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Elizabeth Shuler

A BALANCING ACT: A DISCUSSION OF GENDER ROLES WITHIN WICCAN RITUAL

Most of what we know about Wicca is gleaned from books that reside on the shelves of booksellers under the heading of “New Age.” But the tantalizing titles and helpful how-to indexes are a far cry from scholarly probing. Many are little more than how-to books—*Wicca for Dummies* explains how to buy or make a robe, how to buy the right candles, and step by step instructions for some common rituals—and many are simply autobiographical; however, there are a few books that give a detailed analysis of Wiccan ritual and belief. Wicca is quite new in the world of religion and the vast majority of academia ignores all but the basic questions of dogma, ritual, and goddess worship. Few scholars delve into the idea of masculinity within a religion that worships both a god and a goddess. This lack of curiosity and attention has led to a superficial analysis of Wicca as a woman’s religion, a religion where women are powerful and men are secondary.¹ Because Wicca is a religion of balance, the marginalization of the god and masculinity seems a major oversight of the scholarly analysis of Wiccan

1. Amber Fisher, *Philosophy of Wicca* (New York: EWC, 2002), 190–191; Janet and Stewart Farrar, *A Witches’ Bible the Complete Witches’ Handbook* (Custer, Wash.: Phoenix, 1996), 17–20; Joanne Pearson, “Inappropriate Sexuality? Sex Magic, S/M and Wicca,” *Theology & Sexuality* 11 (2005): 36–37; Joanne Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage Ritual, Sex and Magic* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 8; Jon Bloch, *New Spirituality, Self, and Belonging: How New Agers and Neo-Pagans Talk About Themselves* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 69.

ritual.

Many female Wiccans see the goddess as a long-lost champion for women's rights not only in religion, but in life. As Janet and Stewart Farrar state in their book *The Witches' Goddess*, "after centuries of banishment, the Goddess has returned."² The goddess became a symbol for strong and independent women and Wicca became a religion that was for women, by women. As Jon Bloch points out, "the Goddess movement is claimed to offer self-empowerment through an articulation of the female experience as divine, and to protest what are perceived to be patriarchal values that promote gender inequalities."³ The idea of Wicca as a goddess religion has permeated popular culture and academia and the feminine aspect of deity has overshadowed most other concepts found in Wicca. Understandably, then, most scholars focus on Wicca as a "woman's religion" and there is a lot of information about being and understanding female Wiccans. However, this analysis is inadequate. While Wicca is a goddess religion, Wicca values both masculinity and femininity; neither is dominant over the other, neither is valued above the other, nor is one more powerful than the other. Never is this more apparent than within Wiccan rituals. The liminal space of Wiccan ritual modifies practitioners' gender identities by inscribing both masculine and feminine identities upon the individual to create balance.

Scholars have described Wiccan rituals and what they entail, some even including incantations or invocations from rituals the authors have personally witnessed. Lynne Hume discusses sacred space in Wiccan ritual in *Creating Sacred Space: Outer Expressions of Inner Worlds in Modern Wicca* and she bases her arguments on "participant observation, informal interviews and literature research."⁴ Joanne Pearson has many articles, and one book, that deal with Wicca in various capacities; she discusses sex magic and inappropriate sexual-

2. Janet and Stewart Farrar, *The Witches' Goddess: The Feminine Principle of Divinity* (Custer, Wash.: Phoenix, 1987), 1.

3. Bloch, *New Spirituality*, 69.

4. Lynn Hume, "Creating Sacred Space: Outer Expressions of Inner Worlds in Modern Wicca," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13 (1998): 309-319.

ity in *Inappropriate Sexuality? Sex Magic, S/M and Wicca*,⁵ Wiccan history in *The History and Development of Wiccan and Paganism*,⁶ and witches in popular culture in *Witches and Wicca*.⁷ Joanne Pearson also deals with ritual and goddess worship in *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex, and Magic*⁸; she describes dogma, goddess worship, and she even gives a detailed and in depth account of ritual preparation and structure. However, she uses this analysis to understand Christian ritual, not Wiccan ritual.

Ritual creates a liminal space, a sort of in between time or transitional condition, and is a way of stepping outside of normal time and space to create and live the ideal, if only for a moment, that is nearly impossible to realize in everyday life.⁹ Every aspect of Wiccan ritual is aimed toward enacting and embodying balance and unity, even the altar and the circle itself. As the priest and priestess enact the divine coupling in order to instruct and guide the other participants, the solitary practitioner enacts this coupling of masculine and feminine internally to create a gender identity that is outside of the normal performance of gender, one that is divine. As Janet and Stewart Farrar explain, “we are not separate from the God and Goddess but part of them.”¹⁰ The modified gender identity that comes out of the liminal space is a representation of unity, of wholeness, which is so pervasive in Wicca.

When thinking about Wiccan ritual it is helpful to deal with group rituals, such as the Great Rite. Most rituals within Wicca, including Sabbat rituals, take the same shape and have many of the same elements. They begin with a circle casting where a circle is marked on the floor and the participants of the circle or

5. Pearson, “Inappropriate Sexuality?” 1.

6. Joanne Pearson, “The History and Development of Wicca and Paganism,” in *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age*, ed. Joanne Pearson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 15–54.

7. Joanne Pearson, “Witches and Wicca,” in *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age*, ed. Joanne Pearson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 133–172.

8. Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, 59–76.

9. Victor Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969), 94–97.

10. Farrar, *A Witches' Bible*, 3.

the priest and priestess “cast” the circle by moving around the perimeter clockwise. This directs power into the circle making it sacred and safe for magic work. The altar is located in the center of the circle with two candles. A representation of each element—another candle for fire, a bowl of water, incense for air, and cornmeal or other grains for earth—are placed at their respective directions. The earth element is placed in the north, air in the east, fire in the south, and water in the west. Also on the altar are tools for whichever ritual is in progress. For a Sabbat ritual—such as Samhain or Beltane—a chalice and an athame (a ritual knife) are placed on either side of the altar, and a plant and antlers are placed in the center of the altar to represent the god and the goddess. Other rituals might have food and drink placed on the altar, a sword, a wand, a cauldron, god and goddess statues, or any number of decorative items dictated by the owner of the altar, but the principle of balance is still enacted by the careful placement of these items.¹¹

All of this structure and balance serves a dual purpose: it is there not only to create balance in all things, but it also helps create liminal space with its repetitive and ceremonial layout. As Joanne Pearson puts it, “the framework operates as a mechanism used to build ritual space and time—it *frames* liminality.”¹² In this way the circle casting, the placement of the tools, and even the repetition of incantations becomes a way of slipping into a different place, of stepping beyond the threshold of normal existence. Lynne Hume says of the drama of ritual that “just as a play consists of performance and performers, props, costumes, lighting, music, and special effects in order to create a mood, or atmosphere, so it is with any pagan ritual.”¹³ The performance of the ritual, the theater of it, creates a space that is in between. It is no longer the space of everyday life, but it is not yet the return to structure that happens after the closing of the circle. The repetition of the ritual structure almost exactly each time provides a blank space for liminality, just as the practitioners become a blank slate and are cleared of their

11. See Figure 1.

12. Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, 71.

13. Hume, “Creating Sacred Space,” 312.

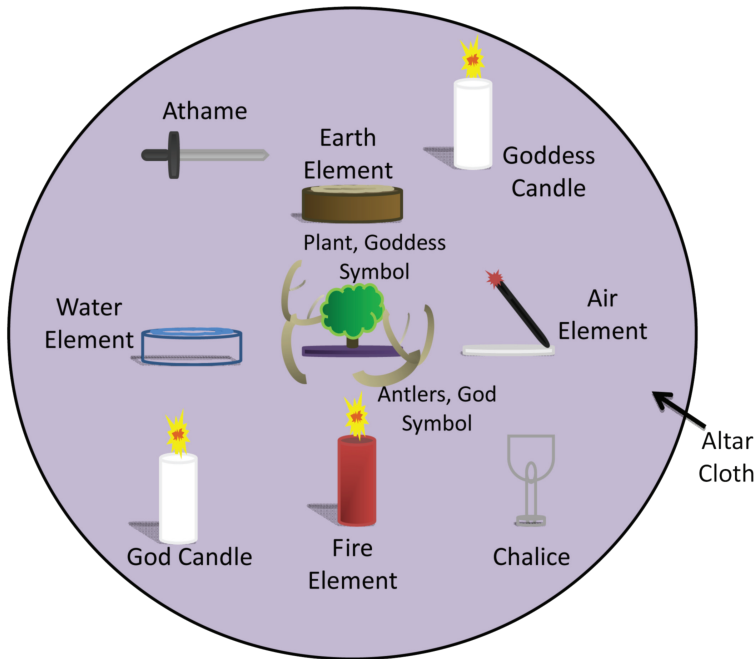


Figure 1. Diagram of a Wiccan Altar.

cultural status by going naked or dressing identically. As Turner explains, “the neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group.”¹⁴ Each element of the ritual becomes a symbol that expresses the ambiguity of the liminal space. Even the idea of the circle provides a symbol of balance. Janet and Stewart Farrar state, “the Magic Circle is neither male nor female; it is a power-house for the polarity of the two, and the whole ritual of Circle-casting emphasizes a deliberate balance of aspects.”¹⁵ The closing of the circle, which is also highly repetitive and ceremonial, becomes a way of bringing the participants of the ritual back into the here and now and out of the liminal space. The closing of the circle brings back the structure of secular life; the priest and the priestess are no longer the god and goddess, but have names, careers, and wealth distinctions. Speech not regarding

14. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 103.

15. Farrar, *The Witches' Goddess*, 63.

the ritual is allowed, and the mystical is remarked upon only in reference to the previous ritual. All of the traits that make up liminality have been left behind, and instead of a balance, or a whole, there is only partiality, individuals.

While the opening and closing of rituals are structured, the body of the ritual, after the circle casting and before the closing of the circle, is much less rigid. While the initiates are inside the circle, the ritual becomes whatever the participants deem necessary, whether it is a celebration in honor of a certain deity, a prayer, a spellworking, or a Sabbat. The ritual can be performed by a group or by a solitary practitioner and still have the same effect. However, regardless of the content of the ritual, the goal is still balance, the ideal. This balance is exemplified by the god and the goddess. Janet and Stewart Farrar explain that manifestation of life, of everything, requires polarity, from the gods down.¹⁶ The goddess' ideal femininity balances the god's ideal masculinity and this is performed within the ritual space. Within a practitioner this "whole" or unity between masculine and feminine is created by combining both aspects of the divine in—hopefully—equal measure within oneself. As Hume states "ritual is the *outer form* whose purpose is to act as catalyst to the *inner process*."¹⁷ It is similar to Turner's descriptions of rites of passage, where neophytes "have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society."¹⁸ The priest and priestess are the society or ritual elders to whom the practitioners have submitted and they become the molds into which the practitioners strive to fit.

In the Great Rite, balance is achieved at a divine level between the god and the goddess, masculine and feminine within a coven setting. The Great Rite is performed between the circle casting and the closing of the circle where the liminal space has been created. . The Great Rite is a ritual that is usually enacted during Sabbat rituals and is a performance of the union of the god and the goddess. Some covens prefer to participate in ritual naked—"skyclad"—but

16. Janet and Stewart Farrar, *The Witches' God: Lord of the Dance* (Custer, Wash.: Phoenix, 1989), 1.

17. Hume, "Creating Sacred Space," 313.

18. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 103.

most covens simply wear robes that are almost identical. Liminal space minimizes the distinctions between sexes which allows for equality, but also makes it easier for gender identities to be modified. The identical dress of the ritual participants creates the ambiguity of status that defines them as liminal entities. It strips them of their cultural rank, position, and gender so that they cannot be distinguished from one another. They therefore enter into ritual *communitas*, as Turner puts it, in order to “become equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”¹⁹ In many covens a priest and a priestess serve as versions of the deities; the priestess becomes the goddess and the priest becomes the god. As Janet and Stewart Farrar put it “the Great Rite is . . . the ritual mating, by human representatives, of the Goddess-principle and the God-principle.”²⁰ The Great Rite actually performs both gender ideals in an almost play-like setting and the priest and priestess do, on many occasions, have sexual intercourse in order to show the unity and balance of gender. This can be disturbing to those who have watched movies where the ritual intercourse takes place in plain sight, but the actual sexual intercourse is conducted in private.²¹

The Great Rite ritual can be performed symbolically as well. The chalice and the athame stand in for the priest and priestess so that actual sexual intercourse is left out. When the Great Rite is done symbolically, the priestess, who has at this point become the goddess, holds the chalice at waist height while the priest, who has become the god, holds the athame over his head. Even in this symbolic version “it is the body, mind, and spirit of the High Priestess which are seen as the channel for the Goddess, and the opening-up of that channel is a central feature of Wiccan ritual,”²² just as the priest is the channel for the god in the liminal space.²³ As the priest moves his athame down, the priestess moves the chalice up and they meet in the middle. This is symbolic of penetration, of

19. *Ibid.*, 96.

20. Farrar, *The Witches' Goddess*, 66.

21. Farrar, *A Witches' Bible*, 49.

22. See section “IX Woman as Goddess,” in Farrar, *The Witches' Goddess*.

23. See Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 63.

course, but it also has a deeper meaning. The two aspects, masculine (in the form of the athame) and feminine (in the form of the chalice) meet together in the middle; they balance each other. This performance is a more user-friendly version of the Great Rite that many covens employ in order to avoid controversy, to make the Great Rite easier to perform, and in order to show the practitioners, in person, the ritual meeting of masculine and feminine. But the principle of balance and unity is the same.

In the actual Great Rite the god and goddess create balance by uniting and becoming one whole through sexual intercourse. Pearson explains, “in the center of the ritual, the Priestess *experiences* the Goddess.”²⁴ Both the priestess and priest transubstantiate into the goddess and the god.²⁵ Most Wiccans understand this as the priest becoming the god and the priestess becoming the goddess, almost like possession. The priest and priestess are the ideal masculine and feminine within the liminal space when they assume the forms of the god and goddess; they represent gender identities where men are strong and women are intuitive. The priest and priestess use each other to create the balance within themselves and eventually come together to perform the modified gender identity that the others are performing or trying to perform within themselves. The couple participating in the Great Rite are offering themselves joyfully to the god and goddess.²⁶ This gives the other practitioners something tangible and human to emulate and also, in the case of the Great Rite, gives an outward example of how to balance masculine and feminine within oneself, which is the goal of ritual. The priest and priestess perform the entire struggle for balance in a very physical way so that the other practitioners have an example to follow. The physical intercourse between the priest and the priestess serve as a symbol of the internal balancing of masculine and feminine. As Samuel Wagar explains, “The mystical experience dissolves away the boundaries of the individual and permits them

24. Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, 73.

25. Samuel Wagar, “The Wiccan ‘Great Rite’—Hieros Gamos in the Modern West,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009), [http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art21\(2\)-HeirosGamos.html](http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art21(2)-HeirosGamos.html)

26. Farrar, *A Witches’ Bible*, 49.

to honour themselves as a part of the *All*. The individual can become aware of themselves as a unique expression of the divine purpose or an integral portion of the universe. By dissolving the ego boundaries an intensity of feeling, a depth of connection and a kind of meaning is derived.”²⁷

The dissolving of the ego, of the individual self, and replacing it with the *All*, or the *Whole*, is what the priest and the priestess demonstrate for the other practitioners. The internalization of ritual is equally meaningful, or even more so, for practitioners than the actual physical act, which is not strictly necessary since the symbolic Great Rite is available. Wagar goes on to explain: “The Priestess and Priest engage in the ritual not for the sake of their own pleasure or to achieve a purely personal enlightenment but to find and bring power and wisdom back into their community.”²⁸ While the physical or the symbolic acts show a physical meeting of the masculine and the feminine into a whole, the internalization of this balance is what is taught and desired in the practitioners, both visually and verbally. Thus the Great Rite gives the practitioners a deeper understanding of the differences between gender identities within and without the liminal space by adding the priest and priestess as an example of both.

In solitary rituals balance is still considered the central ideal within ritual. The structure is similar with a circle casting and closing of the circle, and the altar, which is normally present, is set up according to the same rules. All of this helps, just as in group ritual, to bring the practitioner into the liminal space. However, in solitary ritual the balancing of masculine and feminine, the modification of traditional gender identity, is done solely by the practitioner for the practitioner. Even though this is the goal for all ritual, to balance masculine and feminine within oneself, the solitary practitioner has the god and goddess, as well as his or her own understanding of gender identity, to guide him or her. The strong male and intuitive female gender identities performed and exemplified by the god and the goddess are used as templates, patterns for personal behavior,

27. Wagar, “The Wiccan ‘Great Rite,’” 1.

28. *Ibid.*, 3.

but they are only part of a whole. In ritual these templates are merged internally by the practitioner in the liminal state in a way that creates a balance between male gender identity and female gender identity within one person.

Practitioners also outwardly perform both gender identities as if they were a single, modified gender identity. As Hume explains, “ritual paraphernalia are merely outward and visible symbols of an inward and psychological process.”²⁹ The practitioners become liminal entities or liminal personae within the ritual and the resulting ambiguity of the practitioners—they are no longer classified by cultural space—is expressed by symbols of masculinity and femininity, namely the athame and the chalice. Liminality is very similar to balance, so it is not hard to see why the practitioners of Wicca seek balance in the liminal space. Turner explains, “liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.”³⁰ It seems perfectly natural, then, that Wiccan ritual seeks to balance both masculine gender identity and feminine gender identity within this transitional space.

The practitioner must also become, in the liminal space, a blank slate in order to gain the knowledge of the ritual elders or the social group.³¹ The knowledge and wisdom of the group becomes inscribed upon the practitioners, as well as their gender identity. Judith Butler tells us that gender is performative, but it seems that in liminal space, gender is also inscribed upon the practitioner.³² With both a priest and priestess as models for gender performance, that the Wiccan practitioners, while worshipping both masculine and feminine deities in a liminal space, would become inscribed with both masculine and feminine gender identity—by the submission to the priest and priestess—and begin to perform them. So in solitary ritual the god and goddess, as embodied by the priest and

29. Hume, “Creating Sacred Space,” 313.

30. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

31. *Ibid.*, 103.

32. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 140-141.

priestess, are the examples of not only strong masculine gender identity and submissive feminine gender identity, but also of the modified gender identity that the practitioner is striving for. Without a tangible example the solitary practitioner is creating the balance within him or herself using only the god and goddess. This modified gender identity creates a “whole” that is the goal of ritual in Wicca and the balance is achieved in the liminal space that happens in ritual because the modified gender identity, the “whole”, is hard to contemplate in normal space.

A perfect balance of masculinity and femininity is doubtless impossible to perform in any circumstance. However, within the liminal space of ritual where the performance of gender identities and gender itself is outside of normal understanding, within Turner’s “realm of pure possibility,” the balance of masculinity and femininity within a practitioner can exist, at least in part.³³ While this is true of group ritual as well, solitary ritual exemplifies the difficulty of performing the ideal of balance and internally creating the ideal gender identity outside of ritual. Although balance between masculine and feminine is a central belief of Wicca, it is hard to live in balance in everyday life.

This idea of balance, which is extremely important in Wicca, comes through in almost every aspect of the religion. Most striking is the importance of balance within ritual. Each element is balanced with another, each color, each instrument upon the altar, and even the form of the circle itself is based on the principle of balance. Wiccan ritual takes many forms and has many purposes, but the goal of ritual is always the same: balance. As Amber Fisher states, “the world is created of complements, and from within the pattern of these complements balance is born.”³⁴ To Wiccans, everything is dualistic and must be in balance, including gender, and ritual is a way to create and perpetuate that balance. Ritual, like gender, is a performance. Each step, from the circle casting to the closing of the circle is carefully orchestrated and rehearsed in order

33. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 96.

34. Fisher, *Philosophy of Wicca*, 111.

to create the liminal space that is necessary for stepping out of everyday life. Most Wiccan rituals are not rites of passage, but ultimately contain many of the same attributes. Practitioners go naked or dress uniformly, all are considered equal, none possess status or rank, sex differences are minimized, and partiality is minimized. These characteristics enable the practitioners to be a blank slate for the priest and priestess to manipulate in ritual. Whether the liminal space, with its propensity towards equality and unity, gave way to the belief of balance or whether the belief happened to fit into the liminality of ritual, it is clear that Wicca is a religion of balance. It is not hard to see then that Wiccan practitioners, while worshiping both male and female deities in a liminal space where totality, or the whole, is a characteristic, would balance masculine and feminine gender identities to create that whole.