

ENVISIONING THE GODDESS: MODERN PAGAN ICONOGRAPHY OF THE  
FEMININE DIVINE

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates the iconography used by specific groups of modern Pagan women in the contemporary United States to represent the feminine divine, the meanings attributed to them by women and by broader communities, and the values these images and meanings reinforce. Through a collection of goddess iconography, interviews with female practitioners, and participant observations in Neopagan events, the personal and communal values of this spiritual movement are explored. This thesis will follow a multi-disciplinary approach, which combines folklore, anthropology, and gender studies.

Subcultural scholarship will help to establish whether or not goddess spirituality falls under such a distinction as well as to illuminate the ways in which the images might be subverting the dominant Western culture.

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To Cheryl, Apollonia “Paula”, Nikulina “Lena”, Constantina, and all the women who  
came before me.

To my UO folklore sisters.



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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*I walk with the Goddess  
The Goddess she walks with me  
She is the clouds up in the clear blue sky  
She is the ground beneath my feet  
She is the oceans and the falling rain  
She is the spark that lights my way  
— Kellianna and Leanda Walker<sup>1</sup>*

Western religion has long been subject to the charge that it favors male divinities and masculine identities, and marginalizes the female. The pagan religions of ancient Europe are only partially understood, and there is considerable debate about their gender dynamics, which are far from clear. Nevertheless, the Judeo-Christian tradition is well documented, and there the godhead is entirely male, with the Virgin Mary constituting the only significant female religious figure.<sup>2</sup> The development of later cults of the feminine, such as devotion to the Virgin Mary and to female saints, may suggest that there has long been a craving for greater female religious exemplars and religious presence. However, modern Paganism has revived interest in goddess worship in the West. From an interest in feminine divinity within the Neopagan community and the countercultural movements of the nineteen-sixties sprung goddess spirituality or the goddess movement. As this new spiritual movement has continued to

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<sup>1</sup> This verse was sung at the Women of the 14<sup>th</sup> Moon 2019 ceremony and printed in the song packet of that same year.

<sup>2</sup> As Folklorist Sabina Magliocco notes “Because practitioners of these religions often construct themselves in contrast to Christianity, they reject images of divinity associated with Christian, and especially Catholic, religious iconography, such as the static, beatific portrayals of the Virgin Mary and the saints. Instead they seek new ways to imagine and portray female and male deities” (Neo-Pagan Sacred Art 26). Due to this fact, the Virgin Mary is excluded from this study, as she is largely absent from modern Pagan events.

develop and spread, I have become increasingly interested in exploring the significance of goddess imagery for women who live in a culture where divinity is typified as masculine. Although an investigation into men's worship of the female divine is a valuable subject, I hope to explore the ways in which modern women are controlling the description and interpretation of the female image. By elevating goddesses to equal, if not superior to, male deities, Neopaganism provides women a unique opportunity to develop iconography reflective of their own beliefs and values. Over the decades, Neopaganism has crafted an alternative spiritual history for women to draw inspiration from and from which to build a spiritual tradition in their own image. As such, this thesis will examine the goddess iconography of Neopagan women to describe the ways in which the imagery subverts dominant tropes of femininity.

However, Neopagans' association with the occult encourages groups to meet and practice in secrecy. Women practicing Neopaganism are especially cautious due to the long history of witch trials in the West. Many practitioners still fear suspicion and disdain will result if their spiritual affiliation is known. While they might not broadcast their faith, others adopt the title of Witch in rebellion against women's historic persecution under the label. This also results in difficulty locating and identifying Neopagans, as they are not accustomed to flaunting their spiritual affiliation. Furthermore, in many cases, rituals and altars used in ceremony are considered sacred and must therefore remain unphotographed. Sacred ritual items and performances are kept secret in some modern Pagan groups as they find inspiration in the secretive mystical societies of the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These secret societies, such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, “made claims of ancient origins and immemorial transmission of secret wisdom a central component of their appeal.”<sup>3</sup> Many modern Pagans view themselves as a continuation of such mystical knowledge and take up the task of transmitting secret wisdom to future generations of Pagans. This cautious attitude creates challenges for the researcher. Luckily, Neopagans are generous and accommodating once you make their acquaintance. Although practices and beliefs are kept discreet, as it became clear that I was investigating without a preestablished bias, I was allowed access to the general community and ceremonies.

### **Rationale and Points of Analysis**

Goddess spirituality is an influential development in Neopaganism, which has swept over America since the nineteen-sixties’ countercultural revolution. As many groups in the States encourage a cultural shift towards egalitarianism, efforts such as the goddess movement are important to monitor. Much can be learned from the women who are pioneering their own form of spirituality and further developing the meanings ascribed to the female experience and form. The goddess iconography women select as representative of feminine divinity expresses their values and beliefs on womanhood. Thus, prevalent symbolic interpretations of goddess images among women are important to our understanding of women’s perspectives and their spiritual needs.

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<sup>3</sup> Hutton 52.

Through the study of goddess iconography, three overarching themes emerge: nature, body politics, and subversion. The most prominent motif goddess imagery employs is nature imagery. This reflects Neopaganism's penchant for nature worship and women's association with the untamed wild in Western philosophy. Through an investigation of nature symbolism in goddess iconography, the intricacies in the relationship between womanhood and nature become clear. Similarly, perspectives on the female form, biological processes, and life stages are expressed in the symbols and meanings women ascribe to goddess iconography. Ranging from the voluptuous to the glacial and from the youthful maiden to the elder woman, the variety of goddesses on display at Neopagan events seems to mock the American standard of beauty. Imagery that showcases some of women's curvier forms and older life stages is antithetical to the American ideal of womanhood. Despite efforts for change, the ideal feminine form in the United States remains firmly centered on the young, slight woman. This standard carries the risk of leaving a woman to feel underrepresented and unvalued once she reaches a mature age, regardless of the beauty her youth afforded her. Since American society places great value on women for their beauty, a woman's imagery becomes something of great importance to her value and positioning in society. In response to this dilemma, the goddess iconography employed by women acts to subvert the norm by featuring symbolism that is representative of mature women and women of all body types. Furthermore, goddess imagery subverts the roles and expectations ascribed to women by the dominant American culture. By addressing prevalent motifs such as nature, body

politics, and cultural subversion, the significance of goddess iconography's meanings and interpretations come to light. Through depicting multi-faceted, multi-cultural feminine figures, the narrow view of womanhood prescribed by the dominant culture is challenged with a diverse view of femininity.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

My methodology relies on a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and library research. I have conducted extensive participant observations and interviews focusing on female interlocutors whose beliefs may be categorized under the broader term "Neopagan." Most research was conducted in person, and the remainder was accomplished online. Modern Pagan interlocutors and organizations were discovered by word of mouth from close female friends already involved in Oregon's Neopagan community. Rose and Shari, the women I interviewed, were asked to discuss their beliefs and practices pertaining to goddess worship. During participant observations, I also learned much from the women I interacted with. While many women were more than willing to share their knowledge with me, the secretive aspect of modern Paganism complicates documentation. Furthermore, photography was used to document statuary, altars, and ritual objects representing Neopagan goddesses. Some photographic examples of goddess iconography were collected from an altar contest at the Eugene Pagan Pride event in the summer of 2019. Additionally, I participated in a weekend-long women's ritual to honor the goddess and the different phases of womanhood that same summer. The group that held the event is known as the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, and one member extended a formal interview



for my study. Although permission is rarely given from this group to share photographic evidence of the ceremony and altars, a detailed description of their goddess iconography is recorded.

This sampling of modern Pagan women and their groups provides a glimpse into the underlying character of goddess spirituality on the West Coast, especially in the case of the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, which was created in 1987 by three women in the Bay area of Northern California and brought to Portland, Oregon in 1995 by two women.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s, the San Francisco Bay Area was an epicenter for goddess spirituality, as the prominent Neopagan author Starhawk and others taught classes in the area called “Witch Camps” that trained neophytes.<sup>5</sup> The two members who brought the Women of the Fourteenth Moon ceremony to Oregon bore with them the traditions formed in California in the 1980s. For this reason, the ceremony in Portland is exemplary of the trajectory feminine spirituality took decades after it gained momentum in the 1980s. Furthermore, this ceremony has traveled to Peru, Colorado, and is planning to expand to Washington State at the time of this writing, which demonstrates a wider network of feminine spirituality.<sup>6</sup> Members are encouraged to convey the Women of the Fourteenth Moon ceremony to other locations when they move and are welcomed back annually, often bringing friends on their return visits. Over the years, the Women of the Fourteenth Moon have transmitted and

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<sup>4</sup> Women of the 14<sup>th</sup> Moon Website.

<sup>5</sup> Berger, “Witchcraft and Neopaganism” 48.

<sup>6</sup> Women of the 14<sup>th</sup> Moon Website.

traded beliefs and practices surrounding goddess spirituality with a broader tradition of feminine spirituality in the Western Hemisphere.

To explore this material, I follow a multi-disciplinarian approach, which combines folklore, anthropology, and gender studies. More specifically a functionalist approach illustrates the function of goddess iconography in women's belief systems and what they are communicating, while a behaviorist approach addresses the significance of the particular imagery and symbols that Neopagan women select. In order to address the subversive nature of goddess iconography, anthropological theories on subcultures are used in this study. Subcultural scholarship helps to establish whether or not goddess spirituality falls under such a category as well as to illuminate how the images might be subverting the American culture. Furthermore, a folkloric approach is implemented to investigate the symbolic motifs used by modern Pagans. A sympathetic understanding of the complex system of magical correspondence developed by Neopagans is similarly achieved with a folkloric lens. Additionally, gender studies is used to frame gender as fluid and illustrate the importance of goddess spirituality to women practitioners.

### **Literature Review**

There are three main areas of focus for this literature review: The historic development of goddess spirituality and its early literature; Neopagan beliefs and practices significant to the conceptualization of feminine deities; and subcultural theories to address the subversive nature of Neopagan goddess iconography. The history of goddess spirituality and its development can be conceptualized in

two phases: the historic development of modern Paganism in the West and the new trajectory the goddess movement took Neopaganism during the countercultural revolution. For a robust account of modern Paganism's history, renowned historian Ronald Hutton's book *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* is used to provide context to the goddess imagery observed today. Hutton's work also details the origins of prevalent symbols and meanings ascribed to the goddess by modern Pagans. Furthermore, his work touches on the development of goddess spirituality and the roles American feminists played in shaping the movement; however, works from feminist contributors are also used. The works that argue for the continuity of the ancient veneration of feminine divinity, such as archaeologist and folklorist Margaret Murray and anthropologist Marija Gimbutas, are no longer given credence by modern academics. However, Murray's and Gimbutas' works in particular are viewed as authoritative texts by many women within the goddess movement. Gimbutas' work focuses on goddess iconography and has informed modern practitioners' interpretation of symbols associated with feminine divinity. Thus, Gimbutas' work is used to uncover and articulate the symbolic meanings assigned to common features of divine feminine imagery. While Murray and Gimbutas argued for continuity in goddess worship, later scholars countered that theory, such as feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether and Celticist Sharon Paice MacLeod. Similarly focused on the veneration of the female divine in ancient Europe, Ruether and MacLeod's scholarly histories view gender as more fluid and are more encouraging of inclusivity in issues of gender and

sexuality. As Ruether notes, “the only way we can, as human beings, integrate ourselves into a life-sustaining relationship with nature, is for both males and females to see ourselves as equally rooted in the cycles of life and death and equally responsible for creating a sustainable way of living together.”<sup>7</sup> This challenges separatist notions within feminine spirituality, which are still negotiated within the broader community today. The admittance of men and trans women into groups is still hotly debated within various circles, so each group tends to construct their own admittance guidelines. Ruether and MacLeod’s work also expresses modern scholars’ stance on the claim of a continuous veneration for a great mother goddess. The literature in this camp informs the beliefs of practitioners who venerate multiple goddesses, while Murray and Gimbutas inform the beliefs of practitioners who venerate a supreme mother or earth goddess, although there is overlap. These two different perspectives on goddess worship reflect Neopagan beliefs and practices and may be employed to examine the goddess movement’s development.

As modern Pagans use folklore and anthropology to construct their beliefs and practices, the two schools of thought are heavily relied upon throughout my research. A folkloric and anthropological perspective is employed through the utilization of folklorist Sabina Magliocco’s work on Neopaganism. Magliocco’s book, *Witching Culture*, examines the development of Neopaganism and the different trajectories prominent traditions developed from. As such, the development of goddess spirituality is outlined in this text. Not only does

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<sup>7</sup> Ruether 40.

Magliocco address historic influences on the Neopagan movement as a whole, but she also focuses on their material culture with particular attention to altars. In her book, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art and Altars: Making Things Whole*, Magliocco briefly examines the various representations of divinity that Neopagans adopt. The significance of modern Pagan imagery is explored through Magliocco's work along with various works by Helen Berger, including *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States*, which explores modern Pagan beliefs and practices at a broader scale. Furthermore, religious studies professor Sarah Pike's *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* traces the history of Neopaganism in the United States and articulates the shared beliefs that differentiate them from other spiritual countercultures. Together, this literature will reveal the symbol systems and meanings of modern Pagan iconography.

Furthermore, the application of subcultural theory addresses the subversive quality of goddess archetypes, symbols, and images. First, Paul Hodkinson's four indicators of a subculture, detailed in his book *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture*, is used to establish modern Paganism's status as a subculture. To further describe women's particular selection of goddess iconography, the notion of bricolage aesthetic and the carnivalesque are also employed. Through Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's work "Carnival and Carnavalesque" the theoretical framework for the carnivalesque is established. Then my research employs more specific subcultural theories to explore goddess spirituality's subversive qualities. British

sociologist Dick Hebdige's book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, and in particular, Hebdige's chapter, "The Function of Subculture" is used to explore themes of the grotesque for a closer inspection of goddess imagery that deviates from the American standard of beauty.

## CHAPTER II: CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORY OF MODERN PAGANISM

As goddess spirituality developed within Neopagan communities and in tandem with second-wave feminism,<sup>8</sup> its ideology is synergistic of both. However, since Neopaganism emerged in the twentieth century as a part of a long process of Western rediscovery of ritual and mysticism, the core ideas and values it passed to goddess spirituality occur further back in time than the feminist movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, the development of Neopagan ideology as it relates to women and the worship of the feminine divine is a crucial starting point for this discussion. In order to understand the values and meanings women ascribe to goddess iconography, we must trace the origin of those meanings and values and their incorporation into the Western mindset. As such, an investigation into the history of modern Paganism details the development of goddess worship in modern Paganism.

### Modern Paganism Defined

Simply put, Neopaganism is an umbrella term referring to a variety of religions that “draw inspiration from elements of pre-Christian polytheistic worship.”<sup>9</sup> The pre-Christian elements Neopagans commonly draw from include ancient traditions such as Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Celtic, and Norse as well as

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<sup>8</sup> Second-wave feminism began in the 1960s alongside the Civil Rights movement and lasted about two decades. On the other hand, first-wave feminism is conventionally situated with the Rochester Women’s Right Convention in 1848, while third-wave feminism began in the 1990s and continues to the time of this work’s completion.

<sup>9</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan* 1.

ethnic traditions such as Jewish, Afro-Caribbean, and Native American spiritualities. This is reflected in their goddess iconography, which regularly borrows female forms of divinity directly from these traditions. The sheer number of goddesses across these ancient cultures and ethnic traditions produces a vibrant assortment of divine iconography.

The terminology used by practitioners to refer to their practices and beliefs varies greatly and may even shift over the course of one's lifetime. The variances in beliefs and practices among Neopagan communities are typically cited as cause to abandon this generalized term. Indeed, Neopaganism "covers a wide variety of beliefs and traditions that include re-creations of ancient Celtic Druidism (a British organization of sun worshipers who gather in sacred groves), Wicca or Witchcraft, ceremonial magic, and neoshamanism (revivals of ecstatic journeys into the spirit world in indigenous and pre-Christian cultures)."<sup>10</sup> When asked, most members reject Neopaganism in favor for one of the distinctive terms above, while others prefer the term Pagan. This is further complicated by the fact that a Wiccan may or may not identify as a Witch and vice versa. This individualistic perspective on terminology is applied to ritual practices, with some members preferring to refer to ritual and ceremony as witchcraft, magic, spell work, the Craft, or a combination thereof. In the future it may become inappropriate to regard these varied groups under the same broad term. At the same time, these groups also share many similarities. Although Neopaganism is unhelpful in its generality, this term, along with modern Pagan, is useful for

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<sup>10</sup> Pike 19.



researchers in order to remain respectful of individual perspectives that exist within one group.<sup>11</sup>

The Neopagan view of divinity varies somewhat across practitioners. For some Neopagans “divine power is personified by a great goddess or the planet Gaia, and for others divinity is polytheistic” with a plethora of divine beings “available to help and teach humans.”<sup>12</sup> Divinity may be seen as anthropomorphized spirits, gods, or goddesses representing the forces of nature or as archetypal aspects of human personalities such as the “warrior” or the “trickster.”<sup>13</sup> Those with a monotheistic perspective are similarly diverse in their interpretations and may view divinity as gendered or nongendered. Even so, some of those practitioners may still elect to celebrate the feminine aspect of divinity despite viewing divinity as nongendered.

There are three variations among Neopagans regarding the worship of feminine divinity. In the first approach, Neopagans venerate multiple goddesses and gods. Although they may hold a few particular deities in high esteem, they likely celebrate many different goddesses and may even possess an appreciation for all goddesses. Another popular Neopagan approach to goddess worship is to view the goddess as one half of a divine couple. Gardnerian Wiccans are well known for this view. However, other modern Pagans influenced by the Wiccan path may also adhere to this interpretation. However, as popular Wiccan writer

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<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the two terms (Neopaganism and modern Paganism) are used interchangeably.

<sup>12</sup> Pike 27.

<sup>13</sup> Pike 27.

and practitioner Scott Cunningham asserts, the worship of a divine couple is “a personal decision” and understands that the oppression of feminine divinity over the last two thousand years causes many Wiccans to venerate female divinity only.<sup>14</sup> This brings us to the last and increasingly popular approach, which is the worship of one omnipotent divinity. Groups like the Dianic tradition, propagated by well-known feminist Wiccan Z. Budapest, venerates an individual goddess with the view that “all goddesses are interpreted as being versions of a single mother goddess with many faces.”<sup>15</sup> To further complicate the various perspectives among goddess worshippers, some women may shift their conception of feminine divinity as they age and as notions of a gender binary erode. Although interlocutor Rose conceptualized divinity as both masculine and feminine in her late teens and early twenties, now in her mid-thirties, she views divinity “as having all of the genders,” challenging antiquated notions of binary gender. This distinction highlights the nuanced perspectives of goddess worshippers and hints at a generational shift. As goddess worship manifests in a variety of ways within Neopaganism, the images that represent goddesses are also numerous and varied. Whether divinity is conceptualized as a single cosmological being or as numerous supernatural beings, modern Pagans view divinity as immanent in nature.

The Neopagan penchant towards ecocentrism denotes a core value that Neopagans share. Modern Pagans “share a desire to revive ancient pre-

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<sup>14</sup> *Living Wicca* 98.

<sup>15</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 30.

Christian nature religions,” as many groups sacralize nature to the extent of personifying the Earth as a goddess.<sup>16</sup> Since deities are closely tied to nature and natural forces, modern Pagans correlate a closeness with nature to intimacy with divinity. This view frames the preservation of nature as an important issue since it is connected to the vitality of divinity. Many Neopagans, including the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, view their role as stewards of the land. As a result of this perspective, “several Neopagan organizations have created retreats and sanctuaries” in wooded areas “to facilitate interactions with the natural world,” and many are “open to people of all faiths as long as they are tolerant of others.”<sup>17</sup> The view that divinity is immanent in all things and therefore humans bear the responsibility for the environment’s care frames humanity as intimately connected with one another and to the Earth. The ideology that all life is connected and sacred argues for an inclusive perspective that celebrates religious diversity. The Neopagan community’s acceptance of diverse or dualistic perspectives (i.e. polytheistic and monotheistic), along with their acceptance of diverse cultural and ethnic traditions, illustrates their pluralism. As Magliocco reminds us, “cultural and religious pluralism has always been a feature of American society” (Magliocco, *Witching Culture* 240).<sup>18</sup> In the same way that

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<sup>16</sup> Pike 19.

<sup>17</sup> Pike 32–33.

<sup>18</sup> Neopagans’ adoption of America’s cultural and religious pluralism demonstrates how countercultures are both products and subversions of the culture they develop from. In other words, subcultures “while inevitably connected to the society and politico-economic system of which it is a part, retains a relatively high level of autonomy” (Hodkinson 32). For instance, while modern Pagans embrace American individualism and religious pluralism, they subvert the American penchant for Christian ideals and technological advancement, highlighting Paganism

American culture combines individualism with pluralism, Neopaganism combines individualistic interpretations of beliefs and practices with pluralistic views of nature and humanity.

Another commonality modern Pagans share is the incorporation of magic into their belief system. However, their conceptualization of magic differs from that of the traditional Western view: “Instead of implying surreptitious or irregular ways of controlling the natural world, [magic] refers to a set of techniques for altering consciousness and bringing about personal transformation.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, magic becomes a tool to incite personal growth and gain new insights into oneself, humanity, and the universe. Neopaganism is not faith-centered like Christianity but is focused on “experience and praxis as the core of the religions.”<sup>20</sup> As such, modern Pagans use magic to evoke spiritual experiences, which results in a shift in mindset and/or behavior. This shift is generally achieved through altering consciousness, though it is also reinforced after spell work or ritual work by the practitioner’s intentional behavioral changes towards their magic’s goal. For instance, if a ritual is enacted to gain employment, then the practitioner must reinforce the magic by actively applying for jobs and seeking employment. Thus, the contemporary Pagan concept of magic becomes a technology for self-improvement instead of an explanation for enigmatic natural phenomenon.

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and nature instead. A deeper examination of Neopaganism’s status as a subculture is articulated in a later section of this work entitled “Subcultural Characteristics.”

<sup>19</sup> Magliocco, “New Age and Neopagan Magic” 635.

<sup>20</sup> Magliocco, “Beyond Belief” 18.

At the same time, the essence of modern Pagan magic is derived from the ancient tradition of esoteric philosophy. Since “modern Pagans name and embrace magic as a natural force,” magic is equated with divinity (the most potent natural force), both of which are often conceptualized as energy.<sup>21</sup> As Starhawk explains, “the Goddess is the living body of a living cosmos, the awareness that infuses matter and the energy that produces change.”<sup>22</sup> As magic is a natural force, it must also follow natural law. Thus, any magical workings that violate natural laws are more likely to fail than those designed to augment natural processes. For instance, it is easier to make a garden grow than to transform one’s sibling into a toad. Much of the modern Pagan conceptualization of magic is informed by hermeticism. Neopaganism adopts hermetic principles such as the law of correspondence, which invokes the old hermetic adage “as above, so below,” asserting that larger patterns reflect smaller patterns and vice versa.<sup>23</sup> Coupled with adherence to the laws of sympathetic magic (the notion that like produces like), modern Pagans hold the view that when “two or more things have elements in common, they are linked through their commonality.”<sup>24</sup> For instance, in Western societies the color red is associated with love. Thus, a modern Pagan love spell in those societies will include red objects (candles, cords, votives,

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<sup>21</sup> Magliocco, “New Age and Neopagan Magic” 651.

<sup>22</sup> *The Spiral Dance* 244.

<sup>23</sup> Magliocco’s chapter “New Age and Neopagan Magic” and Berger’s chapter “Witchcraft and Neopaganism” discusses in greater detail the framework by which modern Pagan magic functions. The term “law of correspondence” (also known as the principle of correspondence) is a Kabalistic term, but is found through hermetic traditions past and present.

<sup>24</sup> Magliocco, “New Age and Neopagan Magic” 656.

...etc.) to enhance romance through that common attribute. Within the Neopagan community such symbolic associations are known as magic correspondences, which were compiled by “two founders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn”<sup>25</sup> who “compiled a table of these associations entitled *The Book of Correspondences* in the 1890s.”<sup>26</sup> This compilation of magic correspondences is still widely used among modern Pagans today; however, magic correspondences are more complex than mere color associations and include associations with deities, flora, fauna, one of the four cardinal directions, one of the four classical elements, seasons, holy days, moon phases, and other natural objects and phenomenon. These associations are so widely known among modern Pagans that they are used to communicate symbolic meaning in ritual performances and altars to likeminded individuals. As we shall investigate in subsequent chapters, the symbols modern Pagans associate with the feminine divine build upon magical correspondences to convey important messages about the diverse expressions of femininity and the divine.

Symbols and magical correspondences are also employed to convey sacred meaning through embodied performances at modern Pagan gatherings. As we see with Wiccan-influenced groups such as the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, practitioners sometimes conduct performative rituals in which individuals evoke the presence of one or more deities. For modern Pagans, the act of

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<sup>25</sup> The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (H.O.G.D.) is an influential esoteric organization and “all modern magical systems derive from it to some degree” (Magliocco, “New Age and Neopagan Magic” 644).

<sup>26</sup> Magliocco, “New Age and Neopagan Magic” 644.

invoking a deity denotes “the actual advent of the Deity into the body of the worshipper.”<sup>27</sup> As Magliocco clarifies, “the magic of theurgy, or union with a spirit, typically involves a trance induced guided visualization or guided meditation, a process of storytelling in which participants are asked to imagine themselves in a scenario.”<sup>28</sup> While practitioners can evoke deity on their own or within a group, it always occurs in an altered state of consciousness. Narcotics are rarely used to alter consciousness and are often prohibited by modern Pagan groups such as the Women of the Fourteenth Moon. Instead, practitioners achieve shifts in consciousness by dancing, singing, chanting, drumming or a combination of such practices, which is often referred to as *raising energy*. Likewise, in a group setting, observers *raise energy* through rhythmic sounds, movements, and ritual performances. Once deity is invoked and a shift in consciousness is achieved, the embodied performance conveys sacred meanings to both the participant observers and the performers themselves. Thus, embodied performances become a significant component of working magic. From the elaborate costumes to the imagery evoked in lyrics and performative dance, modern Pagan theurgy is rich in symbolic meaning.<sup>29</sup> Building upon the anthropological concept of participatory consciousness, anthropologist Susan Greenwood, and ethnographer of modern Pagan movements, explains that “magical consciousness is based on analogical rather than logical thought, and involves

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<sup>27</sup> Murray, “Introduction” 16.

<sup>28</sup> “New Age and Neopagan Magic” 659.

<sup>29</sup> Later chapters in the present work delve into the description and interpretation of such symbols documented in this study.

the association of ideas, symbols, and meaningful coincidences.”<sup>30</sup> As such, the symbols observed during embodied performances and other rituals are interpreted by modern Pagans through the symbol’s associated meanings in accordance with preestablished magical correspondences. Greenwood goes on to state that “abductive thinking using metaphor and symbols that speak to the unconscious and an otherworld of spirits is the language of magic.”<sup>31</sup> Through this symbolic language, modern Pagans express and reaffirm their core beliefs and values.

A pluralistic view is extended to gender and sexuality, which draws women in general and the LGBTQ community to Neopaganism. Through surveys and census data, it has been found that Neopagans are disproportionately female. This is supported by Berger et al. in their survey *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* which reported “64.8 percent of [their] sample are women, 33.9 percent are men and 1.3 percent [did] not answer this question”.<sup>32</sup> Noting that other surveys focusing on Neopaganism had similar conclusions, Berger et al. rationalized that “the disparity between men’s and women’s participation can be explained by more women than men being drawn to the celebration of the feminine divine” and that the large number “can also be explained by the existence of all-women groups that exclude men.”<sup>33</sup> This latter assertion is demonstrated in the Women of the

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<sup>30</sup> Greenwood 89.

<sup>31</sup> 89.

<sup>32</sup> 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Voices from the Pagan Census* 28.



Fourteenth Moon ceremony where men and children are not permitted on the grounds except before and after the event. However, this is not to say that men do not identify with modern Pagan spiritualities or that they do not worship feminine divinity, as they do indeed. A male perspective on the female divine among Neopagans would greatly benefit this discussion; however, a comprehensive examination of the subject would not be done justice here. Focusing on female goddess worshipers allows for the exploration of women crafting the divine in their own image and assigning meanings based on lived experiences. Additionally, many modern Pagans hold progressive views on sexuality, though the influence of individualism results in various perspectives on sexual orientation. Another survey cited by Berger et al. found that 61 percent of Neopagan respondents identified as “heterosexual,” 11 percent “homosexual,” and 28 percent “bisexual.”<sup>34</sup> The large percentage of queer respondents reveals modern Pagans’ openness to progressive notions of sexuality. Furthermore, when goddess worshipers are distinguished from Pagans and Wiccans, there is a higher proportion of lesbian members, with 7.1 percent of goddess worshipers, 4.6 percent of Pagans, and 5.3 percent of Wiccan respondents.<sup>35</sup> Modern Paganism likely attracts the queer community for its progressive attitudes on sexuality as well as the inclusion of femininity when conceptualizing divinity. However, many all-women groups still exclude trans women, an issue which must be confronted for goddess spirituality to mature and continue growing.

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<sup>34</sup> *Voices from the Pagan Census* 28.

<sup>35</sup> Berger et al., *Voices from the Pagan Census* 92–93.

While their inclination towards pluralism may complicate attempts to define modern Pagan beliefs and practices, Neopagans share a common history.

### **History of Modern Paganism**

The secretive nature of Neopaganism coupled with longstanding taboos and legislation against magical practices complicates any inquiry into modern Paganism's origins. Modern Pagan history is further complicated by the fact that it is heavily informed by both the poets and artisans of the Romantic period as well as scholarly work on ancient pagan cultures. As a result, there are two strands of literature related to goddess worship. One is the more academic strand, which is concerned with investigating ancient paganism and goddess worship, and which has generally taken the view that the information is quite fragmentary, and little can be known. The second strand, which I outline here, is more devotionally oriented and takes evidence of ancient practices (at times historically valid, and at others, less so) as a background or impetus to developing goddess practices that are relevant today. This section focuses on devotionally oriented literature as it informs practitioners' worldview today. Furthermore, these particular works were selected for their influence on goddess iconography and symbolism. In this section, I will investigate the ways in which modern Pagan imagery was constructed and what meanings became attributed with such images.

Modern Paganism emerged in the early twentieth century as part of an esoteric tradition, which was later influenced by Romanticism. As Magliocco notes, "esotericism includes a number of interrelated philosophies and religious

traditions dating to antiquity, including Neo-Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, and Christianity.”<sup>36</sup> As previously mentioned, the significance of correspondences and the notion that the macrocosm reflects the microcosm and vice versa are common esoteric philosophies that persist today in Neopaganism. Although there are other shared characteristics in esoterism, for the purposes of this study, it is also important to note the belief that “transformation is possible through an inner process or mystical path that reveals the mysteries of the cosmos and brings the initiate closer to God.”<sup>37</sup> As we saw in the previous section, modern Pagans believe that transformation is possible through spiritual experiences which facilitates a closeness with the divine. Elements of these esoteric principles “can be found in the philosophies of Neo-Platonism and Hermeticism; the premodern sciences of astrology, alchemy, and *mageia* (high magic theurgy); and the theosophical current of the Kabbalah, a set of Jewish mystical texts, all of which contributed to the development of magic in New Age and Neopagan thought.”<sup>38</sup> These philosophies were combined for the first time in Renaissance France “through the work of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494).”<sup>39</sup> Renaissance secret societies such as the Freemasons and fringe religious groups such as the Rosicrucians<sup>40</sup> were known to adhere to these

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<sup>36</sup> "New Age and Neopagan Magic" 642.

<sup>37</sup> Magliocco, "New Age and Neopagan Magic" 642.

<sup>38</sup> "New Age and Neopagan Magic" 642.

<sup>39</sup> Magliocco, "New Age and Neopagan Magic" 643.

<sup>40</sup> The Rosicrucian groups in this period quickly disapated, but were revived during Romanticism.

esoteric philosophies. As a result, modern Pagans often look to these societies as predecessors to their worldview. However, the secretiveness of such groups leads modern Pagans to rely on the esoteric materials from antiquity translated during this time to construct their practices and beliefs, as little is known of these enigmatic organizations.

As is well documented, interest in ancient cultures during the Renaissance period extends to the divine beings of antiquity. Although the modern goddess differs from the classical view of the goddess, the Renaissance reacquainted the Western world with the stories and images of the ancient feminine divine. Goddesses in the ancient world “stood for aspects of civilization and human activity much more often than for those of the natural world”.<sup>41</sup> Most commonly, they were patronesses of cities, justice, war, handicrafts, the hearth, agriculture, love and learning.<sup>42</sup> However, one text near the end of the Pagan period diverges from this perspective and reflects the modern view of the feminine divine. The text, *Metamorphoses of Apuleius* (c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), features the writer’s favorite female deity who is depicted as “the embodiment of all other goddesses” and is “identified with the moon and with the whole of nature.”<sup>43</sup> At the same time, “the ancient Greeks spoke of the earth as being feminine in gender and the sky as being masculine,” contrasting with the Egyptians and others.<sup>44</sup> This imagery is

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<sup>41</sup> Hutton 32.

<sup>42</sup> Hutton 32.

<sup>43</sup> Hutton 32.

<sup>44</sup> Hutton 32.

embedded in modern goddess symbolism, as most Western science is built on Greek thought. Although the personification of the feminine divine as Earth appeared earlier in the High Middle Ages from scholastic writers, or occasionally in creative literature, a plethora of ancient sources were translated during the Renaissance, creating greater accessibility for modern scholars.<sup>45</sup> Even so, the association between the feminine divine and Earth was further developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The classical view of the feminine divine differs from the modern view, which was further shaped by Romanticism.

Although esoteric philosophies flourished in the Renaissance, during the Enlightenment period esotericism fell out of favor as science was secularized. However, the emergence of Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century contested the Enlightenment's secularization of science and attempted to "re-enchant the world by reintroducing the element of mystery."<sup>46</sup> With the arrival of the Romantic Movement, modern goddess imagery evolved significantly through a collaborative effort. One important aspect of this movement was "the exaltation of the natural and irrational, qualities that had conventionally been both feared or disparaged and characterized as feminine."<sup>47</sup> At this point in Western thought, civilization, structure, and order are associated with the masculine, while the wildlands and unpredictable natural forces are associated with the feminine. The association between wildness and femininity is clearly expressed in modern

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<sup>45</sup> Hutton 33.

<sup>46</sup> Magliocco, "New Age and Neopagan Magic" 646.

<sup>47</sup> Hutton 33.

Pagan representations of the goddesses Diana, Artemis, Gaia, and others. Additionally, moon imagery is more closely associated with feminine divinity. Poets like Keats, having become enchanted by the moon, identified it with a goddess.<sup>48</sup> Hutton finds that “by 1920 the dominant image of a goddess in the English poetic imagination was already emerging as the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars.”<sup>49</sup> The concept of the feminine divine begins to incorporate monotheistic aspects and is perceived as a singular omnipotent being. Through poetic imagery, the creator god was eliminated, “leaving the composite goddess of nature as the single mighty source of all being” who by 1880 “was both a creatrix and a redeemer.”<sup>50</sup> The image of an omnipotent goddess who acts as both creatrix and redeemer is contrasted with the father god images promoted by the three largest modern theologies.

The imagery of the Pagan feminine divine was further developed in the late eighteenth century with the academic investigation into prehistoric religion. Some scholars began to suggest “that prehistoric Europe had worshipped a Great Earth Mother...who was later known by a plurality of names.”<sup>51</sup> This idea connected all ancient goddesses to a potent predecessor goddess that had functioned in a similar way as the Abrahamic God does today. Hutton explains that “between 1840 and 1940 historians and archaeologists had turned Neolithic

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<sup>48</sup> Hutton 33.

<sup>49</sup> 34.

<sup>50</sup> Hutton 35.

<sup>51</sup> Hutton 36.

spirituality into a mirror of Christianity, but one which emphasized opposite qualities: female instead of male, earth instead of sky, nature instead of civilization.”<sup>52</sup> This may have been in reaction to the emphasis on empirical rationale and the modern values the industrial revolution encouraged. For those who wish for a return to the natural, to the mystical, the image of an ancient, omnipotent Earth goddess is a welcome relief.

Early in the nineteenth century, a hypothesis emerged that would lay the foundation for modern Pagan lore. Though discredited by modern scholars, the witch-cult hypothesis proposes that a Pagan religion had survived the Christianization of Europe, pointing to the witch trials as proof of the religion’s suppression. American folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland was a proponent of this view. Leland’s interest in folk traditions and magic led him to produce ethnographies on the folklore of contemporary groups like the Roma. However, it is his later work which became a primary source for modern Paganism a half century after its release. Leland’s *Aradia, or The Gospel of the Witches* (1899) is a collection of Italian spells, conjurations, and legends. In the book, Leland claims that “witchcraft is known to its votaries as la vecchia religione, of the old religion, of which Diana is the Goddess, her daughter Aradia (or Herodias) the female Messiah, and that this little work sets forth how the later was born, came down to earth, established witches and witchcraft, and then returned to heaven.”<sup>53</sup> Though discounted by modern scholars, the book helped popularize

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<sup>52</sup> 39–40.

<sup>53</sup> *Aradia or The Gospel of Witches*, 2

the notion of secret women-centered societies led by the goddesses Diana, Hecate, or Herodia (Aradia) who were associated with the moon and night-time flights, dancing, and women's healing rituals. Leland's *Aradia* provided additional motifs, which were incorporated into the Neopagan lexicon, including "a connection with the moon; the practice of witchcraft; the presence of additional spirits; and gatherings of women that included feasting, dancing, and sexual license."<sup>54</sup> Despite its historical inaccuracies, *Aradia* holds lasting appeal as "legends of the secret society may have constituted a kind of compensatory fantasy for women—one in which women had power and the ultimate authority rested with a benevolent supernatural female leader."<sup>55</sup> Overall, Leland's *Aradia* provides Neopaganism with a legend from which a foundation may be constructed.

One of the first who framed Neolithic spirituality as a mirror contrast of Christianity is Egyptologist and archaeologist Margaret Murray. Although no longer accepted by modern scholars, Murray's work is one of the first to attempt to trace the continuity of an ancient tradition of goddess worship in the form of what she refers to as a witch-cult. In her first such publication, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), she claims that "underlying the Christian religion was a cult practiced by many classes of the community," which "can be traced back to pre-Christian times, and appears to be the ancient religion of Western Europe."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Magliocco, "Who Was Aradia?" 9

<sup>55</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-pagan Sacred Art* 17

<sup>56</sup> Murray, *The Witch-Cult* 15–16.



For Murray, “the continuity of the ancient religion is proved by the references to it in the classical authors, the ecclesiastical laws, and other legal and historical records.”<sup>57</sup> Murray claims that ancient witch-cults were grouped into covens with a male Chief as their leader and a woman as the second in command. She asserts that the evidence for this early witch-cult lies in the ancient phallic statuettes uncovered in Egypt, which she claims were used in rituals between the Chief male and female of the coven. Murray goes on to claim that during the Middle Ages, their god was associated with Satan and that their goddess, though subordinate to the god figure, was none other than the Roman goddess Diana, a name which she asserts “is found throughout Western Europe as the name of the female deity or leader of the so-called Witches, and it is for this reason that [Murray has] called this ancient religion the Dianic cult.”<sup>58</sup> While it is clear that the goddess Diana was popular in Europe during the Middle Ages, modern historians and archaeologists hold the position that it cannot be known whether such a cult existed or that it is not likely to have existed at all. However, Murray’s work influenced later works that formed the foundation of modern Paganism.

The duplication and triplication of the feminine divine was also brought into the discussion at this time. When the feminine divine became viewed simultaneously as a creatrix and destroyer, the goddess came to embody “a giver of life and fertility and as a giver of death and rebirth; a light and a dark

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<sup>57</sup> *The Witch-Cult* 36.

<sup>58</sup> Murray, *The Witch-Cult* 21.

goddess.”<sup>59</sup> The simultaneous association with life and death is a popular trope of modern Pagan goddesses, sometimes referred to as the unity of opposites, or *coincidentia oppositorum*. When applied to the divine, the unity of opposites describes a divinity who simultaneously embodies two opposing characteristics that are dependent on each other. As such, the unity of opposites fosters nonduality, which is in contrast to the highly dualistic Western mindset.

Furthermore, Cambridge classicist Jane Ellen Harrison “pointed out that the pagan ancient world had sometimes believed in partnerships of three divine women, such as the Fates or the Graces.”<sup>60</sup> She further argued that the original Earth goddess was honored in three roles but only names two: the maiden and the mother.<sup>61</sup> In the twentieth century, Robert Graves’ book *The White Goddess* expands on Harrison’s imagery of the “Threefold Goddess” and perpetuates the witch-cult theory.<sup>62</sup> Graves associates the triplication of the goddess with the three phases of the moon. The waxing, full, and waning moon are representative of the goddess’s forms as maiden, mother, and crone.<sup>63</sup> This is a common motif in modern Pagan communities, especially Wiccans, Witches, and most goddess worshipers in general. Graves’ *The White Goddess* further develops the goddess’s relationship to the god in a way that would be recognizable to modern

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<sup>59</sup> Hutton 37.

<sup>60</sup> Hutton 37.

<sup>61</sup> Hutton 37.

<sup>62</sup> Graves 20.

<sup>63</sup> Hutton 41.

Pagans. Some Neopagan works began to argue that “all male deities had originally been subordinate to the goddess as her lovers and her sons.”<sup>64</sup> Graves expanded on this motif, dividing the goddess’s “son and consort into two opposed aspects of his own as God of the Waxing and of the Waning Year, fated to be rivals and combatants for her love.”<sup>65</sup> This describes the God’s role in the modern Wiccan calendar, where certain celebrations are tied to his birth, death, and coupling with the goddess.

Graves’s contributions to the imagery of the feminine divine are significant in that he combined popular goddess iconography into a cohesive motif. The image of a triple moon goddess whose forms consists of three archetypes of womanhood is embedded into modern Pagan iconography. Earnest in his descriptions of the goddess, he did not intend for readers to view his work as poetic reverie, but as “an authentic work of history, an accurate portrait of the Old Religion.”<sup>66</sup> Graves, like many of the other contributors discussed above, “treated his Great Goddess as a countercultural deity, who stood for values and associations opposed to those dominant in the European cultural world for most of recorded history and especially to those most closely bound up with modernity.”<sup>67</sup> The countercultural values of the goddess were attractive to second-wave feminists, who expanded scholarship on the feminine divine and

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<sup>64</sup> Hutton 37.

<sup>65</sup> Hutton 41.

<sup>66</sup> Hutton 41–42.

<sup>67</sup> Hutton 42.

the trajectory of feminine spirituality moved in a new direction. As such, Graves' works continue to inform modern Pagan's construction of goddess iconography.

The witch-cult theory rose concurrently with the popularity of spiritualism, the occult, and mysticism, as well as the establishment of philosophical organizations such as the Rosicrucians, the Freemasons, and the Order of the Golden Dawn. Gerald Gardner, affectionately referred to as the Father of Witchcraft, claimed that he was indoctrinated into a coven of witches in September 1939. Hutton details Gardner's involvement with occult groups and secret societies which were inspired by esoteric societies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>68</sup> Mystic societies had come back in fashion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and Gardner became involved in a number of these revived orders. Gardner's interest in the supernatural originated from his time as a colonialist and he wrote on the matters of "Malay archaeology, numismatics, maritime history and folklore."<sup>69</sup> Through repeated discussions with like-minded people along with his first-hand experiences of Freemasonry, spiritualism, Buddhism and, tribal magical practices,<sup>70</sup> Gardner constructed a unique system of witchcraft that still heavily informs the practice today.

Gardner's major contributions to Neopaganism center around the development of his brand of witchcraft and popularization of Wicca. Gardner's publications introduced the world to Wicca and outlined its fundamental structure.

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<sup>68</sup> 206.

<sup>69</sup> Hutton 205.

<sup>70</sup> Hutton 205.

His novel, *High Magic's Aid*, published in 1949, "represents his first, fictionalized announcement of the rituals of the witch religion."<sup>71</sup> Some believed that the release of *High Magic's Aid* was a way for Gardner to test the public reception of Wiccan ideology under the guise of fiction before he published more serious works. Gardner himself later claimed that he "was permitted to write, as fiction, something of what a witch believes in the novel *High Magic's Aid*."<sup>72</sup> In the early 1950s, Gardner began to published nonfiction works that detailed esoteric rituals, spells, and theology. In his first nonfiction publication, *Witchcraft Today* (1954), he positions himself as an anthropologist and claims that he had found himself "in the circle" with witches and he "took the usual oaths of secrecy," thereby joining the group. In *Witchcraft Today*, Gardner details their beliefs and practices, explaining that this coven called themselves "the Wica, the 'wise people', who practice the age-old rites and who have, along with much superstition and herbal knowledge, preserved an occult teaching and working process which they themselves think to be magic or witchcraft."<sup>73</sup> Here Gardner succinctly merges the image that earlier proponents of the witch-cult theory had presented.

A surprising number of elements found in these earlier works reflect the beliefs found among goddess worshipers today. Regarding this study, one of Gardner's more significant contributions is his emphasis on the importance of the witch's goddess. As Gardner was influenced by the works of Leland, Murray,

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<sup>71</sup> Hutton 224.

<sup>72</sup> Gardner 19.

<sup>73</sup> Gardner 102.

Graves, and others, he rationalized that “the Myth of Witchcraft seems to be the story of the goddess.”<sup>74</sup> The myth that Gardner recites parallels Leland’s legend of Aradia, depicting a great mother goddess who wields power over magic. He discloses that “the goddess of the witch cult is obviously the Great Mother, the giver of life, incarnate love. She rules spring, pleasure, feasting and all the delights. She was identified at a later time with other goddesses, and has a special affinity with the moon.”<sup>75</sup> According to Gardner’s version of the myth, a “wiser, older and more powerful god” gave “his power over magic to the goddess” whom he names Death.<sup>76</sup> The tale of how Death granted the goddess authority over magic is ritually enacted by two high ranking members of the cult: typically a male and a female. Although “there are certain rites where a man must be the leader...if a man of requisite rank is not available, a chief priestess belts a sword on and is thought of as a man for the occasion.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Gardner warns that “although women can on occasion take man’s place, man can never take woman’s place.”<sup>78</sup> Such beliefs and practices elevate women’s authority over spirituality in comparison to Abrahamic religious traditions, which have dominated the Western world for the last two thousand years.

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<sup>74</sup> Gardner 40.

<sup>75</sup> Gardner 42.

<sup>76</sup> Gardner 41.

<sup>77</sup> Gardner 44.

<sup>78</sup> Gardner 44.

Gardner's combination of key elements from the literature, histories and art of the previous two centuries promoted the iconography associated with the goddess today. One feature of Wicca that highlights a deeper Neopagan value is Gardner's assertion that rituals be performed skyclad (in the nude) as they were depicted in the early modern witch hunts. He rationalizes this by indicating that the "electro-magnetic field surrounding all living bodies," often called the aura, provides a source of power for the witch. Gardner explains that he "can sometimes see it [himself], but only on bare flesh, so clothes evidently obstruct its functioning;" however, he warns that this "is simply [his] own private belief."<sup>79</sup> As Gardner preferred that pretty young women play the part of the goddess during rituals, he is frequently accused of designing Wicca "for the purposes of his own sexual titillation."<sup>80</sup> However, Gardnerian Wiccans and other goddess worshipers assert that "nakedness is a symbol of openness and vulnerability before the deities and each other; the naked body is sexual, but not *only* sexual, and sexuality is an expression of the sacred polarity that underlies all life in the universe."<sup>81</sup> Framing nudity and sexuality as sacred yet inequivalent is in direct opposition to Western culture, in which nudity is commonly associated with sexuality, both of which are depicted as sacrilegious. Furthermore, some modern Pagans suggest that "nakedness also removes class differences among participants, itself a form of social critique."<sup>82</sup> Regardless of Gardner's original

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<sup>79</sup> Gardner 20.

<sup>80</sup> Magliocco, *Witching Culture* 63.

<sup>81</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 55.

<sup>82</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 55.

motive for encouraging nudity, female participants who practice in the nude have reframed nudity and sexuality as a reclaiming of women's embodied experiences.

While many Neopagan groups do not meet in the nude, ritual nudity underscores the modern Pagan view of the body. In Wicca and other Neopagan circles, the body is celebrated and viewed as “a sacred vessel.”<sup>83</sup> Gardner's work echoes the writings of Aleister Crowley and others, for whom “the resocialization of sexuality and the human body” had been a feature of their magick.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, “this preoccupation with the magical and religious power of nude female beauty was by no means peculiar to Gardner; indeed, it was a minor theme of early twentieth-century English literature.”<sup>85</sup> In Graves' novel *Seven Days in New Crete*, “the principal witch...casts spells by removing her clothes and prowling in a circle about the object of her magic.”<sup>86</sup> Later in the novel, Graves' goddess “appears before her people clad only in her ‘moon-mirror crown’.”<sup>87</sup> Additionally, imagery associated with the witches' sabbats were imagined by early modern writers as featuring nude women.<sup>88</sup> In these cases, an association between magic, nudity, and sacredness is made.

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<sup>83</sup> Hutton 230.

<sup>84</sup> Hutton 231.

<sup>85</sup> Hutton 225.

<sup>86</sup> Hutton 225–226.

<sup>87</sup> Hutton 226.

<sup>88</sup> Hutton 231.



Before Gardner began to publicize the Craft, the public had not heard the term “Wicca.” Although Gardner’s publications formally introduced the world to modern Paganism, he had already laid the groundwork to spread awareness of this new religious movement. Before Gardner’s publications had outlined the basic elements of Wicca as we know them today, he began speaking to the press about his spirituality. Gardner was circulating news within the London occult community by 1950 and “[Wicca] was announced to the national press in the summer of 1951.”<sup>89</sup> Consequently, Gardner’s publications and press announcements followed the repeal of British witchcraft laws in 1951. It is likely the public was receptive to Gardner’s Wicca because there was already great interest in the occult at this time. In response to public interest in the occult and esotericism along with Gardner’s publicization of Wicca, many interested in Paganism identified themselves publicly and began producing their own work. While some modern Pagan writers expanded on Gardner’s work or aspects of it, other writers detailed different modern Pagan traditions, which developed into separate traditions from Gardnerian Wicca. Gardner and many who wrote on the subject insisted on an ancient tradition of magic and goddess worship, oftentimes citing Murray’s work. Many of these modern Pagans claimed they were either initiated into a coven, like Gardner, or learned the Craft from family members. Hutton carefully investigates each claim in *Triumph of the Moon*, finding both plausible and improbable elements in all claims, as they are difficult to verify through prehistoric and premodern records.

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<sup>89</sup> Hutton 237.

Gardner's development of Wicca and publicization of witchcraft and goddess worship are significant contributions to modern Paganism. However, for over two centuries before Gardner's time, a unique image of the feminine divine was developed through the joint effort of poets, artists, classicists, archaeologists, and anthropologists. Since esoteric organizations and schools of thought were already established by the 1950s, "there is nothing inherently improbable in the notion that pagan witch groups could have evolved independently of Gardnerian Wicca, drawing upon the same pool of ideas and impulses."<sup>90</sup> The growing interest in the occult and mystic philosophies since the late Middle Ages, along with Gardner's involvement in many of the resulting societies in the early twentieth century, are both responsible for the revival of Paganism. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before someone like Gardner came along. As Hutton rationalizes, "even if [Gardner] had compiled the rituals himself and founded the first modern pagan coven... it would still not be wholly just to describe him as having 'invented' or 'made up' modern pagan witchcraft."<sup>91</sup> In other words, "cultural forces which had been developing for a couple of centuries combined in [Gardner's] emotions and ideas to produce a powerful, and extreme, response to the needs which they represented."<sup>92</sup> Hutton points out that "as a founder of a modern pagan religion (if he was such), his qualifications were probably unrivalled, given his experience of tribal animism,

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<sup>90</sup> Hutton 287.

<sup>91</sup> 239.

<sup>92</sup> Hutton 239–240.

spiritualism, Freemasonry, Co-Masonry, the Fellowship of Crotona, the OTO [Ordo Templi Orientis], the Folk-Lore Society, the Ancient Druid Order, and the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, not to mention his wide reading and field work in history and archaeology."<sup>93</sup> Drawing from the art, philosophy, and science that proceeded his time, Gardner expertly combined their elements into a set of beliefs that persists in modern witchcraft circles.

### **Development of Goddess Spirituality**

In the United States, feminist scholars began to relate the perceived suppression of the prehistoric great goddess to deeply rooted patriarchal and puritanical Christian systems. During second-wave feminism, Gimbutas (1921–1994) and other professional feminist scholars supported “the idea that prehistoric European cultures were women-centered in both society and religion, and that the destruction of such cultures by patriarchal invaders represented a tragedy for humanity.”<sup>94</sup> Although feminist scholars like Radford, MacLeod, and others have pushed back against the notion of a *universal* prehistoric great goddess, others still claimed “the historic ancient world was full of unmistakable proof of the widespread veneration of *goddesses*.”<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, they rationalized that “none of [the subsequent] developments had disproved the former worship of such a deity; they had simply shown that it could not be

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<sup>93</sup> 239.

<sup>94</sup> Hutton 356.

<sup>95</sup> Hutton 362.

proven.”<sup>96</sup> Although already disproven by some scholars, evidence of continuity in the goddess tradition became a central issue during this time.

The notion of a prehistoric great goddess became, in many cases, simultaneously linked to goddess spirituality. Goddess spirituality holds different meanings for different people, but Hutton sums up the varied perspectives succinctly:

To some it simply represented a general female right to a separate spirituality, irrespective of whether this involved actual belief in deities; it could, indeed, signify the spiritual power within women. To others, it meant the putative prehistoric Great Mother Goddess, or the triple lunar deity of Graves, Maiden Mother, and Crone, or the living and divine body of the planet. By yet others it was understood to mean a composite figure in whom were subsumed all the female deities reserved in any part of the world and at any age, who retained something of their individual identity as her “aspects.”<sup>97</sup>

This unique form of feminine spirituality stood as antithetical to the patriarchal Christian society it occupied; however, American feminist witchcraft usually recognized the need for pluralism in belief. For instance, Starhawk wrote of a utopian society where many spiritual paths were followed and all of them “embraced a common culture of tolerance, egalitarianism, decision-making by consensus, pacifism, and self-sustaining, non-pollutant economics with a

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<sup>96</sup> Hutton 362.

<sup>97</sup> 356.

reverence for nature,” noting that “it was impossible to be a pagan witch without believing in all these things.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, interest in a god was not eradicated and in most circles acceptance was extended to those who revered masculine divinity. Modern Pagan groups that developed during this time had varying degrees of inclusion of masculine deities. Groups ranged anywhere between fully inclusive to men and women with male and female deities to exclusively for women with a supreme female deity, such as the Dianic tradition. Although these concepts “flourished independently and luxuriantly in American feminist culture,” through the feminist witchcraft writings of Starhawk and Zsuzanna Budapest, these ideas were eventually incorporated by some Neopagans across the Atlantic.<sup>99</sup> The ideas Starhawk presents in her book *The Spiral Dance* “permeated the whole radical British counter-culture of the 1980s and became part of its own folklore.”<sup>100</sup> Feminist witchcraft embedded seamlessly into European Neopaganism to such a degree that Hutton reports “very few” Pagan groups he encounters “even realized that [these ideas] had originated in the United States; they had become part of a timeless and amorphous Pagan culture.”<sup>101</sup> As such, the theological and countercultural developments in modern Paganism during this period were long-lasting.

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<sup>98</sup> Hutton 360.

<sup>99</sup> Hutton 355.

<sup>100</sup> Hutton 366.

<sup>101</sup> 366.

The new development of feminist witchcraft in America brought a few positive changes important to the discussion of goddess iconography. As Hutton points out, “American feminist spirituality had reinvested witchcraft with a pagan spiritual identity and invested it with a passionate ethic of world improvements or salvation through female liberation and conservation of the natural environment.”<sup>102</sup> It also brought feminist spirituality “out of the occult fringe into the mainstream of international cultural politics,” “greatly enhanced its obvious relevance to contemporary issues and needs,” and “provided a sense of purpose, and an opportunity for self-realization and self-actualization,” to thousands of people.<sup>103</sup> These developments created a greater sense of appeal to Americans searching for a worldview that is antithetical to the modern norm. It also offered women an alternative form of spirituality that was more representative of their own lived experiences and spiritual needs.

One prominent figure who further developed goddess iconography during this time was archaeologist and anthropologist Marija Gimbutas. Gimbutas develops a massive catalog of feminine imagery to analyze ancient Pagan iconography. In Gimbutas’ book *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), she connects images from the archaeological record to goddess worship, which she divided into symbols related to nature, the human body, and the sacredness of the numbers two and three. These associations are repeated in most modern

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<sup>102</sup> 367.

<sup>103</sup> Hutton 367.

Pagan traditions as they reflect magical correspondences already familiar to the community. Gimbutas' work expands on Murray's witch-cult theory, making a case for an ancient mother goddess cult. Inspired by Sir Arthur Evans' and others' assertions that prehistoric feminine figurines were associated with goddess worship, Gimbutas expands on this work. Simply known as the Venuses or the Venus figures, these female statuettes are from the Paleolithic and Neolithic and may be described as "fat, faceless, feetless images with large breasts, buttocks, and bellies."<sup>104</sup> For Gimbutas "the Goddess's religion went underground" but was continued through the "[assimilation] into Indo-European ideology."<sup>105</sup> Both Murray and Gimbutas use archaeology and anthropology to outline a tradition of goddess worship. Although the witch-cult hypothesis is now disproven, their interpretations of prehistoric images and symbolism heavily influence the symbolic interpretations expressed in many contemporary Pagan communities.

### **The Question of Continuity**

Although proponents of the witch-cult theory like Leland, Murray, Graves, and Gardner inform the practices and beliefs of modern Paganism, such sources are devotionally oriented and do not reflect the modern academic understanding of Neopaganism. Modern scholars treat Neopaganism as a revival of Paganism and folk practices from various historic and prehistoric periods and locations. Since modern Paganism relies on academic sources of ancient religions to

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<sup>104</sup> Radford 3.

<sup>105</sup> 318.

reconstruct Paganism for modern consumption, it becomes challenging to delineate mythology from history in the modern Pagan narrative. However, Magliocco warns “the invention of tradition by Neo-Pagans should by no means be regarded as a distortion of academic knowledge, but rather as an integral part of the process by which folklore is shaped and changed by its practitioners.”<sup>106</sup> While the modern Pagan penchant for borrowing from ancient histories and mythos is an important process of constructing tradition, modern academics contest the witch-cult hypothesis. Celtic scholar Sharon Paice MacLeod uses anthropological and archaeological evidence to confront the notion that the female figurines of the Neolithic period represent an ancient mother goddess religion. She rationalizes through archaeological evidence that feminine Neolithic and Paleolithic figurines likely had a multitude of uses and meanings, which does not necessarily indicate the existence of an ancient witch-cult.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether rationalizes that prehistoric cultures were likely more egalitarian, reflecting the family structure which was dependent on the productivity of both men and women in the community.<sup>108</sup> Thus, it is more likely that prehistoric societies venerated divinities which mirrored their cultural expressions of gender, rather than a single omnipotent mother goddess. Murray agrees with the notion that prehistoric deities were “incarnate in a man, woman, or animal;” yet, still claims “the Dianic cult–

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<sup>106</sup> “Ritual Is My Chosen Art Form” 113.

<sup>107</sup> MacLeod 70.

<sup>108</sup> 282–283.



embraces the religious beliefs and ritual of the people known in the late medieval times as ‘Witches’,” which “can be traced back to pre-Christian times, and appears to be the ancient religion of Western Europe.”<sup>109</sup> However, as Magliocco explains, “there is little evidence to support [the] idea” that Neopagans are “the actual and spiritual descendants of medieval witches.”<sup>110</sup> Instead, Magliocco situates the revival of witchcraft to Gerald B. Gardner’s publications, as does Hutton.<sup>111</sup> British historian Ronald Hutton thoroughly addresses the question of continuity between ancient Paganism and modern Paganism in his book *Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Hutton concludes that Neopaganism “is a modern development which deliberately draws upon ancient images and ideas for contemporary needs, as part of a wholesale rejection of the faiths which have been dominant since the ancient ways of worship were oppressed.”<sup>112</sup> Some modern Pagans still maintain ideas surrounding an ancient continuous tradition of goddess worship. Hutton suggests that “the notion of pagan survivals continued to grow in popularity, and was sustained by folklorists” because “many English scholars between 1870 and 1970 were disposed to view the countryside as a timeless place in which immemorial practices were continued from a blind sense of tradition, and in particular practices that were

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<sup>109</sup> Murray 17–18.

<sup>110</sup> *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 2.

<sup>111</sup> *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 2.

<sup>112</sup> Hutton 415.

held to be authentic traces of ancient pagan religion.”<sup>113</sup> Reverence for folk traditions resonates with modern Pagans, and so such notions of the continuous veneration of an ancient mother goddess appeals to many Neopagans. Such pseudohistories function to legitimize feminine spirituality by creating a sense of tradition. However, that is already accomplished by modern Pagans’ adoption of ancient practices and beliefs. As Magliocco and Hutton reveal, modern Paganism is part of a long spiritual tradition of Western esotericism. As one of the contemporary stewards of that esoteric tradition, modern Pagans gain legitimacy.

### **Countercultural Characteristics**

As a countercultural movement that experienced massive growth in the 1960s, a time of social resistance and focus on the civil rights of the oppressed, it is no wonder that modern Paganism places an importance on women’s rights and environmental care. In order to understand how Neopaganism operates as a counterculture, it is imperative to begin by investigating the ways in which Neopaganism fits into the category of a subculture. As Dick Hebdige notes, “the word ‘subculture’ is loaded down with mystery. It suggests secrecy, masonic oaths, an Underworld. It also invokes the larger and no less difficult concept ‘culture’.”<sup>114</sup> Most certainly, a mysterious culture wielding esoteric practices and knowledge, such as modern Paganism, would fall under this description. However, a counterculture is largely defined by its relationship with the hegemonic forces it opposes. Modern Pagan iconography clearly displays their

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<sup>113</sup> Hutton 112–113.

<sup>114</sup> 14.

“intentional opposition to that of the dominant Christianity of North America.”<sup>115</sup>

As such, the modern Pagan aesthetic should express their rejection of the dominance of the Christian religion. As Hebdige confirms, “the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely in style.”<sup>116</sup> However, the eclectic quality of modern Pagan aesthetics and the innate secrecy does not obviously lend itself to a subcultural distinction. Furthermore, Neopaganism “has no set dogma or central leadership” so their subcultural distinction is not initially evident.<sup>117</sup> Thus, an examination of how modern Paganism fits this characteristic is necessary and a study of Hodkinson’s four indicators of subculture helps to accomplish this feat.

One of the first indicators that modern Paganism is a subculture relates to a “consistent distinctiveness” that allows the participants to spot each other.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, there is a certain style and symbols that give practitioners away to one another. However, due to their eclectic nature, the Neopagan style is hard to pin down. As Magliocco observes:

There is no single item or combination of items characterizing it; like other aspects of the subculture, it draws from a variety of sources. Medieval and pre-Raphaelite looks predominate, with a dose of Viking and Hollywood Egyptian elements. In some parts of the country, younger Pagans may overlap with “Goths,” youths who adopt a theatrical look featuring

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<sup>115</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 66.

<sup>116</sup> 25.

<sup>117</sup> Berger, “Witchcraft and Neopaganism” 28.

<sup>118</sup> Hodkinson 30.

Romantic clothing and heavy, dark eye makeup against very white skin. Long hair is common for both men and women, and many Pagan men favor beards; everyone wears lots of black, a color traditionally associated with witches in European folklore. Both women and men wear necklaces and pendants in multiples; body paint and tattoos are not uncommon. The overall general effect of one of loose, gentle roguishness.<sup>119</sup>

Despite the patchwork imagery evoked by the Neopagan aesthetic, two themes are prevalent: a reverence for folklore and ancient cultures, and the occult. As Hodkinson explains, “While accepting the inevitability of a degree of internal difference and change over time, then, the first indicator of subcultural substance comprises the existence of a set of shared tastes and values which is distinctive from those of other groups.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, their shared interest in subverting the dominant culture’s ideas of conventional history, folklore, and the occult, marks modern Pagans as distinctive to other groups. Like other countercultures, “Neo-Pagans appropriate elements of costume from many different cultures and symbol systems and manipulate them in ways that oppose the dominant culture’s ideas of appropriateness.”<sup>121</sup> At the same time, the incorporation of symbolic elements focused specifically on history, folklore, and the occult, coupled with an opposition to the Christian aspect of the dominant culture, creates a unique aesthetic that distinguishes modern Pagans from other countercultures.

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<sup>119</sup> *Neo-pagan Sacred Art* 54.

<sup>120</sup> 30.

<sup>121</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 55.

The second indicator of subcultural status is a shared identity among participants. For Hodkinson, identity is “a sense of like-mindedness... regardless of their geographical location.”<sup>122</sup> Like-mindedness among Neopagans is evident from the organization of festivals and fairs, since “the most popular festivals draw hundreds of people from all over the United States and Canada” and some “from around the world.”<sup>123</sup> Their like-mindedness is obvious when participants are eager to travel long distances to interact with others who identify with a similar spirituality. The Neopagan identity is further detailed in their shared values. A prominent value shared by modern Pagans is their concern “for the natural world and the deities that embody forces of nature.”<sup>124</sup> However, their relationship with nature is conceptualized at a much deeper level. Modern Pagans’ voluntary role as stewards of the land encompasses their objective: “the reconnection of humans with the sacred, which is seen as immanent in nature and elemental forces.”<sup>125</sup> As the sacred manifests simultaneously in nature and deity, the path to spiritual enlightenment for modern Pagans lies in their connection with nature and the divine. This core value ties the modern Pagan community together and is antithetical to the dominant culture’s glorification of technological advancement. Furthermore, nature worship contests the Christian notion that humans are born of sin, as humans are portrayed as inseparable from nature and the divine.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> 31.

<sup>123</sup> Berger et al., *Voices from the Pagan Census* 204.

<sup>124</sup> Pike 31–32.

<sup>125</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 66.

<sup>126</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 66.

This intricate worldview cultivates a sense of like-mindedness that is evident at modern Pagan events and stands in stark contrast to Western cultural hegemony.

Although Neopaganism is comprised of an eclectic assortment of beliefs and practices, which vary even from person to person, there is a sense of community among practitioners. The notion that these eclectic, seemingly pure individualists are in actuality a community appears paradoxical in the least. Yet, as sociologist and religious studies professor Jon P. Bloch asserts, “however loosely structured these clusters of individuals are, and however diverse the beliefs from one individual to the next, they consider themselves to be a community.”<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, practitioners of Neopaganism consume many of the same magazines and attend the same fairs and festivals.<sup>128</sup> Besides their own assertion that they form a community, practitioners’ similar interests and social activities drive them together.

Another important indication of a subculture is commitment, which refers to “a tendency for concentrated and continuous practical involvement among participants.”<sup>129</sup> Although “there is no single central Neopagan organization, there are numerous Neopagan umbrella groups throughout North America,”<sup>130</sup> which demonstrate continuous participant involvement. Their commitment is

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<sup>127</sup> 2.

<sup>128</sup> Bloch 2–3.

<sup>129</sup> Hodkinson 31.

<sup>130</sup> Berger, “Witchcraft and Neopaganism” 50.

demonstrated through the plentiful services provided by Neopagan organizations such as “ordination, training, newsletters, festivals, and open rituals.”<sup>131</sup> If members were not committed to Neopaganism, then the need for organizations and their services would not exist. Commitment to the modern Pagan community is also expressed by the length of time members commit themselves to this spirituality. For instance, Rose, a Women of the Fourteenth Moon member, is currently thirty-five at the time of this writing, but began to associate with modern Paganism during her “junior high, early high school” years. Similarly, Shari, a solitary Wiccan, who is currently thirty-three, came to the spirituality in her “freshman year” of high school. Although both women report varying levels of involvement throughout this time, they have continuously held their worldviews for over half their lives. Members’ long-term commitment to modern Paganism along with the demand for Neopagan services demonstrates a level of commitment expected of any religious group.

The final indicator of a subculture is autonomy, which refers to the fact that “a good proportion of the productive or organizational activities which underpin (the subculture) are liable to be undertaken by and for enthusiasts.”<sup>132</sup> This is evident in Neopagan events such as workshops, fairs, festivals, and rituals, which are all organized by members within the subculture. For instance, the annual Emerald Valley Pagan Pride event in Eugene, Oregon is organized by a local woman, Joy Germack Dances. Even the event workshops, vendors,

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<sup>131</sup> Berger, “Witchcraft and Neopaganism” 50.

<sup>132</sup> Hodkinson 32.

entertainment, and attendees were locals. The community-driven effort of this event was further highlighted by the event's food drive and raffle. Joy explains: "the main focus of our event is the Harvest Food Drive...which supports Food for Lane County."<sup>133</sup> Joy emphasizes that "the costs for such items as the City Park Rental fees, required insurance, porta-potties, the rental of sound equipment are covered by fundraisers, merchant fees advertising, a raffle, and donations of many who support our goals."<sup>134</sup> Not only is the revenue and organization of this event community-driven, but their focus on giving back to the community also builds positive relations with those who may be mistrustful of modern Pagans. Similarly, the celebration of the Women of the Fourteenth Moon is organized and maintained solely by women in the group. Each attendee volunteers for two service positions during the weekend-long event, such as "Welcome Crew," "Kitchen Crew," "Elder Helper," and "Community Clean-up." While the first three jobs are in service of other attendees, the last is in service of the land. Women who volunteer for community clean-up are the last to leave the campsite and ensure that there is no trace left behind of their stay. The hours spent cleaning the facilities and clearing the area of refuse reinforces their position as stewards of the land. Both the Pagan pride event and the women's ceremony are self-sufficient, autonomous celebrations orchestrated and funded by the attendees themselves.

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<sup>133</sup> Germack.

<sup>134</sup> Germack.



Neopaganism fits Hodkinson's four criteria for subcultures with their consistent distinctiveness in style and ideology, a shared identity and worldview, a continuous involvement that spans decades and may last a lifetime, and is autonomous. Although aesthetics may visually distinguish modern Pagans from the rest of the population during ceremonies, festivals, and events, their unique ideology separates them from the Western populous philosophically and spiritually. Their sense of community is driven from shared ideologies, aesthetics, values, and activities, which are antithetical to the dominant Christian society members occupy.

Due to their antithetical beliefs and values, modern Pagans earn the distinctive countercultural title.<sup>135</sup> There are three major areas in which modern Paganism is at odds with the dominant culture: social structure, philosophy, and values. The decentralized organization of modern Paganism is in opposition to Western hegemonic structures, which gives preference to high status community members. Furthermore, Neopagan groups embrace egalitarianism, while the dominant culture welcomes elitism in the glorification of celebrities and the wealthy. Modern Pagans hold values which are antithetical to the dominant culture, as they focus on self-transformation over faith in a specific creed. Since modern Pagans have no set dogma, their attention is turned to personalizing their religion resulting in Neopagans "looking suspiciously at institutions in

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<sup>135</sup> While the terms subculture and counterculture are often conflated with one another, the two terms are distinctive. A subculture generally refers to a smaller culture within a larger cultural group. On the other hand, a counterculture refers to a group whose practices and beliefs deviate from the dominant culture. Thus, a counterculture is a subculture, but a subculture is not necessarily a counterculture.

general and religious ones in particular.”<sup>136</sup> The practice of critically analyzing social structures and institutions was already ingrained in modern Pagan culture with their rejection of Modernity in preference for Romanticism. As such, the religious movement paired well with the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s. New ecological concerns were raised by many of these countercultural movements, which supported modern Pagan’s cry for a return to nature. As Pike explains, “while television increased exposure to new ideas, many young people believed that technological changes were destructive and preached about moving back to nature and simpler lifestyles.”<sup>137</sup> This rejection of technology as a positive force contests the dominant culture’s philosophy and values. It is also related to the modern Pagan criticism of Western capitalism, which is evident through their bricolage aesthetic and decentralized organization. Modern Pagans’ countercultural status is further detailed in their iconography and symbolic systems.

### **Growth of Modern Paganism**

It is difficult to observe the growth of Neopaganism, as categorizations of members are routinely split up and recombined with others in surveys, polls, and census data. For instance, the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) featured separate options for those who identified as Wiccan, Pagan, and Spiritualist.<sup>138</sup> While the data for Pagans and Spiritualists were only collected for

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<sup>136</sup> Pike 74.

<sup>137</sup> Pike 75.

<sup>138</sup> U.S. Census Bureau.

the 2001 and 2008 survey, Wicca was surveyed in 1990 as well. Looking only at Wiccans, the ARIS demonstrated growth from 8,000 reported Wiccans in 1990 to 342,000 just eighteen years later in 2008.<sup>139</sup> Even with the inconsistent data collection, there does appear to be an increase in identifying with Neopaganism. Furthermore, the specification of Wiccan versus Pagan or Spiritualist is just another indication of growth.

At the same time, if one feels they do not fit into those three categories, they are left with “other unclassified” or “no religion.” These inconsistencies make it difficult to track growth in Neopagan communities accurately. The UK census found that of those individuals who “did not fall into any of the main religious categories... the most common groups were Pagan and Spiritualist, accounting for 57,000 people and 39,000 people respectively.”<sup>140</sup> The evidence of growth combined with practitioners’ preference for specific labels and a distaste for institutionalized religion leads one to consider the possibility that some who practice Neopaganism are selecting “unclassified” or “no religion.” The very word *religion* was not used by interlocutors to refer to their current belief system. Many women opted to use specific descriptions of their faith, such as Druidess or Witch, while others prefer to describe themselves in more general terms such as spiritual or eclectic.

Among Neopagans, there appears to be a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. As Bloch explains, “people refer to their pursuits as

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<sup>139</sup> U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>140</sup> Office for National Statistics.

'spiritual' rather than as a form of 'religion,' for the latter terminology is more associated with distinctly organized groups who profess belief in a formalized doctrine. And such is not the case with countercultural spirituality."<sup>141</sup> With the Neopagan penchant for avoiding any association with organized religion, perhaps some respondents are selecting identifiers such as "no religion" when participating in surveys and censuses. The Pew Research Center found that those who identified as "unaffiliated" rose from 16.1% of responders in 2007 to 22.8% in 2014.<sup>142</sup> It seems likely that some individuals involved in Neopaganism may have contributed to the increase in that number due to their specific identity being unrepresented or their disdain for institutionalized religion.

As the movement grows and new generations build upon prevalent beliefs and practices, the layers of meaning complexify. Magliocco points out that "Neopaganism currently represents one of the fastest-growing new religious movements in the world, with more than one million adherents in Europe and North America alone. There are branches of modern Paganisms on every continent in the world."<sup>143</sup> Thus, it is critical to the documentation of this movement to track their diverse beliefs and practices as Neopaganism grows and develops in new regions.

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<sup>141</sup> 1.

<sup>142</sup> Pew Research Center.

<sup>143</sup> "New Age and Neopagan Magic" 652.

## CHAPTER III: GODDESS ICONOGRAPHY AT MODERN PAGAN EVENTS

Most of the goddess iconography documented in this thesis was collected at two distinct events in the summer of 2019: The Emerald Valley Pagan Pride and the Celebration of the Women of the Fourteenth Moon. While the first event was available to the public, the latter was a private event. Due to the sacred nature of the Women of the Fourteenth Moon's celebration, imagery created and maintained in the ritual space is not documented visually. The group's historians are the only women permitted to document the sacred space and ritual performances. All other members are asked to refrain from publicizing photographs taken outside of the Ceremony "without the express permission of the subject."<sup>144</sup> Although it is expressly forbidden to record ritual performances and altars, the organization granted permission to describe in writing ceremonial imagery and performances. The two events offer a glimpse into the public and private spheres of the goddess movement community. Together the events provide an abundance of goddess imagery that highlights patterns of meaning.

### **Altar Contest**

On a sweltering summer afternoon, participants at the fifth annual Emerald Valley Pagan Pride event sang, danced, ate, and shopped at a favored local park in Eugene, Oregon. Participants of the event ranged vastly in age with a few children, young adults, and adults. While the ages of attendees varied, a great number of participants appear over the age of fifty. Those who oversaw the raffle,

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<sup>144</sup> Women of the 14<sup>th</sup> Moon, *Welcome Packet* 3.

food drive, altar contest, and announcements were mostly older women. While senior citizens in Western cultures are expected to retire and vacation, in modern Pagan traditions, older citizens are perceived as possessing wisdom and holding an important position within the society. Like the Eastern cultures they draw inspiration from, Neopagans tend to honor elders more than the broader American culture, as is evident with the Women of the Fourteenth Moon ceremony. For example, an entire day is devoted to the elders of the Fourteenth Moon and volunteers are assigned to support the elders throughout the whole weekend. The propensity to honor elders likely attracts many older participants to modern Paganism. At both events, elders held the leadership positions highlighting their elevated position within modern Pagan traditions. However, it was the young and middle-aged Women of the Fourteenth Moon who were responsible for manual labor, while elders at the Pagan Pride event bore most of the weight of the event. Interestingly, the majority of participants and vendors at the Emerald Valley Pagan Pride gathering were female. This further supports the findings of Berger et al. discussed in the second chapter.

Goddess imagery was sprinkled throughout the Pagan Pride event in the form of decoration and merchandise. Songs and images of divinity hung from the top of picnic shelters, which provided shade and housed entertainment and activities. A large hand-drawn banner of a woman warrior featured prominently in one of the shelters (see Figure 1). The Greek aesthetic mixed with the owl and warrior theme of the image are reminiscent of the goddess Athena, who is classically accompanied by an owl. Imitating the ancient Greeks, modern Pagan

groups associate wisdom with Athena as she was born out of Zeus's head and is the patron goddess of Athens, a center for learning in Greece. Through Athena's association with the woodland creature, the owl inherits the trait of wisdom. With this symbolic correspondence, the image expresses the strength and wisdom observed in women. As strength and wisdom are characteristics reserved for expressions of masculinity in Western cultures, their inclusion in this context subverts the normative warrior trope and alludes to the diversity expressed in femininity.



*Figure 1: Female warrior banner.*

Additionally, images of the feminine divine available for purchase could be found at some of the vendors. One such vendor had a collection of miniature clay figures in a variety of colors resembling the much beloved Venus figures (see Figure 2). However, it is the altar contest which is of particular interest to this

study, as the altars featured multiple images of the feminine divine. The altar creators are not associated with them in the exhibit, so the altars stand independently. Thus, visitors are free to interpret the altars themselves. There were six altars in total scattered between the two picnic shelters. Five of the six altars featured at least one female figure in the center where divinity is often located, though most altars had numerous female figures. The arrangement of items on an altar varies across the different modern Pagan traditions, from adherence to a formal altar plan, frequently employed by Gardnerian, Alexandrians, and other British traditionalists, to a less structured approach, typically preferred by feminists and other more eclectic traditions.<sup>145</sup> The central placement of the feminine divine highlights the fact that “images of the deities” are “among the most important items found on a Pagan altar.”<sup>146</sup> However, it is interesting to note that images of male deities were absent from all six altars entered into the contest. Perhaps this is the result of the elevated position the goddess enjoys in some traditions or perhaps it is simply an indication that the altars in this particular contest happen to be designed by women. In any case, imagery of masculine divinity was not completely absent from the event, but was underrepresented, especially in regard to the altars.

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<sup>145</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 10–11.

<sup>146</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 26.





*Figure 2: Handcrafted Venus figures.*

The first altar in the contest was called “Blessed Be” and held five examples of feminine divinity (see Figure 3). Two images of female divinity were Venus figures: one Venus figure was a silhouette propped up with a shell (see Figure 4), the other was a bowl with the Earth below the figure’s upswept arms giving the appearance of a cape (see Figure 5). Both goddess images in this case feature imagery that represents the Earth. Examples of more curvy forms of female bodies are popular in Neopaganism, but are contrary to the forms glorified by Western society. Furthermore, there are two images of female divinity from the ancient Egyptian tradition. One is a statue of the popular goddess Bast in cat form (see Figure 6), while the other is a flat metal figurine of Isis with wings holding up the sun disk (see Figure 7). Egyptian divinity often combined elements of animals with human forms, demonstrating a connection to nature. The fifth representation of female divinity on this altar is a smiling chubby goddess figure

holding flowers (see Figure 8). The figurine is worn with age and with its soft smile and downcast eyes, it gives the effect of a blank canvas. The style of this particular statuette is reminiscent of a Polynesian design, adding to the multi-cultural aesthetical appeal of this altar. The eclectic collection of goddess imagery offers viewers various representations of the divine highlighting divinity's connection to nature and femininity. Moreover, the voluptuous figures and facelessness of the two Venus figures and the Polynesian figurine allow the viewer to project their own interpretations onto the goddesses.



*Figure 3: The "Blessed Be" altar.*



Figure 5: Venus figure silhouette with shell.



Figure 4: Venus figure bowl.



Figure 6: Bast in feline form.



Figure 7: Isis holding the sun disk.



*Figure 8: Smiling figure holding flowers.*

The second altar, titled “Moon Lake,” featured one example of the feminine divine and one symbolic representation of feminine divinity (see Figure 9). A goddess figure resides at the back center of the altar with a scarf wrapped around her head and another around her body (see Figure 10). Full-length statues of medium to large proportion are frequently wrapped in loose fabric when featured prominently on an altar or within ritual space. A large statue of the goddess Sekhmet at the Goddess Temple of Orange County in California resides in the inner sanctuary and is wrapped in different fabrics and adorned with different symbolic items depending on the time of year. The practice of adorning deities and their altars with luxurious fabrics and items symbolic to that deity is common in Southeast Asia, so this practice may be another cultural borrowing of modern Pagans. Modern Pagans are sometimes criticized for incorporating

aspects of nonwestern cultures, causing members to struggle between attempting simultaneously to avoid cultural appropriation and showcase the diversity of womanhood. In order to avoid cultural appropriation, some white members opt to select deities from the European cultures of their ancestors. As such, the porcelain-looking statuette on the Moon Lake altar wears a long toga and gives the impression of being Greek or Roman. With the name “moon lake,” perhaps the statuette was chosen for her blue toga as a representation of a divinity, who would care for the moon and lakes (two concepts typically associated with the color blue in modern Paganism). Starhawk confirms the magical correspondence between water and the color blue, adding that water “rules” emotions and the unconscious mind.<sup>147</sup> The altar prompted visitors to reflect, asking themselves “What do I need right now?” which illustrates how meaning is conveyed through magical correspondence. Furthermore, this altar includes an image of the moon personified (see Figure 11), which is also associated with water, emotions, and intuition.<sup>148</sup> With this altar, an association is established between feminine divinity, the moon, and water. However, for the modern Pagan, this altar also demonstrates a correlation between the feminine divine and emotions and intuition.

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<sup>147</sup> *The Spiral Dance* 284.

<sup>148</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* 286.



*Figure 9: The "Moon Lake" altar.*



*Figure 11: Porcelain female figure.*



*Figure 10: Sun and moon plaque.*

The third altar was called the “Druid Kindred” and featured three examples of feminine divinity (see Figure 12). This altar belonged to a Druid organization, Columbia Grove ADF,<sup>149</sup> so they incorporated their logo, which features a woman wading in the middle of a river encircled by fish with a forest and mountain top behind her (see Figure 13). The central female figure on this altar is placed in the back center and is draped in berries and vines (see Figure 14). She holds a nest with one bird, another bird on her shoulder, and a third on her raised wrist. With her aviary companions and vegetative garb, this goddess figure illustrates the strong relationship between divinity and nature. To the left of this statue are two more examples of powerful female spirits. The larger statue is a female dryad, a tree spirit (see Figure 15), while the smaller example is a female fairy hanging from a branch (see Figure 16). While dryads originate from ancient Greek mythology and fairies originate from Irish folklore, both female spirits are conceptualized as embodying nature. With all four examples, a deep connection between nature and feminine divinity is displayed.

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<sup>149</sup> ADF is the standard abbreviation for “A Druid Fellowship.”



Figure 12: The "Druid Kindred" altar.



Figure 14: Columbia Grove, A Druid Fellowship logo.



Figure 13: Female statuette.





Figure 15: *Dryad statuette.*



Figure 16: Pewter fairy.

The fourth altar in the contest was called the “Harvest Blessings” altar and it has one example of feminine divinity. This simple altar features one female bust in the center of the square table, with flowers behind her and a plethora of vegetation surrounding her (see Figure 17). With flora and vegetation built up around the goddess figure, it is as if she is emerging from the harvest solemn and stoic. A banner drapes across the side of the green tablecloth, which announces the title of the altar in English and Gaelic with a Gaelic pronunciation guide (see Figure 18). This altar’s harvest theme is a reminder that the autumn season was just on the horizon of this late summer day. Although most modern

folk no longer rely on subsistence from their own fields, modern Pagans adopted the association between the Autumn season and abundance in life and spirituality. Such imagery mimics the Greco-Roman concept of the cornucopia as a symbol of prosperity and spiritual abundance. Overall, this altar displays an association of feminine divinity with abundance and a good harvest season.



Figure 17: The "Harvest Blessings" altar.



Figure 18: Female bust.

The fifth altar, the "Sophia Sanctuary," presented two examples of feminine divinity (see Figure 19). The central goddess figure is placed in the middle of the circular altar wearing long black robes. The figure's eyes are closed with her hands raised almost as if she were in the middle of a ritual. The heavy use of black and accents of orange hint that this altar may be Samhain inspired and therefore pay respects to the spirits or those who have passed. At the same time, "Sophia Sanctuary" is the name of a local *womyn's* group, so the altar likely

belongs to this spiritual organization. The group holds rituals during the modern Pagan holy days and venerates the feminine divine, so their name may refer to the Greek divinity Sophia. In Greek, the word *sophia* means wisdom; thus, the goddess functioned as an embodiment of wisdom. Though not conceptualized as a goddess by the Greeks, Sophia was later venerated by classical esoteric groups such as Platonism, Gnosticism, and Christian mysticism. Through her role in Christian mysticism, Sophia became associated with the Holy Spirit. When Sophia was later adopted by modern Wiccan groups she may have retained her association with death, which would explain the Samhain theme of the altar. Below this goddess is a rock with a Venus figure painted on (see Figure 20). Another Venus figure appears on a black rattle on the backside of the altar (see Figure 21). Like the Polynesian figurine described in the first altar, Venus figures with their simplified, vague forms allow the viewer to project their own interpretations of femininity onto the goddesses. The ambiguity of the Venus figure makes it easy for a variety of women to relate to, so it makes sense that this form of female divinity would appear frequently. The black Venus figures may also have been chosen for their color association. Like most Westerners, modern Pagans associate the color black with death; however, black also signifies renewal in the Neopagan community. In sum, this altar connects the feminine divine with death, the afterlife, and with supernatural beings relating to the afterlife. As such, this altar is also a display of feminine divinity's role in death and the afterlife.



Figure 19: The "Sophia Sanctuary" altar.



Figure 20: Painted Venus figure.



Figure 21: Back view of the "Sophia Sanctuary" altar.

The sixth altar was a collection of natural objects such as flowers and pinecones and was called "Simple Nature." Although this altar displayed Neopaganism's penchant for nature worship, it did not hold a concrete example of feminine divinity. Due to the modern Pagan belief that divinity is immanent in all forms of nature, it can be argued that this altar illustrates that divine aspect of nature. Overall, the types of imagery varied in the altar contest; however, some patterns appeared. There were multiple images incorporated from ancient cultures such as ancient Egyptian, Greece, Rome, and the even older Venus figures. It is also curious to note that female divinity is represented as a specific aspect of nature and animals. For instance, the moon is frequently used to symbolize the goddess plus the Egyptian goddess Bast can appear in cat form or take a hybrid form with a human body and a feline head. The connection between the feminine and the divine is unmistakable with the images Neopagans choose to represent divinity.

### **Goddess Ceremony**

The Women of the Fourteenth Moon ceremony is held every year on Labor Day. The ceremony is organized by the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, a Portland group who brought the ceremony to Oregon in the 1980s from California. The weekend-long ceremony is focused on confronting and correcting the way the American culture deals with the aging process. The glorification of youth and the negative views American culture propagates on the aging process has an enormous impact on women who are pressured to remain youthful in appearance throughout their lifetimes. Thus, this celebration holds great

importance to attendees, as it functions to heal the many stresses which are involved in each phase of womanhood.

In general, the ceremony's main objective is to honor each phase of womanhood, which for the Women of the Fourteenth Moon is divided into three phases: the maiden, the mother, and the elder. This reflects the Neopagan concept of the triple goddess, which is alternatively referred to as the maiden, mother, and crone. As Magliocco explains, "the goddess [is] associated with the moon, and in this guise is thought of as having three aspects: the maiden, associated with new beginnings, youth, and the new moon; the mother, connected with maturity, ripeness, and the full moon; and the crone, symbolizing old age, death, endings, the dark moon and the promise of rebirth and regeneration."<sup>150</sup> As such, the group's own association with the moon also highlights their relationship with the triple goddess. The group's invocation of the triple goddess is consistent with the structure of their rituals, since large blocks of time are devoted to each aspect of womanhood, beginning with the maiden and ending with the elder. This notion is also reflected in the group's description of each of the three phases of womanhood. In the view of the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, a woman is considered a maiden after her first menses and for as long as she remains under twenty-five. Once a woman reaches her twenty-fifth year, she is considered a matron until the age of fifty. Thus, a woman becomes an elder after fourteen moons have passed since her last menses and she is at least fifty-one, which is where the group gets its name. Their name

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<sup>150</sup> *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 27.

refers to the fourteenth moon that must rise after a woman's final menstruation in order for her to become an elder within the group. Since there are twelve or thirteen moons each year, and thirteen's unlucky status has been subverted into a powerful number for many witches, the moon after the thirteenth moon symbolizes a new phase for women who have ended their reproductive years. Celebrating the end of a woman's reproductive years further contests the Western penchant for controlling and assigning value on women's ability to reproduce. There is some degree of sensitivity regarding when women transition to elderhood and each woman must decide for themselves which year they will take the ceremonial walking staffs reserved for elders. Associating the phases of womanhood with the moon and incorporating the timing of each woman's menses personalizes the phases to some degree.

Each phase of womanhood is also associated with a range of color values. For the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, "Maidens wear pastels reflective of spring colors, such as yellow or pale pink," while "Matrons wear red or orange, the colors of fire. Elders wear the colors of deep waters: purple, black, blue, or deep green."<sup>151</sup> The color dress code served a practical purpose, as throughout the weekend, women were able to easily identify each other's current phase of life from a distance. The idea that womanhood corresponds with a range of colors and a concept (i.e. Spring, Fire, and Deep Waters) aligns with the modern Pagan notion of magic correspondences. As Magliocco explains, "for magic to work, there must be a set of exact relationships and correspondences among

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<sup>151</sup> Women of the 14th Moon, *Welcome Packet 2*.

magical tools, cardinal directions, and other elements, and that deviations from this pattern can interfere with the efficacy of the ritual.”<sup>152</sup> Participants instinctively understand this ceremony, especially if they have had an introduction to Neopaganism, as these color correspondences and concepts are culturally constructed and would make sense to many Euro-Americans. For instance, the concept of fire is routinely associated with reds and oranges, just like the matrons of the Fourteenth Moon who are at the point in their lives when they are running businesses and managing homes.

To be clear, this celebration of womanhood is secular; however, elements of Neopaganism are embedded in every aspect of this ceremony. According to the knowledge keepers of the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, the three women who began the ceremony in Northern California relied on their spiritualities to guide the design of this ceremony. These three women, a Native American woman, a Celtic Pagan woman, and a Jewish woman, combined their beliefs and practices to form the basic structure of the first ceremony in 1987, although some details change each year. As the group began in California’s Bay Area, it was influenced by the witch camps of the 1960s and 1970s, which were popular in the area at that time. Thus, modern Pagan elements are found throughout the ceremony. Even though the entire camp was treated as sacred due to the natural scenery, a large liminal area was carved out at the heart of the camp and served as the sacred ritual space. This ritual space was referred to as “The Arbor” and was constructed in the form of a circle featuring “gates” facing each of the four

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<sup>152</sup> *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 10.



cardinal directions: North, South, East, and West. This format reflects the Pagan influence as many rituals are performed in large circles with altars placed at each of the four directions. This is called “casting a circle” and “modern Pagans use it to demarcate a sacred space and time within which their imaginations can have full rein.”<sup>153</sup> As a result, the beginning and end of the ceremony is marked by the traditional Neopagan ritual known as “opening the circle” and aptly followed with the “closing circle” ritual.<sup>154</sup> Many other elements of the ceremony, as well as each “gate,” were designed according to the Neopagan tradition.

Each of the four gates or altars use Neopagan symbolism, which simultaneously represented phases of womanhood and aspects of the goddess. After two maidens cleansed participants with sage and fans, the first altar one entered was the West altar. Once through the gate, participants turned to face the altar ornamentation for a moment, often bowing before moving clockwise to the next altar. This altar’s association with the maiden aspect of the goddess was evident through its adornment. The flowing light-yellow material, which was draped over the top of the archway and swirled around the sides, corresponds with the maiden’s bright, energetic spirit. On the left of the gate hung a large handsewn banner with a young woman in a pink dress holding a vase of flowers. The banner’s background was light blue and the young woman was surrounded by crescent and full moons. White and yellow faux daisies and colorful pastel strips of cloth were tied along the inside of the arbor. On the way around the

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<sup>153</sup> Magliocco, *New Age and Neopagan Magic* 659.

<sup>154</sup> Adler 217.

circle to the South gate, participants pass the sacred fire, which is tended throughout the entire ceremony and is fed heavily scented herbs during rituals. The powerful scent of burning herbs adds to each ritual's performative aspect and works to create an ambiance that may provoke altered states of consciousness.

Continuing clockwise, the second altar honors the matrons and is draped in gauzy red fabrics with another handsewn banner, this time depicting an adult woman with full moons and half-moons surrounding her. The matronly figure was dressed in a soft orange and white top with a geometric skirt of bright red, orange, yellow, and green with a lime green shawl thrown over one shoulder. Clutched against her chest she holds what appears to be a frame drum decorated with geometric turtles. An assortment of items at the foot of the gate adds to the symbolism of the matron. The largest piece is a cast of a pregnant belly and breasts with mehndi designs symbolizing motherhood and the caretaking aspect of the matron. Emphasizing this nurturing aspect of womanhood, a feminine facemask decorated in the likeness of the Earth also symbolizes a connection between nature and womanhood. The nurturing aspect of the Earth is reflected in the feminine propensity to care for family members and pets. Serving as the main caretakers for young children, elderly family members, and household pets is a role many women find themselves in. The personification of Earth as the feminine divine frames the trials and tribulations of head caretaker as noble and important work, which the Earth is similarly responsible for. In Neopagan fashion, this type of women's work is reframed as

simultaneously tender and arduous. This aspect is reinforced with the fiery red, yellow, and orange undertones of the altar as well as the red dragon figurine. The association with fire and dragons at this altar is a reminder of the aggressive aspect of the caretaker. Like the goddess, matrons must be simultaneously gentle and aggressive in their role as nurturer, thereby deifying conventional imagery of the mother archetype.

The next altar was the East gate, where participants exited after each portion of the ceremony ended. This altar was devoted to the elder, which was illustrated by the handsewn banner that featured the image of an older woman. The elder was clothed in a lavender dress with an indigo shawl around her shoulders. In her hand she holds a walking staff with a white feather hanging from the top, which towered over the elder's head. The background of this banner was deep blue with full moons and crescent moons haloing the elder. This gate had heavy blue and purple fabrics draped around the top and sides. On either side of the gate raised masks with long flowing hair stood guard. The congregated elder faces looked solemnly on the proceedings and all those who exited the sacred space. Each mask had a unique aesthetic since they were casts of elder members and decorated for past ritual performances. One mask had a green face and gray-purple lips with long teal blue and purple yarn braided and strung with beads for hair. The mask's face and hair were embellished with white shells. Another mask had a white face with purple lips and purple and teal eyeshadow that swept up like a feline. This mask featured a deep purple mandala in the place of a third eye and a blossoming vine headdress over her

blue-gray tress. Many of the masks had values of white, gray, blue, purple, green, and black, evoking all the shades of the sea. Like the light and energetic colors chosen for the maiden and the fiery colors of the matron altar, the elder's altar was adorned with deep dark colors. This reflects the energies of each stage of womanhood. The saturated pastel colors of the maiden reflect her youthful vibrancy and enthusiasm; the fiery hues of the matron symbolize her endurance and drive; and the rich purple, blue, and black tones of the elder represents her deep wisdom and serenity. As one drifts around the ritual circle, they journey through the phases of womanhood until they arrive at the end of the woman's mortal journey.

At last, participants end their journey around the circle at the North gate, which honored the ancestors. Modern Pagans' view of death is unique in that "although the dead are mourned, death is celebrated, as it provides an opportunity for transformation and change."<sup>155</sup> Thus, the ancestors are invited into the celebration as a fourth stage of womanhood. For many Neopagans, the circle is completed when the ancestor transforms once again into the maiden and the cycle is repeated. Most of the general population of modern Pagans believe in reincarnation, as "75.3 percent state they believe in reincarnation, 4.1 percent state they do not believe in reincarnation, and 19.3 percent are unsure."<sup>156</sup> At first glance, a belief in reincarnation and ancestor worship may appear incompatible. However, as Berger et al. explain, "Neo-Pagans' belief in reincarnation is not

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<sup>155</sup> Berger et al., *Voices from the Pagan Census* 46.

<sup>156</sup> Berger et al., *Voices from the Pagan Census* 114.

inconsistent with a notion of an afterlife, as Neo-Pagans typically content that after death, the soul or essence of the individual goes to a resting place, often called Summerland, prior to being reborn.”<sup>157</sup> As such, this altar not only celebrated their ancestors, but also the afterlife, a place of eternal summer and peace.

The final altar was wrapped in lacy white cloth and each participant pinned a picture of a deceased female relative. The pictures remained pinned to the altar the entire weekend so that each time participants entered and exited the ceremony, they stopped before the collection of women who had passed away. At the top of the archway hung a copper and tin sun and moon and all the photographs of women trickled down from this celestial duo around the sides to the foot of the altar. Below the sun and moon hung a white cloth with two women and various symbols painted on. At the top of the cloth hung a horizontal crescent moon. Underneath the silver moon was an animal skull with antlers extending from the left and a spider web stretching to the right. The skull rested on top of a woman with chestnut hair and green eyes. The figure was holding a staff and wore a blue cape reflecting the elders of the community. Below this figure’s bust, a young woman with a golden tress and green eyes gazed sweetly at onlookers. Where the older woman was all angles and harsh lines, the young woman was depicted with curves and soft shading. Golden wings appeared to come from the young woman’s back and swooped down almost as if to embrace the heart drawn below. Taken together, this image provides yet another example

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<sup>157</sup> Berger et al., *Voices from the Pagan Census* 48.

of the triple goddess. A case could be made that the three women represent different aspects of a triple goddess of the afterlife: the ancestor, the wise counselor, and the guardian angel. Throughout the altar, the use of gold and sun iconography calls back to the concept of Summerland, while the use of silver and moons represents the transformation of death. The combination of hard animal skulls and soft materials like white faux fur and lilies on this altar further highlights the unity of opposites within death. While death involves pain and sorrow, it also offers peace and tranquility. In this way, each altar draws upon magic correspondence to honor each phase of life, including the afterlife.

The ceremony was divided into three separate honoring ceremonies for the phases of womanhood, each beginning with a performance of an embodied goddess. As Magliocco explains, Neopagans “may take the parts of goddesses and gods” during ritual performances.<sup>158</sup> These embodied performances are immersive to both performer and participant pulling everyone in attendance into the ritual. During the performance, “participants interacting with the characters, chant, sing, dance around a bonfire (safely contained by a fire pit), and raise energy, lifting their arms to the stars to direct it and send it towards their goal.”<sup>159</sup> Berger explains that “drumming, meditation, and ecstatic dancing are all used to reach an altered state of consciousness.”<sup>160</sup> The performative aspect of the ritual educes an altered state of consciousness, which allows modern Pagans to “raise

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<sup>158</sup> “New Age and Neopagan Magic” 660.

<sup>159</sup> Magliocco, “New Age and Neopagan Magic” 660.

<sup>160</sup> “Witchcraft and Neopaganism” 31.

energy” or work magic to bring about an intentional goal. Furthermore, when modern Pagans achieve an altered state of consciousness in ritual “they feel themselves in contact with the universe or the divine.”<sup>161</sup> For both the performer and participant, embodied performances of divinity is a powerful experience and riddled with symbolic connotations.

The first honoring ceremony was held for the elders and lasted most of the day on Saturday. After brief announcements were made, a slow drumbeat began and a procession of four women in long flowing black clothes entered the circle. The first woman in the procession wore a mask with three faces; the face in the middle was a redhead and the two on the sides were raven-haired. The woman who followed her was an elder, followed by a matron, followed by a maiden. A raven was perched on the embodied goddess’s shoulder and the cawing over the speaker signaled to the participants that they were in the presence of the Morrígan herself. The Morrígan is a celebrated Irish goddess who is known to have protected the mythic warrior CúChulainn and signaled his death. She is often represented by a group of three women or three black carrion birds. This was confirmed when the cawing gave way to an Irish song about the fierce triple goddess. The song spoke of her association with death and the battlefield as the goddess greeted each altar and interacted with the participants. When she approached, participants responded to her as if she were the Morrígan herself. In reaction to the presence of the female divinity, women responded with different gestures; women bowed their heads, nodded slowly with great esteem, placed

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<sup>161</sup> Berger, “Witchcraft and Neopaganism” 36.

one or both hands to their hearts, offered a solemn smile, or a combination of the aforementioned. After the embodied goddess Morrigan and her attendants had stopped at each altar, they began to dance. Their movements were subdued and dramatic. The goddess's attendants began to gather rocks placed in baskets at each altar by participants who had written names of important people or their own names on the rocks. Once all the rocks were gathered into one large basket, the Morrigan held the basket up while her attendants poured water over the rocks. The embodied goddess held the basket of rocks up to the sky while the song grew with intensity. Once the ritual was over, the procession exited the circle with the basket after one more clockwise visit to each altar was conducted. Later, when participants exited the ceremony, small baskets of gifts were set outside the Eastern gate for participants. The gifts were tokens strung with black ribbon all featuring the same imprinted design of three black birds, representing the goddess Morrigan who was known to shapeshift into the raven and/or crow (see Figure 22).



*Figure 22: Three black birds token.*



The matron and maiden performances were both held on Sunday, beginning with the matrons. Interestingly, in a weekend full of emotional outpouring, this year's matron performance was one of the most emotional experiences of the entire ceremony. It visually impacted each and every woman in attendance. The performance began with the arrival of the personification of Mother Earth, with three women dressed in red bodysuits and golden masks shaped like fire followed close behind. Mother Earth was wearing a large gown and veiled headdress of plastic refuse, which trailed behind her. As she circled the participants, she gifted metal bracelets from her wrists to some participants in the front of the circle (see Figure 23). The simple bracelets each had a bottle cap attached to it and had a variety of impactful messages such as "Our Mother" (see Figure 24). Like the tokens from the elder performance, more were offered as gifts at the end of the ceremony.



*Figure 23: Bottlecap bracelet side A.      Figure 24: Bottlecapbracelet side B*

After the goddess figure greeted the four altars, she began to dance to a somber song overlaid with alarming climate change statistics. The three figures in red danced around Mother Earth in aggressive gestures, sometimes ripping

pieces of trash from the figure. The image of the personification of Earth bogged down with waste brought tears to many women's eyes. The emotional experience provoked viewers to stand as they watched Mother Earth move around the circle. The embodied goddess comforted the women in the audience with recorded words that she knows humans are sorry they hurt her and that she forgives her human children for the damage they have done to her. She bestowed the unconditional love of a mother on the audience. Something shifted and the music became sweeter underlaid with bird's song and chirps. Ever so slowly, her attendants began undoing the goddess' cloak and headdress of waste, which revealed underneath a green woman with the pregnant belly of the Earth and flora woven into her tress and skirts. Her headdress was replaced with a crown of flora. This slow, painful transformation prompted most viewers to sob and cradle one another. This performance hit the maidens the hardest and the matrons and elders gathered around comforting them. Even after the Mother Earth left the circle, participants continued to move within the middle of the circle swaying solemnly to the music, many still in the throes of intense grief. When the song ended and the sorrow pressed down on participants, a woman raised her voice, reminding the crowd, "Ladies, ground yourselves!" Understanding the Neopagan notion of grounding, or placing one's flesh to the bare earth, every woman, including elders, sank to the ground. Some women crouched, some sat, some flattened their bellies to the ground, and a few women huddled together and sobbed into the earth. An elder's voice whispered to another, "What have we done!?" and the sentiment all over the circle was intense remorse and sorrow.

Soft sweet music began to play and one by one women began to sit up and heal. Some women made their way back to their seats, while others continued to cry or meandered around the sacred circle. A group of elders joined hands and began to move sideways swinging their arms up and down in alternate patterns. More women joined the elders in their dance, and the elders beckoned for the women who did not join on their own. Soon enough most of the women, except for a few mature elders, had joined hands. The large group of dancers snaked around the circle as women gazed reassuringly at each other when they passed. This dance cheered the spirits until sweet smiles adorned the faces of all linked together in dance. When the song ended, a break was announced and the ceremony delayed in reconvening for reflection and personal care.

In the afternoon, after the matron ceremony, the maiden ceremony began with a performance. This time a singular young woman entered the circle painted from head to toe in gold glitter. Her gold and white corset tutu and ballet shoes glittered in the summer sun and her tiara stood tall above her head. As she made her way around greeting the gates, the embodied goddess stopped and gracefully bowed to the elders and matrons in attendance. The tunes she danced to were modern, catchy, and fun, causing the embodied goddess to leap and bounce around the circle. As she passed some of the more senior elders, she took their hands and guided them into the circle. The embodied maiden goddess's energy was infectious, and elders laughed as they attempted to dance along with her high energy when they clasped Her hand. Once she let go, the

elders typically slowed their energy back down and returned to their seats while the other participants hooted and hollered to see these elders dance up a storm.

The identity of the performers is kept secret, as performers are dressed in wigs and masks. It is uncommon to know who the performers are beforehand. Some participants guess which woman is behind the mask through intimate familiarity; however, it is usually only discovered after the ceremony encapsulating that particular performance ends. Each performance by an embodied goddess conveyed an emotional message that related to that particular stage of womanhood. For instance, the elder performance was solemn and encouraged strength in women. This first performance was slow and purposeful similar to the way the elders move. On the other hand, the matron performance provoked dire feelings of protection for the Earth and provoked the extreme emotions of pain and peace. The Mother Earth's message was one of forgiveness and caring, like the matron's display at the heads of their households. The maiden performance, however, provoked feelings of hope and joy. The embodied maiden goddess' performance was fun and energized participants, like the maidens energize the culture. All three embodied goddesses provoked strong emotions from the participants.

## CHAPTER IV: PREVALENT MOTIFS IN GODDESS ICONOGRAPHY

With modern Pagans' lavish style, it is clear that Neopaganism is a treasure trove of rich material culture, yet very little has been written on the matter. For many Neopagans, the creative process is an important religious experience, which results in a plethora of unique folk art.<sup>162</sup> As previously discussed, Neopagans "draw inspirations from elements of pre-Christian polytheistic worship."<sup>163</sup> Thus, a historical and in some cases multicultural aesthetic is employed as they draw inspiration from the ancient world. This aesthetic is also reflected in the images of the divinity they venerate. As in most religions, divinity is an important element in Neopaganism. However, unlike modern religions, "the feminine divine plays a central role in almost all Neopagan traditions, and this is apparent in their sacred art."<sup>164</sup> The pluralistic views and multicultural representations of the feminine divine weave together a complex tapestry of womanhood. The typified images of women are rejected in favor of precolonial and multicultural imagery. As Magliocco explains, "many Pagans idealize ancient cultures and those of contemporary marginalized peoples, whom they presume possess a spiritual relationship with the earth now lost to the dominant culture."<sup>165</sup> At its core, the modern Pagan aesthetic is a subversion of Western hegemony. For this reason, Neopagans' sacred art holds symbolic

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<sup>162</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* XI.

<sup>163</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 1.

<sup>164</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 4.

<sup>165</sup> *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 6.

challenges embedded into their iconography. This is particularly true in the case of the feminine divine, since goddesses are held in such high esteem by many Neopagan traditions. The symbolic challenges modern Pagans construct regarding the feminine divine function to support their countercultural values. The combination of countercultural values and a synthesis of style creates a distinctive religious aesthetic. Thus, an investigation into Neopagan images of the feminine divine results in a vibrant sampling of folk art.

Figurines and symbolic images of divinity are showcased by Neopagans and used in a few different ways. The most common way figurines are used is on Neopagan altars. Some traditions may dictate or suggest the specific location where the image of the goddess should rest, as Wiccan author Scott Cunningham asserts, “the left half of the altar is usually dictated to the Goddess.”<sup>166</sup> Other traditions do not place importance on specific layouts, “because they see deity immanent in every aspect of life, precise placement of objects is less important than the general intent of the ritual.”<sup>167</sup> Thus, in some Neopagan traditions, symbolic images of the goddess are often observed throughout the altar and there may be more than one goddess present on the altar, as is evident from the altar contest. Outside of the altar, Neopagans also place goddess images around their homes. Shari hung “a picture of the moon phases above [her] front door” to be “reminded [she is] being watched over every day.” As Shari explains, she is “drawn to the moon” and reveres moon

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<sup>166</sup> *Wicca* 59.

<sup>167</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 11.

goddesses such as Luna and Selene. As we often showcase pictures of loved ones on our shelves and walls, it makes sense that Neopagans do the same with goddess symbols. Whether it is for protection or aesthetic purposes, many Neopagans keep images of feminine divinity close at hand.

Despite the eclectic nature of the modern Pagan aesthetic, a few overarching themes emerge when examining the iconography of the feminine divine. Though subtle, their countercultural values are expressed throughout the imagery evoking goddess worship. In fact, the eclectic quality of the Neopagan aesthetic reveals its subcultural essence. A “bricolage aesthetic” is common to subcultures and rationalizes the anomalous combination of imagery evoked by modern Pagans to represent feminine divinity.<sup>168</sup> Representations of the feminine divine further support their subcultural distinction by incorporating the grotesque body into goddess iconography. Through subversive images of women, which challenge modern beauty standards, the female body is refashioned as sacred and diverse in its beauty. The various phases and expressions of femininity are celebrated through their sanctification, which is highlighted by their triplication, and viewed as a sacred number by modern Pagans. The sacredness of nature is also expressed in Neopagan goddess iconography and is intricately woven into notions of femininity and environmental concerns. Neopagan countercultural values, the sanctification of the feminine form, the significance of the phases of womanhood, and the sanctification of nature all manifest in the iconography of

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<sup>168</sup> Jones 3.

the feminine divine. These overarching themes often overlap with one another, creating a complex web of symbolism.

### **Countercultural Values and the Carnavalesque**

Modern Paganism's critique of Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy carnivalizes Western hegemonic forces. Neopaganism's rejection of the dominant religious and philosophical thought is executed in such a way as to mock the dominant culture. As Peter Jones applies Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory to punks in the UK, here too the concept of carnival is valuable. Bakhtin explains that "the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary... are suspended during carnival."<sup>169</sup> Not only is the norm suspended in carnival, it is blatantly inverted. As a result, the goddess supersedes the god, Paganism replaces Christianity, and magic supplants religion. Since Neopagans construct their identity as antithetical to the dominant Western culture, their symbol systems are derived in opposition of the norm. However, "oppositonality is important because it offers possibilities for cultural critique and renewal" and movements such as these "tend to draw their iconography from this devalued symbol set."<sup>170</sup> Through a devalued symbol set and the symbolism of magical correspondence, the iconography of the feminine divine constructs subversive messages about women's lived experiences.

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<sup>169</sup> 251.

<sup>170</sup> Magliocco, *Witching Culture* 212.



In true carnivalesque fashion, modern Pagans invert social, religious, and philosophical norms by overthrowing institutionalized hierarchies. As a whole, Neopagan iconography “rejects the Augustinian notion of nature and the human body as temporal, flawed, and corrupt. Instead, nature is idealized, humans are portrayed as inseparable from nature, and the entire universe is imagined as interconnected through a system of symbolic correspondences.”<sup>171</sup> This egalitarian view of the relationship between humans and nature overthrows the archaic great chain of being philosophy that continues to influence modern thought. Neopaganism’s rejection of this hierarchical structure is illustrated visually with animal-goddess hybrids such as the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet, who is traditionally depicted with a lion face and female body. The combination of human and animal in one being upends the hierarchical structure by emphasizing the interconnectedness of nature and humans. Patriarchal hierarchies are also undermined through goddess iconography that subverts the Western standard of beauty and gender roles. As previously noted, paleolithic Venus figures challenge hegemonic views on the ideal shape of the female body; however, hegemonic ideals of beauty are also confronted when Neopagans arrange goddesses of varying ages on the same altar. As in the *Blessed Be* altar at the altar contest, a sweet elderly Polynesian figure (see Figure 4) is assembled with a youthful image of the goddess Isis (see Figure 5). The juxtaposition of these goddesses calls into question the importance placed on youth in regard to

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<sup>171</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 66.

feminine beauty. This “bricolage aesthetic” illustrates “a carnivalesque refunctioning of commonplace objects ‘contrary to their common use’.”<sup>172</sup> While the Polynesian figure was manufactured as purely decorative, the colorful tin Isis figure is a votive candle holder that illuminates the goddess from behind. However, placed together in the Neopagan context, the two images work in tandem to undermine the dominant perspective of womanhood.

### **The Sacred Female Form and the Grotesque**

Through the carnivalization of the modern Pagan aesthetic, the iconography of the feminine divine subverts beauty standards relating to women’s age and body shape. This is accomplished by showcasing the diversity of femininity. Each practitioner has their own idea of what attributes the goddess possesses as well as what physical form feminine divinity may take. From the detailed personal descriptions to the more common ambiguous depictions, the feminine divine is imagined in a variety of forms. When working with the goddess Luna, Shari visualizes a detailed image of the goddess. Shari describes Luna as a “barefoot” woman with “dark blonde hair...down to about her elbow” who is “wearing a white roman dress” with “a flower and vine headband” while she is “carrying a staff with a crescent moon at the top.” However, others like Rose may not anthropomorphize divinity and instead visualize divinity as “energy.” Rose explains that “divinity is all-gendered” and “the feminine aspect of divinity is what we celebrate in the Women of the Fourteenth Moon.” Although the number and types of forms the goddess can assume also fluctuates among Neopagans,

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<sup>172</sup> Jones 5.

some common forms include featureless feminine figures, animals and/or animal-human hybrids, historic goddesses, newly conceptualized goddesses, and a triple goddess.

Some of the oldest images of females known to humankind (the aforementioned Venuses) are frequently employed by Neopagans as representations of the goddess and are sometimes used as proof of the historical veneration of a great mother goddess. While some Neopagan artists recreate these figures, others draw inspiration from them and create new designs, yet maintain the traditional aesthetic. These newer designs are still featureless and without detailed hands and feet; however, the modern designs feature an hourglass figure, yet a voluptuous one.<sup>173</sup> Oftentimes, with these modern Venus figures, a spiral design delineates the figure's legs, with the center of the spiral encircling her genitalia. By highlighting the female genitalia on these figures, the images subvert the puritanical notion of sex and the concealment of the female body. Their large breasts and engorged vulvas reveal the carnivalesque nature of goddess iconography. As Jones notes, "the grotesque body is central to the carnival."<sup>174</sup> As such, the grotesque body of the goddess plays a critical role in subverting the social expectations imposed on women's bodies. While the voluptuousness of the figures and the overexaggerated genitalia may appear eerie in its excessiveness, it forces the viewer to gaze upon the forbidden body type, only to find beauty in the form. The grotesque body "stands in stark contrast

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<sup>173</sup> See Figure 20.

<sup>174</sup> Jones 4.

to the distinct, finished and authoritarian 'classical body,' the model for traditional aesthetics and social order since antiquity."<sup>175</sup> While the grotesque body functions to subvert the classical body, taken together, the two extreme body types express the pure variety that feminine bodies manifest. With a belief in the unity of opposites, the expression of the diversity of the female body may lend itself to the eventual inclusion of the trans body. Showcasing the body in a variety of forms works to normalize stigmatized body types. Such is possible for the trans body, although cisgender women-only groups remain. Still, the grotesque body contests the classical body, challenging the viewer to reconsider body standards.

The lack of features on the figurines may be a point of attraction for some practitioners. As previously discussed, many practitioners view the feminine divine as one entity represented by numerous manifestations throughout time. Riffing on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, there is a well-known description of the feminine divine as the goddess of a thousand faces.<sup>176</sup> The veneration of a featureless figure seems rational, then, as it can be seen as representative of the goddess's many forms. For some, this may be preferable to assuming the appearance of the feminine divine. While visualizing the goddess during ritual work and meditation, some practitioners do not like to visualize a specific image, but would rather visualize a type of energy to represent the

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<sup>175</sup> Jones 4.

<sup>176</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* 106.

goddess. The featureless form of Venus figures allows practitioners to focus on a concept or type of energy to communicate with the goddess.

Furthermore, the voluptuous shape of the images may draw some practitioners looking for a body positive image of the goddess. In the modern world, images of fit and toned women surround us. For women who possess bodies that do not fit the modern notion of beauty, these modern images feel oppressive and may lead to feelings of inadequacy. Upon viewing the Venus figures, many women feel that “for the first time, [their] female body had been affirmed.”<sup>177</sup> Images of the goddess should reflect all women, as she is representative of all women.<sup>178</sup> The Venus of Willendorf is the most common figure invoked for this purpose, as her round proportions are pleasing to view and more representational of the natural curves of the female body. Clearly, the typical image of women does not accurately reflect all women, but followers of the goddess express the desire that her images should.

### **The Phases of Womanhood and Triplication**

Another trope found within Neopagan goddess imagery is the presence of a triple goddess. This is represented by Neopagans in two ways. Either three goddesses are showcased adjacent to one another or three goddesses are featured in a single image. For those interested in the Greek tradition, on their altar they might include three goddesses (Athene, Artemis, and Persephone) in connection to the Eleusinian Mysteries, an ancient cult that centered around a

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<sup>177</sup> Radford 3.

<sup>178</sup> Starkhawk, *The Spiral Dance* 103.

specific myth. All three are virgin goddesses; however, they represent different aspects of virginity. As the goddess of wisdom, Athene's virginity is deliberate, while Artemis' domain over the wild symbolizes untamed virginity, and the young Persephone's virginity is one of innocence.<sup>179</sup> In this way, three different aspects of a particular issue experienced by women are addressed. A singular image with three goddesses generally represents different stages of a woman's life. This is usually in the form of a maiden, a mother, and a crone.<sup>180</sup> The adoption of a fourth stage is observed in some traditions, as it is at the Women of the Fourteenth Moon ceremony. This is often seen in ritual spaces so that an aspect of womanhood correlates with each of the four cardinal directions where modern Pagans situate their altars in large ceremonies. For the Women of the Fourteenth Moon, the fourth stage occurs after the elder stage to represent the female ancestors and relatives who have passed on. For modern women, the notion that each stage of our lives is purposeful and holds beauty alleviates the pressure to remain youthful. This imagery is another way to demonstrate appreciation for the female body in all its stages. Most historic goddess imagery presents women in the prime of their lives, giving us a static view of womanhood. However, the Neopagan penchant to represent life as cyclical disrupts this with their triplication of the goddess.

While the idea of a triple goddess is a natural fit for those who are polytheistic or venerate multiple goddesses with the assertion that they are

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<sup>179</sup> McLean 61–62.

<sup>180</sup> McLean 15.

reflections of the one, how do other Neopagans rationalize the existence of a triple goddess? McLean explains that “this is not merely a multiplying by three, but rather a threefold manifestation; the goddess reveals herself on three levels.”<sup>181</sup> Another example of the goddess manifesting in three stages is her expression as the moon. A popular symbol of the goddess consists of three moons linked together in a progression of phases: from a waxing crescent to a full moon to a waning crescent.<sup>182</sup> As this symbol illustrates the passage of time, it is often included in the designs of imagery relating to the maiden, mother, and crone. This threefold manifestation of the goddess is mimicked in other aspects of modern Paganism. One example of this is the Threefold Law, which “is the idea that one’s actions in the world are returned in kind three times over.”<sup>183</sup> Like Hermeticism, the number three is sacred within Neopaganism and when embedded into the imagery of the goddess it functions to reinforce the importance of feminine divinity.

### **The Sacredness of Nature and Ecological Values**

In addition to connecting the sacred with womanhood, Neopagan goddess imagery sacralizes nature. Asserting that all of nature is linked to the divine results in more consideration taken for human interaction with the environment and the living creatures it sustains. Although highly political, the messages of modern Pagan goddess imagery preach acceptance and compassion. The

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<sup>181</sup> 14.

<sup>182</sup> McLean 11–12.

<sup>183</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 5.

iconography of the feminine divine illustrates these ecological values, as it subverts notions of a hierarchal structure of nature.

One way this is accomplished is through images of animals and animal hybrids as representative of the feminine divine. As Magliocco notes, “some feminine figures sport animal heads, bat wings, tails, and other nonhuman appendages.”<sup>184</sup> This may sound strange to those who were raised in cultures that prefer the Abrahamic traditions, as animals are placed lower than humans in the hierarchy. However, Neopagans venerate nature and so animals are revered instead of dominated. Furthermore, certain animals are considered to be under the protection of a deity and therefore stand as representative of that deity. For instance, within ancient Egyptian mythology, cats are symbolic of the deity Bast. Therefore, images of cats often appear on the altars of practitioners who venerate the goddess Bast.<sup>185</sup> While a myriad of cat imagery may appear on such an altar, the feline image associated with Bast is specific and reminiscent of the statues uncovered in Egypt. This particular cat stands upright in the regal Egyptian fashion with tall, straight ears. The feline usually has at least one ear pierced with a gold hoop and may have their septum pierced as well. Around her neck, she wears a traditional Egyptian necklace, which will often feature a scarab beetle in the center.<sup>186</sup> This imagery reveals an appreciation for world cultures as well as a veneration for the natural world and its creatures.

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<sup>184</sup> *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 28.

<sup>185</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 14.

<sup>186</sup> See Figure 6.



The image of the goddess Bast herself, along with most Egyptian deities, can be characterized as having animal heads with human bodies. This image of Bast is usually standing upright and sometimes wears a Wedjat eye around her neck, which is a symbol of wholeness and a protective device. In her right hand is an arched sistrum, which was a sacred instrument in ancient Egypt. While in her left hand she holds a lion-headed aegis, whose meaning is uncertain. However, it has been suggested that goddess-headed aegises “may have been carried only by female members of the royal family in ceremonies connected with the worship of Isis, who represented the ideal of motherhood.”<sup>187</sup> The fact that Bast is holding such a sistrum reinforces her image as a protective figure of high status. Modern interpretations of this hybrid form of Bast depict her in either a seductive or warlike manner. However, these modern interpretations also include many of the features that the more traditional Bast images include. The traditional images of Bast’s hybrid form often appear stiff, with odd proportions of human and feline features. The modern designs are more pleasing to the eye and reminiscent of animal hybrids in Japanese anime. These images “visually [break] down the chain of being that separates humans and animals” while simultaneously “emphasizing the continuity between humans and animals.”<sup>188</sup> Images such as these are a critique of humanity’s relationship with nature as a whole.

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<sup>187</sup> Clark 80.

<sup>188</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 28.

Ancient Egyptian deities are not the only goddesses and gods of the past in which Neopagans venerate. In general, many modern Pagans “turn to historical images of gods and goddesses for inspiration.”<sup>189</sup> While some traditions may invoke historical deities from a specific culture, others are more eclectic and venerate deities from multiple cultures. Images of historic deities employed by Neopagans are highly symbolic, as are many of the Zell’s statuettes. Neopagan artists Oberon and Morning Glory Zell made “hand-cast sacred statuettes that are widely used as altar pieces by Pagans.”<sup>190</sup> Their statuette depicting the Roman goddess Diana is exemplary of the highly symbolic designs typical of Neopagan goddess imagery. The nude figure with wild hair trailing behind her is arched backward while aiming an arrow at the sky. Framed with the arch of her bow, a full moon serves as her background. Around her back foot rests a fawn and a hare protected by their matron. To a modern Pagan, this image is complete, as it conveys the essence of Diana through symbolism and reflects the goddess’s attributes. Diana, and her Greek predecessor Artemis, are associated with the moon and was known as “Goddess of the Wild” and “Mistress of the Woods.”<sup>191</sup> The inclusion of a fawn and hare signals to the viewer that woodland creatures are under the goddess’s protection and to honor nature as they would the goddess. The bow and arrow reinforce the notion that Diana is protective of her devotees as well as nature. In this image, the weapon that is used to

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<sup>189</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 29.

<sup>190</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 30.

<sup>191</sup> Husain 117 and 126.

extinguish the lives of her woodland creatures is now turned on their pursuers. Subversive statements such as this can be empowering to the viewer and illustrate the modern Pagan tendency to construct their identity in contrast to the dominant culture.<sup>192</sup> Once again, we see that Neopagan imagery works to reinforce the subversion of social norms. In the case of Venus figures, images subvert social norms relating to the female body, while historical images of goddesses call into question the lack of feminine divinity in modern religions. Yet, in both cases, we see a call to action regarding our stewardship of the environment.

As with the reimagining of Venus figures and historical goddess images, new images of the goddess have emerged out of the Neopagan movement. The Zell's creation *Millennial Gaia* exemplifies this phenomenon. Every inch of her body is symbolic of our natural world and the creatures and cultures that occupy it. Her pregnant and swollen belly is the planet Earth, while "her left breast represents the moon."<sup>193</sup> Creatures of the Earth, past and present are represented all over her body:

Etching along her legs are all manner of sea creatures representing "the evolution of life in the seas, from the earliest bacteria and single-cell protozoa, to the great sea mammals on her buttocks" (Zell, Zell, and Gabriel 1998), while her arms depict a similar pattern, culminating in climax forests. Crawling in her hair are creatures representing the

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<sup>192</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 2.

<sup>193</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 32.

evolution of life on earth, beginning with amphibians at the base of her spine and culminating in a human child over the left (analytical) hemisphere of her brain.<sup>194</sup>

The insects and flowers woven in her long tress are symbolic of various cultures, including the scarab representing Egypt and the spider representing Africa, with its sacred trickster and creator narratives.<sup>195</sup> As the Millennial Gaia, it is also fitting that she is representative of science, which is accomplished with the evolution of creatures marching up her body and the double helix of DNA within her tress.<sup>196</sup> Fittingly, her design demands that her viewers attend to all the wonders of the natural world. The Millennial Gaia drives home the assertion that all of nature is connected and that harm to one aspect results in harm to all. As a result, one of Neopaganism's core ideologies is showcased in full light: all aspects of nature and humanity are connected and to be revered as a manifestation of the divine.

The form of the Millennial Gaia also highlights important Neopagan worldviews. As previously discussed, Neopagans are interested in showcasing female body shapes that are generally met with contempt in the modern world. This is true of the Millennial Gaia as her body is voluptuous and her face possesses a multi-ethnic appearance. This reverence for all cultures is seen throughout the images of the goddess, especially in regards to the adoption of

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<sup>194</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 33.

<sup>195</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 33.

<sup>196</sup> Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 33.

multicultural deities. With this image, the Millennial Gaia is more representative of the majority of modern women than most images of the Goddess. As Magliocco points out, the Millennial Gaia is “an attempt to create a new iconography incorporating Pagan politics and poetics.”<sup>197</sup> The emergences of new holistic images of the goddess like the Millennial Gaia are much overdue.

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<sup>197</sup> *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art* 32.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The sanctification of nature and the female body illustrate the subversive aspect of modern Paganism's iconography of the feminine divine. The fact that for Neopagans, divinity and nature itself are conceptualized as feminine functions to reinvent women's role in society. Goddess worshipers subvert dominant feminine tropes concerning beauty and the body through carnivalized imagery. Thus, Neopagan women construct a carnivalesque world where they are free to reimagine femininity and shape the divine in their own image. Through a bricolage aesthetic, femininity is reframed as multifaceted and sacred. Goddess images break the woman out of the confines of social standards, allowing her to spread her wings and soar in any direction she may choose.

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