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The Search for the Goddess:
An Analysis and Critique of Feminist Wiccan Goddess History

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an analysis and critique of the feminist Wiccan version of goddess history. Using the writings of Starhawk and Zsuzsanna Budapest, goddess history is first presented from the perspective of feminist Wiccans. Critiques from the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, folklore, history, and religious studies are then examined. Much of the critical analysis is centered on the theories of Marija Gimbutas and Margaret Murray because their work has had a major impact on feminist Wiccan understandings of history. An impasse has been reached in the debate between those scholars calling for a critical approach to goddess history and those feminist Wiccans who hold fast to the unquestioned existence of ancient matrifocal cultures. The suggestion is made that Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and his dialect between imagination and critical reason might offer an approach capable of bridging this impasse.

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DEDICATION

To Lee, Thayer, Erin, and Colleen

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will examine and critique feminist Wiccan goddess mythic history. I will begin by introducing myself as has become customary in contemporary feminist writing. This brief reflection on my background and the interests that have led me to explore feminist Wiccan interpretations of the history of goddesses and witches will hopefully give the reader some insight into the perspective from which I write. My experiences with religion and my own personal questions rising out of those experiences have shaped the approach that I have taken in working with feminist Wiccan writings and the responses to their work by academics. I write from the background of a white, middle class woman, who grew up in a liberal Protestant Christian tradition. The United Church of Canada was not as liberal then as it is now, but it was certainly liberal in comparison with the very conservative Christian traditions that formed the religious landscape of the rural Alberta community where I lived as a child. In that community, whether liberal or conservative, Protestant or Catholic, God was understood in male terms and women did not preach. Women taught Sunday school, they organized wonderful “pot luck” suppers, and they made quilts for the Red Cross. I was active in my church during adolescence but I had a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. It wasn’t until much later when I discovered women’s writings about their own religious experiences and became aware of women who claimed positions of authority on the basis of their religious experiences that I was able to articulate my discontent and my sense that something was missing.

My study of feminist Wiccans and their version of Goddess history has developed from my interest in issues of religious power and authority for women. I am intrigued by the way that women have made space for themselves, both inside of and outside of

traditional religious institutions in order to claim their own authority and to find their own voices. This has sometimes been a quiet process that has either gone unnoticed or been ignored by those in power. However, at other times, women have taken great personal risks in their search for ways to authentically express their spirituality. In most cases these efforts have been disparaged as lesser expressions of religiosity by male dominated religious hierarchies. However, feminist Wiccans reject such judgements of their spiritual practices and expressions. They reject Christian and Jewish traditions as unredeemably patriarchal¹ and claim their own religious authority outside of traditional western religious structures. They are women who are proclaiming their right to express their own way of being religious.² Feminist Wiccans and other contemporary goddess worshippers experience the divine as female. Their writings are filled with female symbols and celebration of the female body. I am attracted to their valuing of women and nature as expressions of the sacred, rather than the profane, as has been the case in much of the religious writing found in the western traditions.

This thesis will explore and critique the feminist Wiccan understanding of goddess history. This focus rises out of my interest in, and study of, archaeology and anthropology and from my fascination with the imaginative and creative way these women have searched to find religious symbols that are meaningful, life affirming and supportive of their search for a new way of being. Feminist Wiccans do not want to be co-opted into existing patriarchal structures. Rather, they want to create new social structures that will value

¹ The term “patriarchal”, in the context of feminist writing, refers to “a male power and property structure in which men are dominant to the detriment of women, and, one might add, also largely to the detriment of their own full development.” (King 1993, p. 21)

² Feminist Wiccans prefer the term “spirituality” to the term “religion”. In their view, the word “religion” resonates with images of male dominated structures.

women. While I sympathize with many of the goals of this movement, I am also critical of some aspects, and it is in this context that goddess history will be analyzed. It is my hope that this critique will be received as Judy Harrow, a practicing goddess worshipper, has received Rosemary Ruether's criticisms of goddess history:

While many Goddess-worshippers have seen Ruether's comments as hostile, over the years I have perceived them as a sort of 'tough love'. Ruether consistently supports our right to seek alternatives and affirms the validity of our quest. She challenges us to examine what she perceives as our weak spots. (Harrow, 1996, p. 11)

It is in this spirit of "tough love" that I present my analysis.

Chapter One introduces feminist Wicca as a subset of the feminist spirituality movement. I use a historical approach to trace how feminist witches and goddess worship became intertwined and to place feminist Wicca in context based on the modern history of both Wicca and the "Goddess". The writings of feminist witches will also be consulted to describe, from the participant's perspective, how and why they define themselves as witches. The intent is to provide an overview of the generally held understandings of what it means today to claim to be a witch.

Chapter Two presents feminist Wiccan goddess mythic history from the participant's perspective utilizing Starhawk's and Z. Budapest's versions of the history of Paleolithic and Neolithic goddess worshipping cultures, as well as their understanding of witches as practitioners of an ancient pagan religion. The parallels between the feminist Wiccan conception of goddess history and Mircea Eliade's analysis of the "archaic" understanding of myth are explored. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the feminist Wiccan understanding of what constitutes history and their place in it.

Chapter Three is interdisciplinary in nature and analyses the claims of goddess mythic history using the critiques presented by scholars from anthropology, archaeology,

religious studies, classics and history. The synthesis and analysis of these critiques demonstrates the problems inherent in this understanding of history. Marija Gimbutas and Margaret Murray form the focal points for much of this analysis because their theories have been very influential on this version of goddess history and they continue to inform the feminist Wiccan understanding of the past. The pitfalls encountered in the common but problematic practice of using mythology as a source for reconstructing goddess history are presented. The chapter concludes with Rosemary Radford Ruether's analysis of contemporary goddess history. Ruether, a feminist scholar who is widely known in religious studies, has had an ongoing debate with some proponents of the feminist Wiccan version of goddess history since 1980.

The concluding chapter presents an alternative approach to the feminist Wiccan practice of uncritically intermingling myth and history. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory, with his dialectic of imagination and critical reason, provides a framework for this discussion. I suggest that feminist Wiccans need to apply critical reason to their imaginative and creative work. An analysis along the lines of a hermeneutics of suspicion of their information sources and their underlying presuppositions is needed if they hope to arrive at a vision for the future that has the capability of being enacted in the world.

CHAPTER ONE

Witchcraft, the ancient European earth religion, is inherently feminist.
Zsuzsanna Budapest, *Grandmother of Time*.¹

INTRODUCTION

Feminist Wiccans or witches are women² who have, for reasons both spiritual and political, aligned themselves with modern paganism, emphasize goddess worship and who self-identify as witches. In order to place feminist Wicca in context, this chapter will discuss what “witch” means to such feminists and will attempt a generalized profile of feminist Wicca. The relationship between feminist witches and the broader pagan community, as well as to feminist political issues will be included as part of the background necessary for the understanding of the mythic-history to be presented in Chapter Two.

FEMINIST WICCA AND THE FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY MOVEMENT

“Wicca” (witch) is a term used by many contemporary women who wish to assert their independence from traditional organized religious beliefs and practices. It is a hybrid term that has connotations of witchcraft, but also makes an appeal to a pagan or pre-Christian orientation.³ Feminist Wicca honors and celebrates goddesses, and as such, is part of a broader based community of spiritual feminists, usually referred to as the feminist spirituality movement. The feminist spirituality movement began in the early 1970s and is an unstructured grassroots movement that to-date has no structured organization and claims

¹ From “Confessions of a Feminist Witch”, (Budapest 1989a, p. 61)

² Rabinovitch’s 1992 study of Canadian Wicca states that there are feminist covens with male participants. However, this is, for the most part, a women’s movement and I will make that generalization in this thesis.

³ Many scholars use “neopagan” or “neo-pagan” to describe modern pagans. This term has its problems. According to Hanegraaff: “Commentators of the contemporary neopagan movements usually seem unaware of the fact that the term ‘neopaganism’ is regularly used as a general indication covering, among other things, certain politically suspect religious and philosophical developments in pre-war Germany.” (Hanegraaff 1995, p. 219) In this thesis I will use “pagan” because modern pagans use it.

no leaders. It is predominately Caucasian, but does include women of other races.⁴

Cynthia Eller states: “The primary characteristic of feminist spirituality is variety.” (Eller 1993, p. 3) Central to feminist spirituality is the empowerment of women. This is accomplished through different types of rituals and through the introduction of religious symbols that speak to women’s experiences. For pagan spiritual feminists it also includes a belief in, and the use of, magic.⁵ There is a sense of connection with nature and reverence for women’s bodies and cycles. Women’s experience is central to feminist spirituality. The validation of women’s experiences as a legitimate religious source is crucial to the feminist spirituality movement’s agenda to empower women.

Most scholars refer to spiritual feminists as goddess worshippers but, as with almost any aspect of this movement, this is not always the case. (Dijk 1988; Hester 1989; Finley 1991; McCrickard 1991; Eller 1993; Martin 1993; Krull 1995) For example, the Women-church movement, which is Christian rather than pagan, is akin to the feminist spirituality movement with its focus on the empowerment of women through the creation of new rituals and its search for new symbols which speak to women’s experiences. Thus, many of the women in the feminist spirituality movement do not describe themselves as witches. At the same time, while contemporary witches are goddess worshippers, not all goddess worshippers define themselves as witches. (Neitz 1990, p. 366; Eller 1993 p. 61) Yet, despite the prevailing public negative stereotype, there are large numbers of women who self-identify as witches. “Witch” has a different positive connotation for these women and

⁴ The coven studied by Griffin included women from different racial groups. (Griffin 1995, p. 37)

⁵ Magic is “the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational” as defined by Starhawk. (Starhawk 1989, p. 27) Spiritual feminists believe that they can change reality by working with magic through spells and rituals.

it is this group of women and their self-understanding that is the focus of this chapter and thesis as a whole.

WHAT IS A WITCH?

An important aspect of women self-identifying as witches is the process of women reclaiming the appellation of witch. The modern pagan and the feminist understanding of “witch” is very different from the historical Christian portrayal of witches and from the way the term “witch” is used in the anthropological literature. Today, in common usage, witch is still a derogatory term used to insult, defame and inspire fear. Given the negative connotations associated with “witch”, both in the past and the present, the project of reclamation is a major undertaking. The extent of this undertaking can be appreciated by first briefly examining the understanding of “witch” during the witch hunts in early modern Europe, and, secondly, by looking at the anthropological definition.

Many factors coalesced to produce the European understanding of the witch as the embodiment of evil.⁶ The link made between the belief that witches were practitioners of “harmful, black or maleficent magic” and the understanding that Satan was the source of power behind the witch’s harmful effect helped to create the particularly malevolent view of witches that took hold in many areas of Europe from approximately 1450 to 1700. (Russell 1972, p. 16; Levack 1987, p. 7; Barstow 1994, p. 20; Briggs, 1996, p. 4) The tragic consequences of the resultant witch hunts are well known.⁷ While the estimated number of executions vary from one study to the next, recent studies estimate approximately 100,000 to 200,000 accused witches with execution rates varying from 25 per cent to 90 per cent,

⁶ It is outside the scope of this study to explore in detail all the factors contributing to the witch hunts. There are many studies that explore these issues. Works by Briggs, Barstow, Levack, and Russell cited in this thesis all approach the question from different perspectives.

⁷ Chapter Two will outline the feminist Wiccan version of this tragedy.

depending on the region. The majority of those who were accused of witchcraft were women, although this also varied in degree according to region. (Levack 1987, p. 19, 124; Barstow 1994, p. 23; Briggs 1996, p. 8)

The stereotype of the witch that held sway during the witch hunts was fully developed by the fifteenth century. It was believed that witches made a pact with the devil and held secret meetings at night. At these meetings they would desecrate the Eucharist and the crucifix, hold orgies, sacrifice infants and eat human flesh. (Russell 1972, p. 232) Both men and women were accused of witchcraft but the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which became the classic guide for witch hunters, set women up as more culpable.⁸ The *Malleus Maleficarum* was an extremely influential book, going through many printings and translations into German, French, Italian and English from the original Latin. Its wide distribution and official status guaranteed that its misogynistic views would become the staple of the witch hunter. The authors asked, “Why Superstition chiefly is found in Women?” After quoting numerous examples of the failings of women from sources such as ancient Greek literature, the Bible, and the Church Fathers, the authors stated:

To conclude. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. See *Proverbs xxx*: There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, a fourth thing which says not, It is enough; that is, the mouth of the womb. Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils. More such reasons could be brought forward, but to the understanding it is sufficiently clear that it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft. And in consequence of this, it is better called the heresy of witches than of wizards, since the name is taken from the more powerful party. And blessed be the Highest Who has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime: for since He was willing to be born and to suffer for us, therefore He has granted to men this privilege. (Kramer and Sprenger 1971, pp. 122-123)

Although the extreme misogyny of the witch hunters is not as pronounced in the writings of the witch hunt critics, they too pictured witches as predominately female and

⁸ Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, two Dominican priests in Germany wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). It had official papal sanction.

their descriptions were certainly not flattering. Reginald Scot, a skeptic who did not support the witch hunts, stated that the accused witches were “women which be commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles.” (Barstow 1994, p. 16) Scot described these so-called witches as:

Poore, sullen... These go from house to house and from doore to doore for a pot full of milk, yeast, drinke, pottage or some such releefe, without which they could hardlie live... They are doting, scolds, mad, divelish... so firme and steadfast in their opinions, as whosoever shall onelie have respect to the constancie of their words uttered would easilie beleieve they were true indeed. (Barstow 1994, pp. 26-27)

Scot was not alone in portraying witches as malevolent, ugly, old women with scolding tongues. The modern image of witches as portrayed in stories, movies and Halloween costumes has come down through these sources.

Anthropologists also provide a negative understanding of witches. The *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* states:

By “witchcraft”, most anthropologists mean a belief in a mystical power that develops in some people and enables them to work evil directly, without magic or spiritual assistance, but some use the term for instances of evil magic. (Steven 1996, p. 1225)

Anthropologists claim that certain characteristics of witches are found in most cultures that believe in witchcraft. Witches embody social ideas of evil. Witches fly. They spread diseases. Witches hold meetings to plot evil and to engage in whatever forms of sexual behaviour are forbidden or considered deviant by their society. They conduct ritual murders.⁹ (Steven 1996, pp. 1227-1228) In modern Wicca this stereotype is rejected. Witches are understood to be practitioners of an ancient religion that was driven

⁹ It would be interesting to deconstruct the use of the term “witch” in anthropology. According to the *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (v. 4, p. 1226) sorcery, which is generally attributed to men, can have both positive and negative connotations. However, a witch is by definition evil. Did the European understanding of “witch” as articulated during the witch hunts play a part in the anthropological definition and then become applied cross-culturally?

underground by Christianity.¹⁰ They are not evil; rather, they have a code of ethics, which requires that their actions harm no one. “An ye harm none, do what ye will” and “What you send returns three times over”.¹¹ (Adler 1986, p. 83; Starhawk 1989, p. 26; Budapest 1989b, p. 17-23) This understanding has come, for the most part, through Gerald Gardner (1884-1964).¹² Gardner claimed to have been trained and initiated into Wicca by a hereditary witch, a woman whose family had kept the “old religion” and passed the knowledge along through the generations, despite persecution during the witch hunts. Scholars have discredited this claim but some Wiccans are still supportive of Gardner’s story. What is known for certain is that Gardner drew on a variety of sources, but was most heavily influenced by Margaret Murray’s *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of the Witches* (1931). He also availed himself of works on magic, the occult, and witchcraft, particularly Aleister Crowley’s *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929)¹³ and Charles Leland’s *Aradia, Gospel of the Witches* (1899).¹⁴ Leland was a folklorist and a linguist and his fieldwork was carried out among the Gypsies and folk-witches of Tuscany, England and Eastern Europe. The primary deity in Murray’s work is the Horned God and in Leland’s work it is the goddess Diana whose daughter Aradia is the first witch, “sent by her mother Diana to teach witchcraft to the lowly of the earth”. (Jencson 1989, p. 3; Guiley 1992, pp. 412-413) The evidence presented by scholars indicates that Gardner constructed his own version of the “witch cult”, combining Murray’s god and Leland’s goddess. He

¹⁰ This will be explored in more depth in the discussion on mythic history in Chapter Two.

¹¹ According to Budapest, whatever you send returns ten times over. (Budapest 1989b, p. 17)

¹² I will provide only a brief summary of Gardner’s role in the creation of modern Wicca in order to contextualize his definition of “witch”.

¹³ As this thesis does not focus on magic, Crowley’s work will not be discussed.

¹⁴ To this mix he added information from his own experiences in Southeast Asia and the information he had gleaned from the folk practitioners he knew in England. The role of Romantic scholarship and nineteenth century anthropological theories will be discussed in Chapter Three.

called it Wicca, an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “knowledge”.¹⁵ Wicca became associated with witchcraft through Gardner’s use of the word for his religious practice. (Hutton 1993, p. 373) Gardner defined witches as follows:

They are the people who call themselves the Wica [sic], the “wise people”, who practise the age-old rites and who have, along with much superstition and herbal knowledge, preserved an occult teaching and working processes which they themselves think to be magic or witchcraft... These Wica generally work for good purposes and help those in trouble to the best of their ability. (Gardner 1954, pp. 102-103)

Note that Gardner’s definition states that witches work for good purposes, not evil, as was understood by early modern Europeans, and continues to be the predominant understanding in anthropology. Though ways of defining what it means to be a witch differs from one branch of modern Wicca to the next, all modern Wiccans follow Gardner in their positive understanding of witches. (Adler 1986, pp. 99-105)

The following two examples of “witch” definitions are typical of the current Wiccan understanding of what it means to be a witch. Both Starhawk and Zsuzsanna Budapest are widely read and highly respected by feminist Wiccans. Budapest defines witch as follows:

A witch is a woman or man who considers the Earth a living, breathing, conscious being – part of the family of the vast universe – to be regarded and respected as God herself. To be a witch, you have to see yourself as part of God, who is present in, not separate from, us and all living beings. (Budapest 1989a, p. 57)

Starhawk agrees that witches understand the earth to be a living being and participate in a world where all living things are interconnected. She also describes the reclaiming process in her work as she defines “witch”:

The word ‘Witch’ carries so many negative connotations that many people wonder why we use the word at all. Yet to reclaim the word ‘Witch’ is to reclaim our right, as women to be powerful, as men to know the feminine within as divine. To be a witch is to identify with nine million victims of bigotry and hatred and to take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice claims no more victims. A Witch is a ‘shaper’, a creator who bends the unseen into

¹⁵ Starhawk claims that Wicca comes from the root “wic” meaning to bend or shape. Adler presents both this and Gardner’s theory. (Adler 1986, p. 11; Starhawk 1989, p. 19)

form, and so becomes one of the Wise, one whose life is infused with magic. [In her section "Ten Years Later" she corrects the nine million claim]. (Starhawk 1989, p. 214)

The definition of "witch" has undergone a complete reversal from its previous connotations of evil to the modern pagan understanding of witches as wise and benevolent. Although this understanding of "witch" is not generally understood or accepted, and in many instances simply not known outside of pagan circles, it provides a powerful image for many spiritual feminists. The predominance of women who lost their lives as accused witches, together with the understanding of witches as worshipping goddesses and possessing special healing power and spiritual wisdom, has inspired some women to self-identify as witches.

FEMINIST WITCHES

Feminist Wicca is difficult to categorize. Some studies differentiate between communities of feminist witches such as Dianic Wicca, Starhawk's "Reclaiming Wicca" and feminist Wicca.¹⁶ Other scholars refer to them all as feminist Wicca. The problem in attempting to define feminist Wicca is that there is no list of attributes that can be generalized to all participants. These women tend to be "rugged individualists"¹⁷ and their rituals are adapted and changed to meet the needs of the particular individual or group. (Eller 1993, p. 8) They are reacting against rigid, traditional, institutionalized forms of religion that have limited women's participation, stifled women's religious creativity, and

¹⁶ Adler identifies two streams of Dianic worship. One was started by Morgan McFarland and does not exclude men. The other is associated with Zsuzsanna Budapest, does exclude men and is political as well as religious. Starhawk describes Reclaiming as a community involved in both education and political action. (Starhawk 1989, p. 221) Rabinovitch treats Reclaiming as a Wiccan tradition and states that it is an "American Wicca tradition started by Starhawk and many of her co-religionists in California, blending the Celtic-influenced Fairy tradition of Victor Anderson with the feminist Witchcraft of Z. Budapest." (Rabinovitch 1992, p. 64)

¹⁷ Eller (1993) uses this term but it is also confirmed by the studies of Ludeke (1989), Johnson (1991), Rabinovitch (1992), Dahr (1995), Griffin (1995), and Bourdeaux (1992).

ignored the role women's experiences play in religious expression. Feminists, in their search for a spiritual grounding for their politics, have looked for sources of female centered religious symbols and rituals to replace the prevalent male symbolism of God.¹⁸ (Christ 1987, pp. 117-130) Modern Wicca, where both goddesses and gods are worshipped and women play an important role as priestesses, has been a source of inspiration for such feminists. While many Pagans share the feminist witches' distrust of organizations, some groups such as Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wicca are quite structured.¹⁹ They have formal training, priesthood, and hierarchical structures. Rabinovich refers to these groups as religionist Wicca²⁰ and states that in religionist Wicca the title "witch" must be earned through an initiation process. (Rabinovitch 1992, p. 85; 1996, pp. 78-79) Feminist Wiccans, in contrast, dispense with the formalities and become witches by simply declaring that they are witches. This has caused some strain between religionist Wicca and feminist Wicca in the past. However, both Eller and Adler have observed a lessening of the tensions between the more structured religionists and the free flowing nature of feminist Wicca. (Adler 1986, p. 228; Eller 1993, p. 60)

Feminist Wicca incorporates practices that originate from religionist Wicca, such as the casting of a circle that "places the participants between the worlds", the invocation of the "Four Directions",²¹ the raising of the "cone of power", and the directing of the energy

¹⁸ This point will be discussed in more detail in the section on empowerment of women.

¹⁹ Gardnerian and Alexandrian covens follow guidelines established by Gerald Gardner and Alexander Sanders, respectively. They both have hierarchies of priestesses and priests as well as formal rituals.

²⁰ Other terms that are used include "the neo-classical craft" (Ludeke 1989), "mainstream craft" and "traditionalists". (Adler 1986)

²¹ The invocation of the "Four Directions" can go by other names such as "Four Quarters" or "Grandmothers". (Ludeke 1989, p. 44)

raised in the “cone of power”.²² The athalme or ritual knife, wand, chalice, candles, and incense are tools and ritual aids used both by religionists and feminists. (Weinstein 1986, pp. 15-18; Ludeke 1989, p. 44; Starhawk 1989, pp. 75-84; Budapest 1989b, pp. 11-15)

Feminist Wicca tends to be more creative in ritual design and more willing to improvise than religionist Wicca. The participants draw on a wide variety of sources, select what works for them and substitute where necessary, rather than following specific directions from a Book of Shadows.²³ (Adler 1986, p. 221; Ludeke 1989, p. 52-3) Their sole emphasis on the goddess also differs from religionist Wicca. The Wiccan Horned God is either left out completely or plays a very minor role in their rituals.²⁴ Carol Christ analyzes this focus on the Goddess in her oft quoted article “Why Women Need the Goddess”, noting that God, symbolized as male in western religious traditions, functions to legitimize male power. Women are attracted to the goddess as a symbol because it serves to affirm female power. Christ states that “The Goddess aids the process of naming and reclaiming the female body, its cycles and process.” (Christ 1987, p. 125) For feminist witches, as will be discussed below, naming and reclaiming is central to the project of empowering women both spiritually and politically. This is a different objective than that of religionist Wicca, which views the male and female energies as two poles to be balanced through ritual. For religionist Wicca, the Goddess and the God are both necessary as

²² The purpose of coven rituals is to raise energy, which is then directed for different purposes. The energy raised through the ritual is usually visualized as a cone and when it reaches its peak, those participating in the ritual send the energy to accomplish a particular end. (Starhawk 1989, p. 28, 146)

²³ A Book of Shadows contains detailed descriptions of rituals and spells. At one time in religionist Wicca, these were considered to be only for the eyes of the initiates. However, this secrecy is changing, particularly as some of them have been published. The authenticity of the claimed antiquity of some Books of Shadows has come under increasing scepticism.

²⁴ The Horned God is understood to be the consort of the Goddess and represents “all that is male in the universe”. (Budapest 1989b, p. 162)

representatives of the feminine and masculine energies.²⁵ (Adler 1986, p. 217; Kuhlen 1994; Lipp 1994)

Feminist witches are, for the most part, well educated, literate women who enjoy reading.²⁶ While this may seem a trivial point at first glance, many women learn about Wicca and self-identify as witches through books written about Wicca and its spells rituals, goddesses, and ancient matriarchy. Both fiction and nonfiction play important roles in this regard. This literature provides resources for ritual and working magic through spells and promotes an understanding of the world as full of spirit where all beings are interconnected through the goddess. Boudreaux refers to reading as a “spiritual tool” which creates “community and a shared paradigm” among women, many of whom are isolated geographically from one another. (Ludeke 1989, p. 30; Johnson 1991, pp. 84-88; Rabinovitch 1992, p. 34; Hume 1994, 7-8; Neitz 1990, p. 365; Boudreaux 1992, pp. 92-93)

Budapest emphasizes the importance of reading in the struggle to reclaim women’s religion:

A willingness to study is a must today when so much has to be reclaimed. The media are not yet ours; our books are mostly self published and our resources are limited. The responsibility to study and follow up is certainly required. Years of teaching often exhausted me, and when a new woman demands that I tell her all I know in one breath, I cry out in desperation, I can’t help you if you won’t read! Only three percent of Americans today read, and the majority of these are women. Women read naturally more than men. So we are in hopeful shape, but we must make this conscious devotion and continue to READ. (Budapest 1989b, p. 226)

While Budapest’s claims that “women read naturally more than men” is questionable, it does seem to be the case, as discussed above, that reading has been a major factor in women becoming aware of, and making the decision to participate in, feminist

²⁵ As this thesis focuses on feminist Wicca, I will not be analysing this belief system of religionist Wicca.

²⁶ There are exceptions to the claims that feminist Wiccans are well educated. The members of the coven Griffin studied had not attended or did not finish college and had working class jobs. (Griffin 1995, p. 37) However, these women were also readers. The studies consulted for this thesis also found that, although

Wicca. In Budapest's description, reading is an act of "conscious devotion"; in other words, a religious act. It is a religious act for women to become informed, not only about Wiccan rituals, but to learn about women's history, which has been lost and is now being rediscovered. Budapest exemplifies the emphasis that spiritual feminists place on reclaiming women's religious heritage. Using the term "witch" is part of that process.

Budapest states:

Many people ask me why I use the word "witch" so often in *The Holy Book*. Why don't I call it "Womanspirit" or "Goddess's Inner Guide"? Safe, New Age-ish words that don't threaten anybody. My answer is, I like the word "witch". It is the only word in English that denotes "women with spiritual power." I know that Hollywood propaganda, Christian propaganda, have made people think that witches are totally evil...I explain to them that this word means "priestess", that it has suffered a great deal of badmouthing and propaganda, and we are aiming to reclaim dignity for witches and educate the world about witchcraft. If you insist on educating about a word, it takes about twenty years, but you can do it. Look at what happened to the word *woman*. (Budapest 1989b, p. xvii)

Starhawk states:

I prefer the word *Witch* to prettier words, because the concept of a Witch goes against the grain of the culture of estrangement. It *should* rub us the wrong way. If it arouses fear or negative assumptions, then those thought-forms can be openly challenged and transformed, instead of molding us unseen from within our mind. (Starhawk 1988, p. 25)

Starhawk and Budapest both make it very clear that the term "witch" means more than just participating in a religion. By overturning patriarchal definitions and using "witch" in a positive sense, women are reclaiming corrupted and co-opted descriptors that once referred to powerful women. The re-appropriation of the word "witch" is but one instance of this process. Mary Daly, beginning with her ground breaking post-Christian work *Beyond God the Father* (1973), has pioneered much of this work.²⁷ Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), with its powerful gender analysis of the European witch hunts, has

many of these women were well educated, they tended to exhibit "downward mobility" or were under employed. (Ludeke 1989, p. 150; Johnson 1991, p. 118; Rabinovitch 1992, p. 34; Eller 1993, pp. 21-22)

²⁷ Daly gives credit to Matilda Joselyn Gage who predates Daly by close to a century in her 1893 work *Women, Church and State*. According to Gage, "The original meaning of "witch" was a wise woman." (Gage 1972 [1893], p. 239)

had a great influence on the feminist Wiccan understanding of this period in history.

Even though many participants in these movements have been influenced indirectly rather than directly by Daly, some of her insights have been incorporated into their work. (Berry 1988, p. 213; Stein 1991, p. 1) The word “leader” is sometimes used to describe Mary Daly, Carol Christ, Starhawk, Z. Budapest, among others. (Ludeke 1989, p. 21; Boudreaux 1992, p. 52) However, Neitz’s assessment gives a clearer understanding of their role: “The contribution of Carol Christ and other women theologians does not account for the presence of a goddess movement in the United States today, but they do contribute to its vitality.” (Neitz 1990, p. 362) They are not leaders in the sense of managing an organization and establishing policy because no such structures exist. Their influence comes through their books, lecturing and workshops.

Daly describes herself as a “Positively Revolting Hag”. This is a phrase with negative connotations in the language of patriarchal society, but for Daly it is a self-affirming statement. Daly defines Hag as: “*Archaic*: a **Witch**, Fury, Harpy who haunts the Hedges/Boundaries of patriarchy, frightening fools and summoning Weird Wandering Women into the Wild.” (Daly and Caputi 1987, p. 137 emphasis added) Daly’s definition of “Witch” is:

An Elemental Soothsayer; one who is in harmony with the rhythms of the universe: Wise Woman Healer; one who exercises transformative powers: Shape-shifter; one who wields Labrys-like powers of aversion and attraction – averting disaster, warding off attacks of demons and Magnetizing Elemental Spiritual Forces. (Daly and Caputi 1987, p. 180)

Hags and Witches are powerful, independent women who strike fear into the patriarchal status quo. Daly has identified numerous ways that patriarchal language has co-opted words and inverted meanings, projected patriarchal male qualities onto women as well as appropriating women’s creative power and she calls these reversals. (Daly and Caputi

1987, pp. 248-258) One of the objectives of Daly's writing is to expose and reverse these reversals and to reclaim women's power. "Witch" appears to be a significant descriptor for Daly, as she wants to mend "our broken ties with the Witch within ourSelves who spins and weaves the tapestries of Elemental creation."(Daly 1984, p. xii) The witch within every woman is, for Daly, a metaphor for women's creative power.

For many women, the desire to reclaim their creative power is a key factor in the decision to call themselves witches and is bound up in the complex relationship between the religious aspects of Wicca and the political aspirations of feminism. Reclaiming women's experiences as authoritative and allowing women to discover and act upon their personal power connects the spiritual and the political. Feminist Wicca as a form of religious expression came about in part through experimentation by women in consciousness raising groups and grassroots women's circles of the 1960s and 1970s. These women were searching for a spiritual grounding for their feminist politics. Some feminists used "witch" as an expression of political defiance. In the late 1960s "WITCH", became an acronym for such groups as the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell and Women Incensed at Telephone Company Harassment. These protest groups were political in nature and were not associated with Wicca. (Adler, 1986, p. 179) Another means of coming to Wicca has been through the environmental movement. Concern over environmental issues has made the immanence of the Goddess in Wicca an appealing form of spirituality for many women. (Adler 1986, p. 182; Neitz 1990, p. 362; Crowley 1993, pp. 126-128; Eller 1993, pp. 43-44)

Thus, feminist Wicca has risen from many sources: experimentation in feminist circles, experiences of feminists in Wiccan circles, individual women becoming inspired by

Wiccan literature and feminist theology²⁸, the association of “witch” as an acronym for political activist groups, and the search for a spirituality compatible with environmental activism. All of these factors have had an impact on women identifying with “witch” as both a spiritual and a political designation. “Witch” for these women is Daly’s understanding of witch – a powerful, independent, creative woman.

Empowerment, as understood by feminist witches, has connotations that run from healing to political emancipation. The most detailed discussion of power is contained in Starhawk’s writing. Initially, Starhawk distinguished between two types of power: power-over and power-from-within. She later added a third type, which she calls power-with. (Starhawk 1987, pp. 8-10) Power-over is power that dominates and is how power is generally understood in patriarchal society. Power-from-within is “the power to feel, to heal, to love, to create, to shape our futures, to change our social structures”. (Starhawk 1988, p. 47) It comes from the energy that connects, moves through, and makes up everything in the universe. Witches train themselves to be aware of the subtle energies that interconnect all things and learn to mold and work with that energy. Women are empowered by learning to work with this energy for political action to effect change.²⁹ In this way feminist Wiccans discover power. One of the ways that Starhawk understands Goddess is as the energy, or the power-from-within each of us, which extends out and connects with all beings. She cautions that this energy should not be thought of as a noun. It is not something that we have. Rather, this energy or power is something we can do. It

²⁸ Theology is a word that was created independently by Naomi Goldenberg and Emily Culpepper. The Greek word *theos*, the root word for theology is masculine for god. It seemed appropriate to use *thea*, the Greek feminine form, to create a word to describe Goddess theory. (Christ 1987, p. xi n. 1; Culpepper 1987, p. 51)

²⁹ Starhawk is also concerned with empowering men. Not all feminist Wiccans share her view.

involves action or the potential for action. Energy is not a “thing”, it is actually “moving relationships”. (Starhawk 1988, pp. 12, 29; 1989, pp. 142-143) This is reminiscent of Mary Daly’s understanding of goddess as Be-ing. Be-ing as a verb “cannot be reified into a noun.” Daly states that Goddess “points Metaphorically to the Power of Be-ing, the Active Verb in whose potency all biophilic reality participates.” (Daly 1984, p. 26)

The emphasis on the power of the individual to be creative and to effect change empowers women in their personal lives and in their involvement in political issues at the group or collective level. Wiccan Vivian Crowley also ties “power” for women into women’s experiences of their bodies. She states:

The collective power felt by women who act together is related to another aspect of power. Many women feel within them tides and flows of an intangible kind, which they define as ‘power’. This power has been closely linked to their sexuality; it has also been seen traditionally as the province of the witch. (Crowley 1993, p. 130)

Feminist Wicca gives women the opportunity to freely exercise this power, something that is not made available to women in traditional western religions. Women’s power, as described by Crowley, has associations of magic, which modern witches believe they can use to effect changes that will benefit others. In this world-view, the power to effect changes in society is not welded as power-over, it stems from the concept of interconnection where all things are understood to be related to, and affected by, each other. Women experience their power-from-within through feminist Wicca’s spells, rituals, and the understanding of the Goddess as immanent; each woman is the Goddess. Translated into action, this is Starhawk’s power-with, where individuals influence and guide others through their wisdom and experience. This is seen as profoundly political.

However, the understanding of the Goddess by spiritual feminists as energy and power immanent in creation is contradicted by their actual practices where they behave as

thought the Goddess is a transcendent deity.³⁰ In the presentation of goddess mythic history in Chapter Two, it will become apparent that the Goddess has an anthropomorphic presence as well. Starhawk states:

We also use the word “Goddess”, however, to refer to various aspects of that life-force that have taken on particular attributes and personalities: Demeter, the Greek Goddess of grain and agriculture, for example, or Kali, the Hindu Great Goddess of birth, life, and death. There are thousands of Goddesses from cultures all over the world, as well as thousands of Gods – male deities who also embody the cycles of life, death, and regeneration. (Starhawk 1997, p. 9)

When I’m in an anthropomorphic mood, I like to think the Goddess is eternally trying to amuse herself by creating moments of beauty, pleasure, humor, and drama. (Starhawk 1989, p. 228)

Zsuzsanna Budapest describes the Goddess as “Mother Goddess, Female Principle of the Universe and source of all life.” Every woman is an expression of the Goddess and all the different Goddesses are manifestations of the One:

The goddess has 10,000 names, shared by women around the world. Her name is Diana, Holy mother. Her name is Tiamat. Her name is Hecate. Her name is Isis, Inanna, Belili. Her name is Sapanone, Belladonna, the Great Corn Mother; Her name is Alaskan Bear Mother, Artemis, Brigid, Io, Morrigan and Cerridwen; Her name is every woman’s name – Carly, Doris, Lily, Catherine, Sharon, Susan. All of the personal names of women derive from Goddess names, as all women without exception are expressions of the Mother – Goddess-on-Earth Manifest. (Budapest 1989b, p. 283)

For Starhawk, anthropomorphizing the energy or power that interconnects all of life as the Goddess is a way of conceptualizing it and making it more immediate to humans. While she usually speaks of the Goddess, she also uses the plural, Goddesses, as a way of acknowledging diversity:

So far I have been speaking of *the Goddess* as the whole, the underlying unity of which all things are aspects. But there are also *Goddesses*, specific ways to imagine and experience that whole, different roads to the center. They are each real, in the sense that they are powerful forces and distinct paths. Start to work with one, and changes will happen to you in ways that are different than what happens if you choose another. Some of those aspects may also be male images, Gods. (Starhawk 1989, p. 229)

³⁰ For example, Budapest describes a Lammas celebration where the participants chant: “Great Goddess of life and good fortune, accept our thanks for our own growth, insights, accomplishments, and the sustaining food You have given us”. (Budapest 1989b, p. 129)

She then goes on to explain that even though the “the Goddess, the whole, does not have genitalia (or is all genitalia),” a female image helps to get away from the notion of the patriarchal God and to “remind us that what we call sacred is immanent in the world, embodied”. (Starhawk 1989, p. 229) However, this statement could be understood as reinforcing the association of women, body and nature in the dualistic mode of ancient Greek philosophy and western religious traditions rather than challenging them.

The intent of this chapter has been to clarify what I mean by feminist Wicca, to the extent that this is possible, given their loose affiliations and to present their goals. Their objectives include the empowerment of women and living in a manner that values relationships and the interconnections between humans and the natural environment. Feminist Wiccans insist that they are not just engaging in wishful thinking. They look to descriptions of peaceful, cooperative goddess worshipping ancient societies that they believe valued women and viewed nature as sacred and argue on this basis that their vision is within the realm of possibility. The next chapter will present both the feminist Wiccan understanding of ancient myth and history that informs their model of future possibilities, as well as their explanation of the creation of patriarchal structures.

CHAPTER TWO

Let us learn all the old tales
 Sing the songs dance
 Let us tell new stories
 With no false enemies in them
 And no lies that pass for history.
 Starhawk. "Litany of the Holy Well".¹

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will outline goddess mythic history as presented by feminist Wiccans, Starhawk and Zsuzsanna Budapest. Feminist Wiccan mythic history can be understood as part of the larger project of empowering women. It is one aspect of the creative process involving the reclaiming of language and history. However, in this world-view, women will never totally be free to be their powerful, creative, witchy selves until patriarchy either collapses of its own weight or is overthrown. The importance of the mythic history lies, not only in reclaiming the history that patriarchy has overwritten, but in providing a model for a utopian future vision of a matrifocal² society. The role of myth and history in feminist Wicca will be examined, focusing on the way myth and history are understood by, and their importance to, participants in the tradition. The parallels with Mircea Eliade's analysis of myth will be highlighted as they suggest that the understanding of myth present in goddess mythic history resonate to a large extent with the model presented by Eliade.

¹ From *Litany of the Holy Well* by Starhawk. (1987, p. 291)

² The term matriarchy is rejected by most feminist Wiccans because it suggests a hierarchy, only with women in control instead of men. Matrifocal, meaning "mother-centered" is often used, as are the terms matristic and gynocentric.

GODDESS MYTHIC HISTORY

The term “mythic history” has been chosen because the history of the Goddess functions as both “history” and “myth” in the feminist Wiccan literature. Some feminist Wiccans understand the stories about peaceful, prehistoric, matrifocal cultures overthrown by patriarchal marauders to be actual historical events, the verity of which is proven by the fieldwork of such archaeologists as Marjia Gimbutas and James Mellaart. However, others are less concerned with the historicity than they are with the role goddess mythic history plays in undergirding their religious and political goals. It does this by providing a model of an ideal society and by explaining how the world came to be in the current undesirable state. Goddess mythic history is a religious narrative in this sense for feminist witches. In this context, it is unimportant whether or not the historic truth can be demonstrated. It is “real” and “true” as a sacred story or myth in the sense of Mircea Eliade’s definition of myth. Eliade states: “‘Myth’ means a ‘true story’...a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant”. (Eliade 1963, p. 1) The parallels between goddess mythic history and Eliade’s understanding of myth will be explored later in this chapter.

There is some variation in the presentations of goddess mythic history in the writings of feminist Wiccans and others involved in feminist spirituality. The following summary is Starhawk’s version, supplemented with the perspective presented in Budapest’s work. These two examples will illustrate the general themes and the range of approaches, from Starhawk’s more nuanced and detailed discussion, to Budapest’s more polemic presentation with her tendency towards sweeping generalizations.

Starhawk includes her understanding of goddess mythic history in her four books: *Spiral Dance* (1979, 1989), *Dreaming the Dark* (1982, 1988), *Truth or Dare* (1987), and *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying* (1997). She claims that Witchcraft, also referred to as the “Old Religion”, is an ancient religion, going back to the Paleolithic period and thus has roots that are much older than religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. *Spiral Dance* outlines in general terms and with very broad strokes, the “evolution” of the goddess and her consort. The goddess, as the “Lady of the Mammoths” or the “Lady of the Wild Things”, dates back at least 35,000 years ago and gradually transforms into the “Barley Mother” with the beginnings of agriculture in the Neolithic period. (Starhawk 1989, pp.16-17). During the Paleolithic period, witches were the shamans, in tune with the energy interconnecting all of life and this energy was understood and expressed in the images of the “Mother Goddess” and the “Horned God”. Gradually as agriculture developed these images became understood in terms of the agricultural life-style and became associated with the cycles of the crops and associated with the grains. There were waves of invasions of Indo-Europeans bringing new gods, but also incorporating many of the features of the “Old Religion”.

For Budapest, the matriarchies, as she calls them were free, peaceful and technologically superior. Unfortunately, because their technology was directed towards peaceful ends, they could not defend themselves against the invading warriors. Budapest believes that patriarchal religion is a reversal of the once universal goddess religion. She describes goddess religion as life affirming and patriarchal religion as life denying. (Budapest 1989b, p. 3) Budapest speculates that those men who were dissatisfied may have banded together outside of the

matrifocal communities and used women “to breed like cattle” in order to create their own population base to challenge this women-centered civilization. As Budapest describes it:

Matriarchal women had no defense systems. They didn't even have swords, although they did use wands. All they had were superior sewer systems, elaborate baths, beautiful wall paintings and exquisite jewelry. They were beauty-oriented, not war-obsessed, and thus were easily overrun and sacked in the cruelest sense of the word. (Budapest 1989b, p. 294)

Marija Gimbutas, an archaeologist whose work on the Neolithic of Europe has been very influential on goddess mythic history, describes the cultures of “Old Europe” and of the Indo-European invaders respectively in the following statement:

The two cultural systems were very different: The first was matrifocal, sedentary, peaceful, art-loving, earth- and sea-bound; the second was patrifocal, mobile, warlike, ideologically sky oriented, and indifferent to art. (Gimbutas 1989b, p. 62)

Starhawk uses her creative imagination in conjunction with the archaeological works of James Mellaart, Marija Gimbutas, anthropologist Ruby Rhorlich, as well as Thorkild Jacobsen's *The Treasures of Darkness: a History of Mesopotamian Religion* (1976), to reconstruct the history of the original matrifocal goddess worshipping agrarian societies. This is the focus of the history Starhawk presents in *Truth or Dare*, utilizing archaeological research and mythology from ancient Mesopotamia. She constructs a scenario that provides at least a partial explanation for the regression from the egalitarian goddess worshipping societies to “an organization of society around the principles of domination and the rule of men over women and over other men”. (Starhawk 1987, p. 33)

Starhawk's historical chapter is entitled “The Dismembering of the World” and is divided into four parts “The Mother Times”, “The Sacred Marriage”, “The Epic of Gilgamesh” and “The Enuma Elish”, all of which are prefaced with Starhawk's fictional account of the times told from the perspective of women from each period. *Truth or Dare* brings together fiction and academic accounts. Starhawk's fictional passages are reminiscent of guided

visualizations. The following excerpts, each drawn from a separate section, give a sense of her technique:

You enter the shrine from above, through the roof hole, the smoke of the hearthfire curling around you as you descend the ladder made of lashed saplings. Smoke purifies. The roof hole is an opening as the vagina is a passageway. Emerge and return. (Starhawk 1987, p. 34)

Breathe. See the full moon rise above the temple terrace. Hear the voices of the procession: he comes, bringing rich offerings, cattle and grain, milk and fruit to fill the storehouse. You will be filled. He ascends the stairs, he comes up. Moonlight glints on bare arms. The women dance, arms upraised to the moon, hips curving, as the drums beat and chants rise in the night air. (Starhawk 1987, p. 42)

You stand on a small rise in the ground. You can see them, a line of dust under the shimmering heat waves that rise from the baked ground. You adjust your leather corselet, grip your bronze spear. (Starhawk 1987, p. 60)

Although Starhawk does not articulate her reason for structuring the chapter in this way, it seems to me that she is attempting to engage the reader at an emotional, as well as an intellectual level. The reader who participates fully in these passages enters into the scene described, eliciting more than the intellectual response of reading a strictly historical account.

My discussion of Starhawk's version of goddess mythic history in *Truth or Dare* will focus mainly on the "Mother Times" and the "Sacred History" sections because both passages describe a time when women were powerful and valued and where interconnection with the natural world was celebrated. It is this vision that is most important to feminist Wiccans. The belief that this ideal society existed in the remote past is used to substantiate their claims that such a society is possible.

"The Mother Times" begins with an account of a woman giving birth as a sacred rite in a shrine from the perspective of a priestess, complete with the shamanic journeying of the priestess, in which a grandmother instructs her how to combine varieties of wheat to obtain a superior variety for threshing. Starhawk relies on three of James Mellaart's many

publications on the archaeological site of Çatal Hüyük in Turkey and the ancient Near East as the inspiration for this vision. She quotes Mellaart as stating: “The supreme deity was the Great Goddess.” According to Starhawk, women were “leaders, priestesses, revered and respected members of society. Murals show that women participated in hunting, and women were buried with hoes and adzes, the tools of the farmers. Children were buried with their mothers indicating that the society was matrilineal.” (Starhawk 1987, p. 36) She states that the archaeological findings at Çatal Hüyük “do not reflect structures of domination”. Starhawk credits Mellaart’s *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town* for this interpretation, which she links to archaeologist Marija Gimbutas’s theories about “Old Europe”.³ Starhawk’s interpretation of Mellaart’s work creates an image of an egalitarian society that goes beyond what Mellaart claims in his analysis of the evidence. Starhawk states that “women had power at a time when power over was not yet invented”. (Starhawk 1987, p. 37) While Mellaart states that goddesses were worshipped and women likely held powerful positions, he does not state that there were no hierarchies or social classes in this society, a fact that tends to be ignored by proponents of goddess mythic history. According to Mellaart:

Not much can be said about the Neolithic social structure as the excavations have revealed only the religious quarter. The position of women was obviously an important one in an agricultural society with a fertility cult in which a goddess was the principal deity. Social inequality is suggested by sizes of buildings, equipment and burial gifts, but this is never a glaring one. (Mellaart 1967, p. 225)

In addition, Mellaart does not present this as a society without warfare. Projectile points found at the site could be used for warfare as well as hunting. Some of the human skulls excavated at the site show signs of head wounds. (Mellaart 1975, pp. 101-103)

³ Gimbutas’s theories will be examined in detail in Chapter 3.

In his work, *The Neolithic of the Near East* (1975), Mellaart modifies his earlier interpretation that the ancient Near East figurines were all representations of the Goddess. This change in his position is also either missed or ignored by spiritual feminists when they use his work in their attempts to reconstruct ancient history.

The next section is entitled “The Sacred Marriage” and is based on the fourth millennium Mesopotamian mythic cycle of Inanna and Dumuzi. Starhawk believes this was still a time when the culture was matrifocal and centered on the worship of the goddess. However, changes were occurring with the rise of urban centers that eventually led to the creation of patriarchal structures. With urban centers came “the first great central temples”. Temples became very powerful with the control of land passing from the clans system of “the old egalitarian, matrifocal order” to the temple priesthood. Initially, women held power in the priesthood. Starhawk follows Jacobsen’s interpretation that the Inanna and Dumuzi songs are about a sacred marriage rite. They celebrate both the female and the male body and associate them with the fertility of the fields and herds. Starhawk states:

These early myths celebrate the presence of immanent power in the natural and human world, in the seasonal rhythms of renewal and withering, in food, and in sexuality. The erotic power of woman is venerated, seen as a force that generates good for all the community, and as a power that woman herself takes pride in. (Starhawk 1987, p. 43)

According to Starhawk, the myth of Inanna’s descent is from a later period than the sacred marriage myths and “reflects a time of transition when issues of power and gender had become concerns in Sumer”.⁴ (Starhawk 1987, p. 46) As power became more centralized and secular power developed, women’s political power eroded. Although Starhawk calls upon several sources to document the “erosion of women’s power”, she concentrates on the

⁴ Starhawk also acknowledges the complexity of this particular myth and retells it in *Truth or Dare* to describe her own personal psychology journey.

stories told in myths, which “reveal to us most clearly how the outer changes reshaped the landscape of the psyche.” (Starhawk 1987, p. 40) Based on the analysis of Mesopotamian myths presented in Jacobsen’s *The Treasures of Darkness* and Wolkstein and Kramer’s *Inanna, Queen of Heaven*, Starhawk maps the changes. The Gilgamesh stories of the mid second millenium BCE are in the model of the epic which glorifies the deeds of the hero. In the Inanna and Dumuzi stories, dating from the fourth millenium and into the third millenium BCE, sexuality is sacred and brings power. In Gilgamesh women are property and “sexual intercourse is seen to rob a man of his power.” (Starhawk 1987, p. 50) Starhawk states that “the story of the transition to patriarchy is the history of the maximization of power. It came about through choices made by both men and women to preserve what they saw as their best interests”. (Starhawk 1987, pp. 39-40) War played a key role in this process. The first urban assemblies that wielded political authority included both men and women. With the rise of warfare and the institution of kingship, women were squeezed out of political power and eventually lost religious authority as priestesses as well. Mobilization under a strong leader, perhaps initially for self-defense against invaders, led to the creation of the types of power structures and organizations that waged war on others. Starhawk states that “kings found their power extended by war and so had an incentive to wage war”. (Starhawk 1987, p. 40) Carol Christ is in agreement with the assessment that warfare played a key role in the institution of patriarchy. According to Christ:

It is likely that in some areas, internal developments prepared the way for the dominance of warriors, while in others, relatively peaceful agricultural societies were attacked by warlike pastoral nomadic groups such as the Indo-Europeans who invaded southern and eastern Europe and progressed as far into Asia as the Indus valley. (Christ 1997, p. 60)

She goes on to say “In my opinion, the institutionalizing of warfare as a way of life (however it occurs) is the single most important factor leading to the subordination of women.” (Christ 1997, p. 61) Both Starhawk and Christ present the introduction of patriarchal structures as occurring because of economic pressures within the society as well as pressures occurring from outside of it by invaders. The invasion theory, where nomadic warriors over take these peaceful women-centered societies, still forms part of the theory explaining the changeover to patriarchy society. For Budapest, the world of “the matriarchies” ended at the hand of patriarchal invaders.

The persecution and execution of women accused of witchcraft during the European witch hunts of the early modern period is another important focus of feminist Wiccan goddess mythic history. Starhawk centers her historical discussion in *Dreaming the Dark* on this period. Starhawk’s view, and in this she is presenting the understanding of most if not all feminist Wiccans, is as follows:

The history of patriarchal civilization could be read as a cumulative effort to break that bond, to drive a wedge between spirit and flesh, culture and nature, man and woman. One of the major battles in that long war of conquest was fought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the persecutions of the Witches shattered the peasants’ connection with the land, drove women out of the work of healing and imposed the mechanist view of the world as a dead machine. That rupture underlies the entwined oppressions of race, sex, class, and ecological destruction. The Craft survived however, secretly, silently, underground, in small groups called covens whose members were related by blood or deep trust. Its reemergence in this century is linked to a growing realization among many strata of people that the dead world of mechanism, the world of domination, cannot sustain our inner lives, nor our lives in community with each other, nor the life of the planet. (Starhawk 1988, pp. xxvi-xxvii)

Dreaming the Dark devotes an appendix of thirty-seven pages entitled “The Burning Times: Notes on a Crucial Period of History” to the discussion and analysis of the witch hunts. This section is an example of bringing together the political and the spiritual, as well as fictional and academic accounts. Starhawk draws the reader into her historical discussion by beginning with a story that allows the reader to identify with the uncertainty

and fears of a woman healer, a witch, living during the witch hunts. She follows this with a historical discussion of both economic and religious factors that she believes played a role in creating a climate favorable toward the persecution of witches. Starhawk does not question the existence of witches, or that those who were accused of witchcraft might have been other than people practicing the “Old Religion”. What she seeks is an explanation for such severe persecution of the “Old Religion” at this time. Her discussion is limited for the most part to Great Britain. She traces the loss of the medieval feudal society’s organic (although hierarchical) model through the enclosure laws, the establishment of an ethic of private ownership, and the rise of professionalism (particularly the medical profession). The religious factor is “the war against immanence”, where she proposes that some of the groups who were deemed to be heretics might have been members of the “Old Religion”, attempting to protect themselves by couching their beliefs in Christian terms. Unfortunately, by holding onto their belief in the immanence of the divine, they became labeled as heretics and, in some instances, as witches. (Starhawk 1988, pp. 208-211)

Budapest also describes the witch hunts as the persecution of those people continuing pagan practices. She describes the pre-Christian religion of Europe as a form of shamanism – a native European nature religion. Budapest states that the Christian story of “a god who dies and is reborn” was familiar to the Europeans from their own religion. As Christians, they simply added a few new practices and carried on with the old ways. Unfortunately the “Old Religion” was forced underground because of the Christian demand that their god be worshiped by everyone and in the manner prescribed by the leaders of the church. Budapest states:

Like Native Americans, Native Europeans couldn’t understand a Great Spirit that would force anyone to become a follower, or that this Great Spirit from the Middle East would be cruel,

possessive and jealous. These attributes were not divine; they were the qualities of the church lords' imperialist thinking. So the peasants reacted by going underground, practicing their Craft on the nature holy days and going to church Sunday mornings. But then came the awesome, consolidated power of the church and state. During this period, which lasted from the eleventh to the seventeenth century, the church had the power of the state. The Christian hierarchy could arrest and torture anyone to extract "confession". The peasants, whose land the church coveted, were often the targets. This is known as the "Burning Times"; the shamans were renamed witches and their nature worship labeled Satanism. True Satanism didn't even exist until the seventeenth century, and then only as a backlash to the Inquisition, which tortured and burned its innocent victims over "the Devil", a concept foreign to pagan mythology. Nine million men, women and children were burned alive in Europe to rid the land of the last vestiges of nature religions and gain the property of the accused. (Budapest 1989b, pp. 238-239)

Budapest's account is more typical of witch hunt descriptions in the feminist Wiccan literature than Starhawk's presentation. Exaggerations and generalizations abound. The polemics serve as much to raise emotions and indignation as to set the historical record straight. The contrast between Starhawk and Budapest in their accounts of goddess history illustrates the uneven writing in this body of work. Budapest presents her version of ancient matrifocal culture matter-of-factly, with little concern for footnotes, for distinguishing what is historically verifiable from what arises from her intuition and imagination. These are artificial distinctions for her. Starhawk attempts to ground her retelling of history with some evidence from academic as well as Wiccan sources.

PARALLELS WITH ELIADE

The history presented here is the "inner" or "mythic" history that provides a touchstone for modern witches. Like the history of all peoples, its truth is intuited in the meaning it gives to life, even though it may be recognized that scholars might dispute some facets of the story. (Starhawk 1979, p. 268 n. 1)

Starhawk's statement parallels the "archaic" understanding of myth as articulated by Mircea Eliade. As has already been noted, both Eliade and proponents of goddess mythic history understand myth to be "real" and "true" in a sense that goes beyond ordinary, mundane reality. Eliade begins *Myth and Reality* by distinguishing his approach to the study of myth from that of nineteenth century scholars who treated myth as "fiction" or

“invention”.⁵ He captures the feminist Wiccan understanding of myth when he describes how, for “archaic” people “‘myth’ means a ‘true story’ and, beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant.”⁶ (Eliade 1963, p. 1)

The mythic cycle of birth, death and renewal provides an escape from “the terror of history”. According to Eliade, the going back or renewal “abolishes past Time” by “returning to the origins”. He states:

If it is probable that the intuition of the “Year” as a cycle is at the bottom of the idea of a Cosmos that periodically renews itself, in the mythico-ritual New Year scenarios another idea, an idea different in origin and structure, is discernible. It is the idea of the “perfection of the beginnings”, the expression of a more intimate and deeper religious experience, nourished by the imaginary memory of a “Lost Paradise”, of a state of bliss that preceded the present human condition. It is possible that the mythico-ritual New Year scenario has played such an important role in the history of humanity principally because, by ensuring renewal of the Cosmos, it also offered the hope that the bliss of the “beginnings” could be recovered. (Eliade 1963, p. 50)

The renewal of the “Cosmos”, the return to “perfection of the beginnings” ameliorates the terror of history by “wiping the slate clean” at the beginning of each new cycle.

Feminist Wiccans experience their own “terror of history”. Most commonly cited are the imposition of patriarchal structures on matrifocal cultures and the “Burning Times” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Starhawk captures this fear in the fictionalized passages that accompany her presentation of ancient prehistory and early modern history. The following excerpt is presented from the perspective of a priestess during the change from a matrifocal society to one dominated by patriarchal structures:

The woman is bleeding. Red stains on the stone of the temple court—not the first, not the last...“Will she live?” the women ask.
“She will live,” you say, and they sigh, but you are angry, for this has become an everyday occurrence. You can hardly walk out on the city streets without women throwing themselves at

⁵ The term “myth” in popular as well as some scholarly usage continues to connote fiction or falsehood.

⁶ “Archaic” is Eliade’s term for pre-modern societies where religion is incorporated into every aspect of life. There is another level at which there is a parallel between goddess mythic history and Eliade’s work on myth. Eliade appears to value what he perceives to be the “archaic” world-view above the secular perspective and academic historicism predominant in modern times. Proponents of goddess mythic history also esteem what they understand to be the ancient, in this case, prepatriarchal, world-view.

your feet, clasping your knees, and begging you to take them as servants. Men return from the wars, and treat their own women as they did the women of their enemies. Hard times... Your priestesses do not cease dressing the woman's wounds or her bruised limbs. You imagine, nevertheless, that they draw away. For this woman is their mirror. Tomorrow, or a year from tomorrow, any one of you could be lying in your own blood on strange stones. (Starhawk 1987, p. 48)

The next passage is from the point of view of a woman healer during the witch hunts:

She is afraid. Her own fear has a smell more pungent than the needles of pine that her feet crush on the forest path...she remembers her dream of the night before—the paper pinned to the church door. She couldn't read it. What had it been? The proclamation of a Witch-hunt? These days, the Sight is a trouble; her dreams are haunted by the faces of women in torment; their sleepless eyes, the lids forced open as they walk up and down, night after night, weak from hunger, their bodies shaved and displayed to the crowd, pricked deep to find the evidence they call devil's marks, then taken for the private amusement of the jailers. And they were mild here in England, where Witches were only hung. She thought of the tales, whispered at Meetings, of Germany and France, of devices to crush bones and tear limbs out of their sockets, of veins ripped apart and blood spilling on the dirt, and of flesh charred as flames rose about the stake. Could she keep silent under that—or would she break, confess to anything, name anyone they wanted as her fellow Witch? She doesn't know, she hopes she will never know. (Starhawk 1988, p. 184)

Starhawk uses this narrative form to make the terror of history as experienced by women, particularly goddess worshipping women of the “Old Religion”, felt at a personal level by the reader. The terror rises out of the lack of control the individual feels when confronted with world shattering events. Eliade's proposal, which would seem also to be endorsed by Starhawk, is that going back or returning “to the origins” acts to counter it.

Contemporary Pagans emphasize the cyclical nature of existence through myth and ritual. According to Starhawk:

Our sacred calendar of holy days brings alive the mythology of birth, death, and rebirth and allows us to experience the mystery of regeneration in the turning of the wheel of the year. (Starhawk 1997, p. 16)

The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is at the core of Pagan mythology. Many myths about Goddesses and Gods deal with journeys into the land of the dead. Often these are stories of descent and return. Working with these myths, retelling the tales, and exploring them in guided journeys and meditations can help us deeply integrate our understanding of the circle of rebirth...In part, they show us how the cycles of birth, growth, death, and rebirth plays itself out in the seasons...The myths were not told to “explain” the seasons, but to personify the circle of death and rebirth. They can serve as fertile material for working through our own feelings about loss and death. (Starhawk 1997, p. 45)

Although the above description is directed towards dealing with personal loss, this cyclical view of birth, death, and renewal is understood on the level of macrocosm as well as microcosm. There have been terrible events in western history that strike fear into the hearts of women, women have been stripped of their power, subjugated and even systematically murdered, according to this understanding of history. The contemporary emphasis on mythic cycles in feminist Wiccan ritual acts to counter the atrocities of the past. Feminist Wiccans believe that by recovering and recreating the rituals of the ancient mythic cycles there will be a return to, and a renewal of, the beginnings. Budapest states:

A Women's Holy Book is but one of the utterances of the awakening Goddess in Her many guises. The sense of prophecy, wonder and sacredness articulates through the Mysteries, as the Lifegiver becomes more visible in defense of our endangered species, mothers and their children. (Budapest 1989b, p. xxiv)

Budapest describes how *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* contains memories of the ancient ways. It is through the re-enactment of these ancient ways, and modifying them where necessary for the twentieth century, that the renewal is taking place. Eliade states that myth "narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'." (Eliade 1963, p. 5) In the writings of Starhawk, Budapest and others the "fabled time of the 'beginnings'" is the "mother times", the time of the matrifocal goddess worshippers. This was the time of peace and harmony prior to the fall into patriarchy, in other words, a golden age. (Budapest, 1989b; Sjöo and Mor 1987; Stein 1991; Starhawk 1987;1989; 1997) In Chapter One, the emphasis in feminist Wicca on empowering women was discussed. As we have seen in the proceeding description of goddess mythic history, this golden age was believed to be a time when women were powerful and valued. It thus functions as an exemplary inspiration.

According to Eliade: “The foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities – deity or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom”. (Eliade 1963, p. 8) Starhawk presents the exemplary model of the “mother times”:

This ancient civilization was a mosaic of village cultures that were roughly egalitarian, peaceable, and creative. Agriculture, pottery-making, architecture, writing, and mathematics all were born in this time. Religious imagery focused on the cycles of life and death, on food, fertility, and sexuality as images of the sacred. Archaeologists may argue about this picture, but for contemporary Goddess worshippers what is important is that *it presents a model of a cooperative, peaceful, and innovative society* lying hidden in the roots of European culture. Knowing that such societies are possible we need not accept war and domination as inevitable. (Starhawk 1997, p. 10, emphasis mine)

Through their rituals, feminist witches enact their mythic history by calling the names of ancient goddesses, retelling the stories of the ancient women-centred societies and expressing anger at the persecution of witches throughout the ages of patriarchal rule. In Eliade’s model, myth also functions as a way of going back in order to recover “the original, strong, scared Time”. (Eliade 1963, p. 37) Feminist witches are looking for ways to invest life experiences and their feminist political activism with deeper meaning, hence the creation of a mythic order, and the creation of sacred time and space through ritual. The re-enactment of creation, the ideal of world renewal in the feminist Wicca ritual is the “becoming” of women.

The spiritual feminist understanding that to be a myth maker or sacred storyteller is seen as participating in a locus of power parallels Eliade’s statement that “knowledge of the origin and exemplary history of things confers a sort of magical mastery over them.” (Eliade 1963, p. 90) For example, Jane Caputi describes myth making as having the power to create or cause physical manifestation of phenomena in the world. (Caputi 1992, pp. 426-427) In this understanding of reality, paradigmatic myths do not just represent the

ethos of a culture, they can actually bring into being or manifest physical forms and change social structures. Mythic history thus plays an important role in the process of changing reality through magic because it presents symbols of women's power along with a new paradigm. According to Starhawk, the symbol is merely a lens that channels the universal energy the witch uses to effect the desired change but it is still critical for making magic. (Starhawk, 1989, p. 124) It is through the use of magic that the modern witch creates her own reality. The belief in the efficacy of magic closely links feminist Wiccans with the "archaic" world view in Eliade's works on the function of myth.

There might seem to be a contradiction between Eliade's Sacred as transcendent where myth functions to re-enact the breakthrough of the Sacred into mundane reality and the feminist Wiccan understanding of the Goddess as immanent. Starhawk states:

Myth is the telling of the collective story about what really happens in the spiritual counterpart of the physical world. When we enter into a myth through ritual, then similar processes unfold in us. Our links with the processes of the universe and our connection to the community are strengthened. (Starhawk 1989, p. 218)

This statement seems to follow Eliade's concept of myth as facilitating a breakthrough of the Sacred into ordinary reality. As we discussed in Chapter One, there are contradictions between what feminist Wiccans write about the nature of the Goddess and what they actually do in practice. Certain patterns in feminist Wiccan ritual indicate an understanding that the power of the Goddess, or the power called Goddess, while existing everywhere and in all things, must be called upon and brought into focus in the physical world. The casting of a circle to create a sacred space also seems to indicate that somehow the power of, or in, the Goddess must be called upon and concentrated by certain chants and rituals. The practice in ritual of chanting the many names of the Goddess calls on the primordial power of myth, power inherent in the many names from the ancient past, from the "mother-times".

SITUATED IN HISTORY

Budapest and Starhawk both attempt to situate feminist Wicca and goddess worship firmly in history. The introductions to all of Starhawk's books include some information on the history of the goddess and the survival of witchcraft through history. For Starhawk, it is necessary to reclaim the past in order to identify and name the sense of loss experienced by living in contemporary western societies. From that naming comes the ability to mourn, to be angry and finally to attempt the recovery of an ancient way of being where once people were part of a web of "living interconnections" that valued women and the natural world. Starhawk states: "We suffer loss precisely because we have something to lose: a heritage, the rich gifts of a culture, a way of being". (Starhawk 1987, p. 33) The heritage which has been lost is the "mother times", and to reclaim it provides, to use Rosemary Ruether's terminology, the "deeper bedrock of authentic Being" for feminist Wiccans.

Feminist Wiccans are very suspicious of academic scholarship and reject any academic claims of objectivity as they believe that the academy has both participated in, and been influenced by, the formulation of the patriarchal mythos. Budapest states:

It is important to see these images (of the Goddess created before us by Goddess-worshipping people) without being distracted by what they are called, classified, or thought to be by archeologists. Archeologists are not witches who yearn to see the Goddess. Her guises often mislead them. We don't have many allies among scientists today. The Craft threatens them; their jobs may be in real danger if they start telling the truth. The possibility that there was ever a society where women ruled, or the belief in women's inherent ability to be superior, is abhorrent to them. (Budapest 1989b, p. 258)

Starhawk acknowledges that "Scholars, including some feminists, argue about whether such times existed. We cannot prove to them that the mother-times were real, for the academy accepts only written evidence." (Starhawk 1987, p. 32)

While Starhawk is correct that written evidence is usually privileged, other types of evidence such as archaeological evidence are also accepted when reconstructing history. However, the interpretation of archaeological evidence by most academics is also problematic for feminist Wiccans. Although they do not articulate their position in this way, it seems that Starhawk and Budapest are directing their critiques towards a traditional academic “objectivist-realist” approach where the view is held “that the past can be known scientifically and objectively”.(Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, p. 98) The researcher is required to maintain an objective stance and not identify personally or engage politically with the subject matter of their research. This methodology is understood to be value-neutral and engaged in the pursuit of truth, the recovery of “what actually happened” in the past. Feminist Wiccans are also looking for “the truth” about the past, although they do not claim an objectivist stance. They reject most academic historical accounts of the witch hunts because most studies begin from the position that witches as religious practitioners, whether they were practicing a Satanic religion, or the benign “Old Religion”, did not exist. These accounts attempt to explain why belief in witches arose at that particular point in history and the underlying assumption is that the belief in witches was erroneous. Feminist Wiccans do not accept this premise and believe that witches represent the remainder of an indigenous European population practicing the early pagan religion.

Feminist Wiccans are not alone in questioning “objective academic scholarship” that does not acknowledge its own situatedness in history. Hermeneutic theory and post-modern theory make us aware that there is no such thing as an objective standpoint. Our background, our experience, and the dominant myth operative in our society are among the factors that will impact on our interpretation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza observes:

Historical knowledge is not only “history for” but also knowledge dependent on the self-image of the social group for which historians speak and to which they belong. Far from recording what actually happened with the utmost objectivity and value-neutrality, historians have written history for the dominant groups in society. History was conceived as a history of empires and wars, or as the history of political or cultural heroes, and it was written in order to instil national pride or cultural hegemony. History was made and written by the “winners”; the oppressed and vanquished of the past do not have a “written” history. (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, p. 102)⁷

Feminist Wiccans are cognisant of the concept that the victors have written history and they approach historical accounts with suspicion. Starhawk states:

Their [the scholars] definition of what can be considered fact claims to be objective, but it is inevitably skewed. For texts do not preserve the mysteries, nor can they fully record the reality of oral cultures. And texts are written by people with biases and interests to preserve. It was not in the interests of the rulers to preserve records of a time of freedom, or of woman’s power. Yet traces survive. (Starhawk 1987, p. 32)

For this reason Starhawk gives precedence to “craft oral history” and those scholars whose research might corroborate it. There is little concern in most feminist Wiccan accounts with separating the historic and fictional and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, they use a creative combination of fiction and historic accounts to present goddess mythic history from their perspective. Starhawk blends the mythic and the historic in her accounts, although she demarcates her boundaries by separating her narrative creations from her analysis based on academic scholarship. Analyses of economic conditions, which may have led to warfare in ancient Sumer or the persecution of witches in early modern Europe are interwoven with “craft oral tradition” and fiction. (Starhawk 1987;1988) The merging of history and myth in goddess spirituality rises partially out of the perception that, as in Eliade’s model, myth expresses a deeper ontological truth than the literal meaning of the narrative. This combines with the desire to find evidence of actual societies where people were able to live in a way that was compatible with that “truth”. Historical and mythical

⁷ However, Schüssler Fiorenza does not suggest that history is completely relativistic. It is possible to approach historical accounts critically to distinguish between history and fiction. In this context, it should be noted that goddess mythic history does not stand up to the criteria proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza for making this distinction.

accounts are combed for exemplar societies that existed in the past. Carol Christ suggests that “the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in reconstructing the history of early Christian women provides an interpretative model and methodological theory that is relevant to feminist research on the Goddesses.” (Christ 1987, p. 162) Christ goes onto suggest that Schüssler Fiorenza’s argument “that any scrap of evidence” found in the texts must be given consideration.⁸ Through this process, an understanding of history has developed that feminist Wiccans believe represents an ancient way of being, a prepatriarchal, matrifocal society. It is this understanding that has come under intense criticism.

⁸ Although Christ has read Schüssler Fiorenza, it is unlikely that most feminist Wiccans and other spiritual feminists have done so because of her Christian emphasis and the academic nature of her writing.

CHAPTER THREE

Archeological materials are not mute. They speak their own language. And they need to be used for the great source they are to help unravel the spirituality of those of our ancestors who predate the Indo-Europeans by many thousands of years.

Marija Gimbutas. *The Language of the Goddess*.¹

In this volume I have followed one line only of anthropological inquiry, the survival of an indigenous European cult and the interaction between it and the exotic religion which finally overwhelmed it.

Margaret Murray. *The God of the Witches*.²

INTRODUCTION

As has been outlined in Chapter Two, feminist Wiccans are suspicious of, and in some cases hostile towards, the work of academics. Ironically, given their suspicion of academic scholarship, the “oral history of the craft”³ comes for the most part, from academic scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, albeit often indirectly through more popular works on the subject. This chapter will begin by briefly outlining some of the sources of “craft oral tradition” to demonstrate that goddess mythic history is a modern movement with its roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rather than the ancient past. I will not belabor this point or discuss it in great detail as several scholars have already demonstrated that this is the case.⁴ (Jencson 1989; Hanegraaff 1995; Rees 1995; Hutton 1993;1995;1997) Starhawk and Budapest acknowledge that there are modern elements to this movement, although they continue to hold onto the claim of ancient antecedents. This chapter will present a critique of the selective and uncritical use of academic scholarship as supporting evidence for goddess mythic history.

¹ From “Introduction”, p. xix.

² From “Introduction”, p. 14.

³ Starhawk uses this term.

⁴ Margot Adler and Adian Kelly are among the contemporary pagans who also acknowledge this.

MODERN SOURCES FOR GODDESS MYTHIC HISTORY

A brief historical overview of the theories of ancient matriarchy and the “Great Goddess” will provide a backdrop for the critiques presented in this chapter. I will not attempt to trace all of the interconnecting links between scholars and popular writers but will focus on those that have most substantially influenced feminist Wiccan interpretations of goddess mythic history. My understanding is indebted to the work of Ronald Hutton, Linda Jencson, Kenneth Rees and Wouter Hanegraaff, all of whom have examined in some detail the history and influences of archaeologists, anthropologists, folklorists, and classicists on contemporary understandings of the goddess.

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz suggests that contemporary pagan movements have roots in the Enlightenment rejection of the historical religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity and the desire to “rehabilitate the religion of nature”. However, there are some substantial differences in the approach to “the religion of nature” between them, which Eilberg-Schwartz acknowledges. The Enlightenment deists⁵ focused on reason and discovering the laws of nature, whereas contemporary pagans emphasize intuition and feeling. They view humans as part of an organic, interconnected cosmos, rather than part of a mechanistic world running according to laws and principles handed down from on high. This would seem to place contemporary pagans closer to the Romantics than the deists. (Eilberg-Schwartz 1989, pp. 80-81)

There is general agreement among scholars that the idea of ancient roots for contemporary pagan beliefs and practices has been heavily influenced by Romantic

⁵ The deists flourished in the eighteenth century, particularly in England. They did not believe in revelation and they emphasized reason. God could be known through the careful study of the orderly design of nature.

scholarship. Ronald Hutton, in tracing the Romantic Movement's impact, states:

By the 1810s the divine feminine is personified either as the moon (apostrophized with particular religiosity by Keats) or the spirit of the green earth (for whom Shelley makes an equivalent, especially in 'Song of Proserpine'). In the latter capacity she often sheds any classical label altogether, becoming simply 'Mother Earth' or 'Mother Nature'. (Hutton 1997, p. 92)

Eighteenth century German Romanticism also influenced later understandings of the goddess that have permeated goddess mythic history. In 1849, German scholar Eduard Gerhard theorized "that behind the various goddesses of classical Greece stood a single great goddess venerated before history." (Hutton 1997, p. 93) Some, but not all, classicists and archaeologists supported this theory. This image of a prehistoric "Great Goddess" became combined with the theory first proposed by J. J. Bachofen in 1862 that a primitive stage of social organization, ancient matriarchy, preceded patriarchy.⁶ Jane Ellen Harrison, a classicist who is oft cited in works on goddess mythic history, presented evidence for the existence of ancient matriarchal societies in her books *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis* (1912). Harrison based her argument upon images on Greek vases as well as Greek mythic sources. She also postulated a female deity who was representative of the earth and had three aspects, although she only named the Maiden and Mother aspects.⁷ Hutton states:

Following her [Harrison's] work, the idea of a matristic early Europe which had venerated such a deity was developed in books by amateur scholars such as Robert Briffault's *The Mothers* (1927) and Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1946). In the same years, acceptance of the concept of the single prehistoric goddess continued to grow among experts in the prehistory of Greece, the Balkans, and the Near East; in 1929 the British archaeologist G.D Hornblower gave it a backward projection by linking it to the figurines, again often feminine, found on a scatter of European sites from the early period of the Upper Paleolithic. After this these statuettes

⁶ Bachofen did not use the term "matriarchy". He used the terms *mutterrecht* and *gynaiokratie* which translate as maternal law and gyneocracy. However, in his work these two terms refer to a system where women were in power in society and where only daughters could inherit property. The term matriarchy came into use in the late nineteenth century. (Georgoudi 1992, p. 449)

⁷Harrison's work has inspired Budapest, who uses Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* as a resource for creating songs and rituals.

were regularly cited as evidence that a Great Goddess, Mother Goddess, or Earth Mother had been venerated all through the Stone Age. (Hutton 1997, p. 93)

Another scholar who contributed to the popularization of this view of history was archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes, who also wrote novels, plays, poetry and popular works of archaeology and history from 1938 into the early nineteen seventies.⁸ Thus, a number of scholars supported a model of ancient history where matriarchies and goddess worship were thought to be an early stage of cultural development. Hutton states: "Whether or not there ever was an Age of the Goddess in Neolithic Europe, there certainly was one among European intellectuals between 1951 and 1963."⁹ (Hutton 1997, p. 96) However, by the mid 1960s, questions regarding archaeological methodology and interpretation regarding the Neolithic "Great Goddess" or "Mother Goddess" were raised by scholars such as Peter Ucko and it became apparent that the "Great Goddess" theory was only one possible interpretation among many for the archaeological and mythological evidence. Changes in theoretical direction and a stronger emphasis on evidence verifiable by scientific methodology played an important role in this shift.

MARIJA GIMBUTAS AND THE CRITIQUE FROM ARCHAEOLOGY

Despite the arguments against this model of ancient history, archaeological evidence is still presented as proof for, or at the very least suggestive of, the existence of ancient matrifocal societies and for the understanding that witches and witchcraft are

⁸ Jacquetta Hawkes was still involved with the topic as late as 1990. She published a review of Margaret Ehrenberg's *Women in Prehistory* in which she criticizes Ehrenberg for being "excessively cautious in her judgement of evidence" and for trying "to cover so much that mistakes and glaring omissions are inevitable". (Hawkes 1990, pp. 424-425)

⁹ Hutton bases these dates on the influence that "three giants of British archaeology", Gordon Childe, O.G.S. Crawford and Glyn Daniel, had in the mid 1950s when they declared their belief in the veneration of a single female deity by Neolithic cultures. The image of the Mother Goddess was projected into other time periods and also became incorporated into art history. Eric Neumann's work popularized it in psychology. This understanding was questioned by Peter Ucko, (see pages 52-55 of this thesis) in 1962 and went out of vogue soon afterward.

cultural survivals of the ancient goddess religion.¹⁰ It is therefore central to an analysis of goddess mythic history to examine the work of the archaeologists that has both influenced and supported goddess mythic history. Some of the assumptions made by, and the underlying model presupposed in, the work of one such archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas, will be examined. Marija Gimbutas and James Mellaart are the two archaeologists most often cited by proponents of goddess mythic history. While Mellaart's work has been used as supporting evidence for this version of history, it is the work of Gimbutas that permeates both the presentation of goddess mythic history and the images used in the meditations and rituals of contemporary feminist Wiccans. For example Starhawk's chant: "Great Woman Mother of birds... You are the vessel beaked and breasted" comes directly from Gimbutas's descriptions of the "Bird Goddess". (Starhawk 1987, p. 34; Gimbutas 1982, pp. 112-150; 1989a, pp.38-41) Starhawk's "Chant of the Butterfly Goddess" is also inspired by Gimbutas. (Starhawk 1997, p. 96; Gimbutas 1982, pp. 186-187; 1989a, p. 275) Budapest describes various representations of the Goddess as a wise owl, a vulture, and having a penis head, all images found in Gimbutas's work. (Budapest 1989b, pp. 286-287; Gimbutas 1982, pp. 152-157) Articles in *The Beltane Papers*, a feminist Wiccan journal, frequently cite Gimbutas as a source and images from her books are often selected for illustrations.

Prior to presenting and analysing some of the criticism of Gimbutas's archaeological interpretations, some background information on the limitations of

¹⁰ Cultural survivals are defined as "elements of ancient cultures, which have carried over into the present with little change in form, meaning and function". (Hunter and Whitten 1976, p. 377) This theory is no longer accepted by most anthropologists and archaeologists. For a critique of cultural survivals from a folklorist's perspective see J. Wood (1996), pp. 19-21.

archaeological evidence in general will be presented.¹¹ When archaeological evidence is used to substantiate goddess mythic history, the interpretative aspect of archaeological research is often ignored and hypotheses such as proposed sequences of events and possible functions of artefacts are cited as proven facts. In the case of prehistoric¹² archaeology, archaeologists work with the material remains of ancient societies, developing hypotheses and testing them against the material data recovered from excavations. Interpretations of the data can, and do, change as more evidence becomes available. Prevailing paradigms in archaeological and anthropological theory also influence the interpretative process. Much can be learned from attempts to reconstruct ancient societies from archaeological data, but some of the difficulties and limitations need to be kept in mind when utilizing archaeological reports to substantiate theories. A few examples should suffice to illustrate this point. Contemporary excavation techniques are sophisticated but not all sites are excavated with the same rigor and attention to detail. Only certain types of material remains are preserved unless extraordinary circumstances create an environment that allows for the preservation of biodegradable materials. Materials can be shifted out of context by natural forces or by later occupants of the site. Older excavations were not performed with the same attention to detail and lacked access to the sophisticated technology for dating, pollen and soil analysis that are now available to archaeologists. (Ehrenberg 1989, p.25-32)

Keeping these limitations in mind, the work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas will now be discussed. Gimbutas had a long and distinguished career as an archaeologist

¹¹ This is intended to be a general rather than a comprehensive discussion of the limitations of archaeological evidence.

¹² Some feminist scholars consider the term prehistoric problematic. Carol Christ, Margaret Conkey and Ruth Tringham argue that the term implies that societies without formal systems of writing have no history. Conkey and Tringham are "also uncomfortable about treating this prehistory as a somehow homogenous block of time and, by extension, of human culture." (Conkey and Tringham 1995, p. 233; Christ 1997, p. 74)

working first on Bronze Age sites and then Neolithic sites in southeastern Europe.

Gimbutas earned her academic standing from her early fieldwork, but in the words of archaeologist Lynn Meskell: “From the material particulars of archaeology in her earlier work she moved toward an ideal vision of prehistory”. (Meskell 1995, p. 74) Scholars have been particularly critical of the “ideal vision of prehistory” that appears in her books *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1982), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991). In these works, Gimbutas presents evidence from her own sites and from many other sites across Europe and the Near East, along with ethnographic data, mythology and folklore to argue for the worship of a “Great Goddess” from the Palaeolithic period onward.

In *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, Gimbutas writes about the Neolithic period and restricts her analysis for the most part to the geographic area she calls “Old Europe”. Old Europe is a term coined by Gimbutas. In this work, she defines it as the area between “the Aegean and Adriatic, including the islands, as far north as Czechoslovakia, southern Poland and the western Ukraine”. (Gimbutas 1982, p. 17) The geographic boundaries of the Old European culture are extended in *The Language of the Goddess* and *The Civilization of the Goddess*, which, as their titles imply, subsume all goddesses under the rubric of the “Great Goddess”. The Old European culture now encompasses “the Near East, southeastern Europe, the Mediterranean area, and central, western and northern Europe”. (Gimbutas 1989a, p. xv; 1991, pp. 12, 126, 156, 183)

Gimbutas theorises a continuum from the Palaeolithic through the Neolithic in Europe and the Near East, and into the Bronze Age, in the case of Crete. (Gimbutas 1982,

New Introduction; 1989a, p. 321; 1991, p. x) This covers a time span from 25000 BC¹³ to 2500 BC, which she extends to approximately 1450 BC in the case of Crete. Although the Palaeolithic period is mentioned, she focuses her discussion on the materials from the early Neolithic through to the end of the Neolithic, from approximately 6500 BC to 3500 BC in southeastern Europe and from 4500 BC to 2500 BC in western and northern Europe. In the case of Crete, she extends the Old European culture into the Bronze Age. (Gimbutas 1989a, p. xvii; 1991, p. vii) Although her analysis is centred on sites excavated in Europe and the Near East, she occasionally extrapolates to other areas:

The earliest civilizations of the world – in China, Tibet, Egypt, the Near East, and Europe – were in all probability matrilineal “Goddess civilizations”. Since agriculture was developed by women, the Neolithic period created optimum conditions for the survival of matrilineal, endogamous systems inherited from Palaeolithic times. (Gimbutas 1991, p. 324)

This statement encompasses a broad geographic area, suggesting that almost half the world had matrilineal, endogamous systems. This understanding is based on the assumption that a prehistoric monoculture existed over an extended period of time. The presupposition of a prehistoric monoculture underlies Gimbutas’s interpretation of symbols throughout her work. For example, in her discussion of the “Bird Goddess”, she associates paintings of red bird feet on the walls of Palaeolithic caves with bird feet painted on Neolithic red-painted ceramics and understands them to be evidence for the continuation of the “Bird Goddess” from the Palaeolithic into the Neolithic period. (Gimbutas 1991, p. 230) Leaving aside the questionable assumption that the bird feet are symbolic of a goddess, the suggestion that a symbol presented in two very different media and settings would have the same meaning to people in cultures separated by thousands of years presupposes a prehistoric monoculture.

¹³ Gimbutas uses BC instead of BCE.

FIGURINE ANALYSIS

Gimbutas draws on a variety of materials, including figurines, murals, tools, and ceramics for her interpretation of the material culture in Old Europe but she centres her argument on the analysis of figurines. The figurines come from sites all over Europe and the Near East, and range in date from the early Neolithic to the late Neolithic and include some Bronze Age material. Gimbutas states:

The miniature sculptures, called figurines, found in quantity in almost every Neolithic settlement and cemetery are invaluable for reconstructing not only the symbolism but the religion itself. Because rituals were reenacted using these stone, ivory, bone, and clay figurines, much of the content of this prehistoric religion has been preserved. The tradition of marking figurines and other cult objects with symbols allows us to decipher their functions. (Gimbutas 1989a, p. xvi)

The statement that rituals were re-enacted using the figurines is a major assumption that Gimbutas puts forth without presenting systematic evidence site by site or even by geographic area. Thus, it is not obvious to this reader that “much of the content of this prehistoric religion has been preserved.” Here, Gimbutas presupposes a universal culture for an entire continent through the whole Neolithic period. The following examination of Peter Ucko’s *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete with Comparative Material From the Prehistoric Near East and Mainland Greece* (1968), and Lauren Talalay’s *Deities, Dolls, and Devices: Neolithic Figurines from Fanchthi Cave, Greece* (1993) will serve to illustrate a contrasting methodology for figurine analysis, as well as to critique of some of the presuppositions underlying Gimbutas’s interpretation. This is not intended to denigrate Gimbutas’s expertise as an archaeologist. Gimbutas was extremely knowledgeable and well read on the archaeology of Europe.¹⁴ Interestingly,

¹⁴ When she came to the United States, her first professional job was translating archaeological reports for Harvard University and this exposed her to information on Neolithic sites from all over Europe. (Marler 1995, p. 43) She studied figurines and other materials from a wide variety of sites. However, she analyzed and

although Gimbutas uses an illustration from Ucko's book in two of her three monographs under discussion in this thesis, she does not incorporate his findings or respond to them.

Ucko systematically analyzed figurines by period (Early, Middle, and Late Neolithic), sex, material of construction and decorative motifs and positioning. Ucko's detailed analysis of figurines drew attention to data that did not fit the generally accepted interpretation of prehistoric figurines as representations of the "Mother Goddess". (Ucko 1968, p. 445) According to Ucko, for the geographic areas covered by his study, the figurines were mainly female or "no-sex", with male figurines in the minority. Ucko applied the label "no-sex" to figurines that did not have sexual characteristics or were not clearly male or female. He found that there were significant numbers of figurines in the "no-sex" category. For example, the "no-sex" figurines from Crete were nearly equal in number to the female figurines. Restricting his analysis to definitely dated figurines, he found nineteen female and seventeen "no-sex" figurines. (Ucko 1968, p. 316) Although this was the pattern for most of the areas studied, there were differences in these ratios from one area to another and from one site to another. In his analysis of Near East figurines, Ucko found that Jarmo had twenty-three female figurines and twenty-seven "no-sex" figurines. In contrast, at Halaf forty-three female figurines and seventeen "no-sex" figurines were identified. (Ucko 1968, p. 366) The point in citing these statistics is to illustrate that there are variations from one site to another. In addition, not all of the figurines interpreted by some of the studies as representations of a "Great Goddess" are definitively female.¹⁵ As a

categorized figurines with the intent to establish which aspects of the "Great Goddess" they represented, rather than leaving the interpretative options open and letting patterns emerge in specific contexts.

¹⁵ This is clear in my own study of the drawings and photographs of the figures in Gimbutas's three monographs under discussion here. The following figure numbers are a few examples from *The Civilization of the Goddess*: figure 7-21, 7-40 and 8-14.2 are representative of the figurines that do not appear to my eye to

result of “the detailed analyses of the figurine complement from each area and the archaeological contexts of these figurines”, Ucko concluded that:

It is unlikely (a) that the figurines from any one figurine complement all served the same purpose; (b) that the figurines from any one complement all represented the same aspect of one single individual; (c) that the majority of figurines from any one complement represented the same aspect of a deity” (Ucko 1968, p. 443)

Both Ucko and Talalay allow the possibility that some of the figurines may be representations of a goddess, but they also suggest that, depending on the context in which the figurine is found, other explanations may be more probable. Using data from ethnographic studies, both Ucko and Talalay have compiled a list of possible functions for the figurines. While they both find ethnographic evidence useful, they do advise caution in pushing interpretations too far. The use of ethnographic evidence in interpreting prehistoric evidence has its limitations because examples come from cultures separated in time and space. Ucko states:

It is not suggested that any one practice, either by an historic people or by a tribal group, can be simply equated with prehistoric practice, but that given as much of this evidence as can be gathered it now becomes easier, first to evaluate the possible range of practices that prehistoric people may have had, and second, to decide which of these practices may best account for the facts revealed by analysis of the archaeological material. (Ucko 1968, p. 420)

Talalay argues that, although ethnographic analogues are “not an essential component in the construction of a convincing argument, ethnographic analogies provide an array of potential models and offer researchers perspectives that are relatively free of ethnocentric bias”. (Talalay 1993, pp. 44) In order to identify possible functions for the figurines excavated at certain Greek Neolithic sites, Talalay used the available ethnographic data to find examples of the many different ways that figurines have been manufactured, used and discarded. She is aware that this approach has its limitations. It is difficult to

be clearly female or male. (Gimbutas 1991, pp. 235, 247, 315) I have not included figures from the other volumes as Gimbutas uses many of the same illustrations from one volume to the next.

develop methods for determining and reliably testing which ethnographic analogue provides the best explanation for the archaeological data. (Talalay 1993, p. 44) Therefore, Talalay uses the ethnographic evidence to suggest possibilities, not as proof of an interpretation. Some possible interpretations of figurine functions suggested by ethnographic studies include models for initiation ceremonies, curing rites, fertility rites, witchcraft, ancestor images and for dolls and games. To further complicate the picture, some ethnographic evidence indicates that a figurine may change functions over the course of its life. For example, it may start out as a child's doll but may later have a religious function after being sanctified by a priestess or priest. (Talalay 1993, pp. 40-44)

Ucko also draws attention to the inadequacies of the interpretations of male figurines for Neolithic sites:

First, those who have supported the Mother Goddess interpretation have either treated the male figurines as exceptions, discreetly ignored them or postulated a male associate of the Mother Goddess. Second, the occurrence of three groups of human figures, male, female, and sexless, among some figurine complements has never entered any discussion concerning the Mother Goddess. Whereas the males have been discarded as exceptions, both the figurines with breasts and also the figurines without breast or penes have all been accepted as representations of the same Goddess. (Ucko 1968, p. 417)

Gimbutas does include male figurines in her analysis. They get one chapter of twenty pages in *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, one chapter of nine pages in *The Language of the Goddess* and two pages in *The Civilization of the Goddess*. She states:

The very small numbers of sculptures representing male figurines from Neolithic settlements and cemeteries do not mean that male images were less divine or that they were representing mortal men...I see male gods as partners, consorts, and brothers of goddesses. (Gimbutas 1991, p. 249)

As Gimbutas understands all female figurines (and in this group she includes the figurines Ucko labels as "no-sex") to be representations of the "Great Goddess", then male figurines must represent a god in relationship to the goddess as "partners, consorts, and brothers of goddesses". She lists additional functions of male gods as "male

guardian/owner of wild animals and forests, household protector, male god of rising and dying vegetation". (Gimbutas 1989a, p. 329) This type of interpretation is precisely what Ucko is criticising.

Although female figurines are all aspects of one "Great Goddess", these male figurines are not considered to be aspects of one Great God. Gimbutas states that "there are no images that have been found of a Father God throughout the prehistoric record." (Gimbutas 1991, p. x) Though many male figurines have an erect penis, Gimbutas does not consider them aspects of a father god. This is in contrast with the interpretation of female figurines with spread legs and exposed vulvas as being of the goddess giving birth. Gimbutas claims that the role of the father in reproduction was not understood in the Palaeolithic. This is a major assumption, but even if it is the case, surely in the Neolithic, with the advent of agriculture and animal husbandry, the role of the male in reproduction was understood.

A PREHISTORIC MONOCULTURE

Gimbutas' understanding of prehistory is problematic for several reasons. First of all, goddess history is rooted in a paradigm that archaeologist Margaret Conkey refers to as "the unilinear evolutionary progress of human culture". This understanding of human culture is based on the androcentric models of those nineteenth century anthropologists who argued for an original matriarchy as a primitive stage in their theory of social evolutionary progress.¹⁶ (Conkey & Tringham 1995, p. 207; Wood 1996, pp. 12-13) J. J. Bachofen is credited for originating this theory. (Georgoudi 1992, p. 449-451) This

¹⁶ An excellent, in-depth discussion of nineteenth century anthropological theory can be found in G.W. Stocking's *Victorian Anthropology* (1987).

evolutionary perspective was the predominant model in anthropology from the 1860s into the first part of the twentieth century. The model utilized the comparative method and the theory of cultural survivals and presupposed the psychic unity of humanity and uniform stages of development. (Stocking 1995, p. 10) In this view, patriarchy is a higher, if not the highest stage in human cultural evolution.

Gimbutas credits Bachofen in her discussion of the social structure of Old Europe. (Gimbutas 1991, p. 324) However, she reverses the privileging of patriarchy as the pinnacle achievement in human social organization by placing a higher value on goddess worshipping cultures. In contrast to the nineteenth century theorists, Gimbutas does not use the term matriarchy. She rejects “matriarchy” as a mirror image of patriarchy, preferring instead to use the terms matrifocal and matristic, both of which have a more egalitarian tone. Her theory presents patriarchal culture as devolution:

The images and symbols in this volume assert that the parthenogenetic Goddess has been the most persistent feature in the archeological record of the ancient world. In Europe she ruled through the Paleolithic and Neolithic, and in Mediterranean Europe throughout most of the Bronze Age. The next stage, that of the pastoral and patriarchal warrior gods, who either supplanted or assimilated the matristic pantheon of goddesses and gods, represents an intermediary stage before Christianity and the spread of the philosophical rejection of this world. A prejudice against this worldliness developed and with it the rejection of the Goddess and all she stood for. (Gimbutas 1989a, p. 321)

In this passage, a devolutionary model is presented. First there was a parthenogenetic Goddess who is worshipped by a peaceful, art loving culture that “took keen delight in the natural wonders of this world”. (Gimbutas 1989a, p. 321) A second stage of “pastoral and patriarchal warrior gods” paved the way for the third stage, Christianity and “the philosophical rejection of this world”.¹⁷ While Gimbutas reinterprets the traditional unilinear evolutionary model as devolutionary, it is still a simplistic and linear presentation

¹⁷ For Gimbutas, Western civilization is a degenerate culture on the verge of self-destruction unless it can find its roots in the goddess.

of history. This model no longer has currency in the social sciences because social structures are now understood to be more adaptable and flexible than this model allows. (Townsend 1990, pp. 184-186; Conkey and Tringham 1995, p. 207)

That Gimbutas should focus on “origins” research is not surprising or unusual as historically this has been a major focus of archaeological research. Gimbutas, when describing her early work, stated: “The question of the origins of the Indo-Europeans was always in my mind.” (Marler 1995, p. 43) Gimbutas began her career searching for the origins of the Indo-Europeans and ended it seeking and compiling evidence for an original goddess worshipping matrifocal culture. On the basis of her research, she became convinced that the origins of patriarchy could be traced to the Indo-European invasions of Old Europe, which supplanted the goddess worshipping societies.

“Origins” research has come under criticism from some archaeologists because it tends to gloss over the complexity and diversity of ancient cultures that span thousands of years. The following quotation illustrates the practice of simplistically collapsing thousands of years into a sequential account of the degradation of the Goddess from the Indo-European invasions through to contemporary times:

The degradation of the Goddess in all of her forms, which began during the period of Indo-Europeanization of Old Europe in 4th and 3rd millennia B.C., continued throughout the historical period, with great intensification by the entire array of Hebraic-Christian traditions. In spite of extreme attempts to eradicate her during historic times, especially by the European Inquisition of the Middle Ages in which *virtually every woman of wisdom and influence was burned*, her importance in life and storytelling did not disappear. The Goddess of Death and Regeneration was demonized and degraded into the familiar and highly publicized image of the witch. She came to represent all that was denied and considered evil within this relatively recent mythology of dualism. (Gimbutas 1991, p. 244, emphasis mine)

The italicized section also exemplifies the tendency towards sweeping generalizations with nary a citation to back up such claims. Recent research on the late medieval and early modern witch trials and executions presents a more complex scenario,

as has been discussed in Chapter One. Gimbutas's account sets up male and female as polarised categories, with the stereotypes of the aggressive conquering male in the Indo-Europeanization process and the passive female victim degraded from "Great Goddess" to evil witch. In addition, it is not clear when this dualism entered European culture. She is vague as to its origins.

The presentation of universalized roles for men and women, with the assumption that these represent continuous practices over long periods of time, is another questionable supposition. Similarities are highlighted and differences are either downplayed or ignored. Patriarchy appears as a universal category, a social structure imposed on a matrifocal society, that of Old Europe. There is no recognition in this model that patriarchy can take different forms. Women's biological functions and experiences of motherhood are interpreted as having the same meaning in cultures separated widely in time and spread across large geographic areas. Gimbutas states: "According to the myriad images that have survived from the great span of human prehistory on the Eurasian continents, it was the sovereign mystery and creative power of the female as the source of life that developed into the earliest religious experiences." (Gimbutas 1991, p. 222) Gimbutas maintains that "The primordial deity for our Paleolithic and Neolithic ancestors was female reflecting the sovereignty of motherhood". (Gimbutas 1991, p. x) However, she rejects the term "Mother Goddess":

It is true that there are mother images and protectors of young life, and there was a Mother Earth and a Mother of the Dead, but the rest of the female images cannot be generalized under the term Mother Goddess. The Bird and Snake Goddesses, for example, are not always mothers, nor are other images of regeneration such as the Frog, Fish, or Hedgehog Goddess, who are incarnate of transformative powers. They impersonate Life, Death, and Regeneration; they are more than fertility and motherhood. (Gimbutas 1989a, p. 316)

Whether Gimbutas uses the term “Great Goddess”, which she prefers over “Mother Goddess”, the bottom line is that specific historical contexts are lost and important questions go unasked in the universalizing approach taken in origins research. According to Meskell: “No gender questions are asked: the role and symbolic place of men and women are set and fixed.” (Meskell 1995, p. 84)¹⁸

While the interpretation that Gimbutas presents is one possible way of understanding the data, she presents it as the definitive interpretation, using a style referred to by Conkey and Tringham as “argument by assertion”. (Conkey and Tringham 1995, p. 216) The word “possibly” does preface some of her statements but words and phrases such as “obviously”, “can clearly be seen” and “there is no doubt” are used to introduce many of her claims. Such terms are used to lend authority to her interpretation but they close down discussion. Dialogue is not invited. Yet proponents of goddess mythic history are dismayed when the work of Marija Gimbutas is subjected to criticism, particularly when that critical analysis comes from other feminist scholars. (Christ 1996; Spretnak 1996; Abrahamsen 1997; Christ 1997)

Feminist critics of Gimbutas, such as Conkey, Tringham and Meskell are not, as Carol Christ intimates, supporting the “male power elite”, when they criticize the model of reality presented in goddess mythic history. (Christ 1997, pp. 71-73) These scholars have all made valuable contributions in their own right to gender research in archaeology and anthropology. Rather, they are suggesting that it is more productive to examine prehistoric evidence in context and to explore various possibilities when interpreting the evidence.

¹⁸ This is sometimes framed in terms of the essentialist – social constructionist debate that has taken place amongst feminists in recent years. In their critiques of origins research Conkey and Williams (1991, p. 113) and Conkey and Gero (1991, p. 8), include some discussion of the social constructionist point of view and

They are recommending that researchers take care to avoid using universalized categories of masculine and feminine as defined in modern terms, and be open to different ways that gender may have been understood in the past. It is important to recognize that studying gender roles and relations is a complex undertaking. Feminist anthropologist Pat Caplan has found in her work that “the picture may be disconcerting and untidy, gender relations may well be both asymmetrical and complementary, a culture may feature various and mutually contradicting statements about it.” (Caplan 1988, p. 12) A model of a progressive monoculture that utilizes universalized roles for men and women based on Victorian understandings of “the feminine” and “the masculine”, such as we find in some accounts of goddess mythic history, cannot do justice to this complexity.

There are other approaches that may be productive lines of inquiry. Studies by McCoid and McDermott (1996) and Talalay (1993) provide two examples of imaginatively and creatively exploring various interpretative possibilities. McCoid and McDermott examine Palaeolithic so-called “Venus” figurines and have found that their unusual proportions can be explained by changing the viewing perspective. Using photographs to demonstrate, they illustrate that these figurines capture the perspective of a pregnant woman looking down at her body. This would suggest that women were the artists that produced these figurines and that these figurines are a form of self-representation by women. This does not eliminate the possibility that this self-representation was part of the religious symbolism related to a goddess cult. It does eliminate some of the interpretations of “Venus” figurines put forward in the past, such as fertility objects created by men or

Carol Christ's *Rebirth of the Goddess* (1997, pp. 91-93) raises the problems she has with the “anti-essentialist”, in other words the social construction point of view.

representations of stone-age pornography. (Dobres 1992, pp. 12-15) The next step is to put forward theories as to why women might have produced these figurines.

Talalay's study of Greek Neolithic figurines looks in detail at the figurines in their similarities and differences, breakage patterns, context in which they were found, and includes comparisons between sites. Her analysis suggests patterns of connections or networks between sites. She finds changes in these over time, suggesting breaking of old alliances and establishing of new ones between settlements. In addition, her study concludes that it is unlikely that all figurines recovered on the site had the same function, given the different archaeological contexts in which the figurines were found as well as the differences observed among the figurines themselves.

Gimbutas attempted to construct a theory that would bring together evidence about women and goddess worship in ancient times from archaeological sites across wide geographical areas. Unfortunately, her hypothesis is built on too little data and does not take into account the diversity and complexity of social structures. Her work remains fixed in an outmoded concept of a prehistoric monoculture. Rather than searching for origins, for someone or some event responsible for the subjugation of women, contemporary feminist theorists attempt to understand the multiple possibilities for structuring human societies and the circumstances under which some of them have failed so that we may learn from them.

MARGARET MURRAY'S "WITCH-CULT"

Another important resource for feminist Wiccans is the popular understanding of witches as pagan survivals that comes from Margaret Murray's work. Starhawk is directly familiar with Murray's work, but in many cases contemporary Wiccans are influenced by Murray's theories through Gerald Gardner, particularly his book *Witchcraft Today*

(1954).¹⁹ Gardner's interpretation reached a mass audience and served to popularize the idea that witches were goddess worshippers whose practices had survived from prehistoric times. Murray's own theories have been severely criticized by scholars for a number of years. Despite the fact that Murray's work on witchcraft has been discredited, the feminist Wiccan understanding of goddess mythic history still shows Murray's influence and her work is still cited an information source. (Sjöö and Mor 1987, p. 485-486; Starhawk 1988, p. 230; 1989, p. 268)

Margaret Murray attributed a long history to witchcraft. "There is a continuity of belief and ritual which can be traced from the Palaeolithic period down to modern times." (Murray 1931, p. 13) Contrary to Gerald Gardner, as well as the feminist Wiccan understanding that a "Great Goddess" was the predominant deity, Murray argued that this religion worshiped the "Horned God". She states:

I have traced the worship of the Horned God onwards through the centuries from the Palaeolithic prototypes, and I have shown that the survival of the cult was due to the survival of the races who adored that god, for this belief could not have held its own against the invasions of other peoples and religions unless a stratum of the population were strong enough to keep it alive. (Murray 1931, p. 14)

She believed it was probable that the worship of a female deity was predominant at one time. However, "the male deity appears to have superseded that of the female, and it is only on rare occasions that the God appears in a female form to receive the homage of the worshippers." (Murray 1921, p.13) According to Murray, the legends about fairies and "Little People" refer to these surviving aboriginal races that took to the hills and forests after their lands were conquered. (Murray 1931, pp. 63-64) The worship of the "Horned God" spread to their "Iron Age conquerors" and after the spread of Christianity. Although the ruling class may have been Christian, the majority of the population remained pagan.

¹⁹ See the discussion in Chapter One, pp. 10-11 for a brief discussion of Gardner's influence.

(Murray 1931, pp. 18, 31) The conquering Christians demonized the “Horned God” as the devil.

In *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, Murray argues that this religion incorporated a fertility cult and she gives it the name “Dianic”. She states:

The deity of this cult was incarnate in a man, a woman, or an animal; the animal form being apparently earlier than the human, for the god was often spoken of as wearing the skin or attributes of an animal. At the same time, however, there was another form of the god in the shape of a man with two faces. Such a god is found in Italy (where he was called Janus or Dianus), in Southern France, and in the English Midlands. The feminine form of the name, Diana, 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 I have called this ancient religion the Dianic cult. (Murray 1921, p. 12)

Murray’s introduction of Dianic as a name of the “witch-cult” likely owes something to Charles Leland²⁰ and the use of the name was an influence in creating an association of the goddess Diana with witches. Dianic Wicca is the name of one particular expression of feminist Wicca. (Adler 1986; Rabinovitch 1992; Eller 1993)

Many of these ideas have informed the contemporary construction of goddess mythic history. Feminist Wiccans understand themselves to be part of a tradition that goes back to the Paleolithic and has survived, often underground, into contemporary times.

Starhawk, in *Dreaming the Dark* states:

The Old Religion – call it Witchcraft, Wicca, the Craft, or with a slightly broader definition, Paganism or neo-Paganism – is both old and newly invented. Its roots go back to the pre-Judeo-Christian tribal religions of the West, and it is akin in spirit, form, and practice to Native American and African religions. Its myths and symbols draw from the woman-valuing, matrilineal, Goddess-centered cultures that underlie the beginnings of civilization... Long after city dwellers had converted to Christianity, the Witches were the wise women and cunning men of the country villages. They were the herbalists, the healers, the counselors in times of trouble. Their seasonal celebrations established the bond between individuals, the community as a whole and the land and its resources. (Starhawk 1988, p. xxvi)

Starhawk describes how patriarchal civilization attempted to break that bond and describes

²⁰ For a brief description of Charles Leland’s influence through his book *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899) see Chapter One, pages 10-11.

the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as “one of the major battles in that long war of conquest”. She states: “The Craft survived, however – secretly, underground, in small groups called covens whose members were related by blood or deep trust.” (Starhawk 1984, p. 313; 1988, p. xxvii)

Starhawk’s claim in *Spiral Dance* that the Fairies are the pagans living on the boundaries of society and her description of the Christianizing process as gradual with a substantial pagan population existing among the peasant classes are ideas that come directly from Murray. (Starhawk 1989, pp. 18, 19) She credits Murray in her discussion of the “Horned God” in this same work. (Starhawk 1989, p. 109) Starhawk has somewhat modified Murray’s version of the history of European witchcraft. In her most recent book, *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying*, she states:

Goddess traditions today do not claim an unbroken lineage going back to the Stone Age. Rather, we say that the same symbols that moved people then speak to us today, that the same cycle of birth, growth, and death honored in Old Europe and among indigenous cultures worldwide can inspire us today to create, to change, to face life’s powerful moments of challenge and transformation, and at the end of life, to accept and honor death. (Starhawk 1997, p. 10)

This statement illustrates a continuing belief in the psychic unity of humanity but Starhawk appears to be qualifying Murray’s theory, which had a very noticeable influence on her work in *Spiral Dance* and *Dreaming the Dark*. Despite this qualification, Murray’s influence, integrated with Gimbutas’ theory, still underlies Starhawk’s understanding of history in her most recent work where she continues to assert that the ways of Old Europe “lingered on as folktales and customs, traditions of healing and magic, the domain of the Witches”. She presents the witch hunts as “a persecution directed at traditional healers and all the remnants of the Old Religion”. She also asserts that during the witch hunts and

continuing into the twentieth century “the Old Religion was forced into a period of secrecy”. (Starhawk 1997, p. 11) All of these ideas come from Margaret Murray.

While Budapest does not use references and does not include Murray in her list of recommended reading, Murray’s influence is apparent although it may be indirect, coming from what Starhawk refers to as “craft oral tradition”. Budapest’s use of the term “Dianic”²¹, her understanding of the “Old Religion” having ancient roots back to the Paleolithic period and surviving by going underground, as well as the notion that witches are the European shamans²², an idea also put forward by Starhawk, all show Murray’s influence.

The influence of Margaret Murray’s theories, whether direct or indirect, have shaped feminist Wiccan understandings of goddess mythic history, and a brief examination of her methodology is thus in order. There have been numerous scholarly evaluations dating back to 1922, just after the publication of her first book on European witches. My account is indebted to the survey by folklorist Jacqueline Simpson, as she attempted to grapple with the continuing popular appeal of Murray’s ideas, which Simpson believes have been detrimental to the reputation of folklorists in academic circles. Simpson

²¹ Budapest states that she finds “traces of Dianic tradition” in “many modern customs such as archery, sports, games, weaving and witchcraft”. (Budapest 1989b, p. 56) Unfortunately, Budapest is not specific about what aspects of these “customs” demonstrate “traces of Dianic tradition”. In her discussion of European paganism, Budapest describes the following cultural survivals from ancient times: “The only relic we have from those times is our Goddess embroidery, worn by brides at country weddings and folk dances, often ending up in the National Folk Ensembles. Take a look at visiting folk dance groups from Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Russia or Yugoslavia. You will see how the principles of the Old Nature Religion are acted out in sacred dances, which survived centuries of persecution. The four corners of the universe, the four elements and the center are very clearly danced in these performances. Women perform the dances of puberty rites, blessing the brides and the mothers. Both sexes dance out the divine wedding in an ecstasy of women’s whirling red skirts, and the black pants and white shirts of the men.” (Budapest 1989b, p. 240)

²² T. M. Luhrmann states that Murray compared witches to shamans. (Luhrmann 1989, p. 43) I can’t find any direct statement where Murray uses the word “shaman” and Luhrmann does not give page numbers to reference this claim. However, assuming that this notion originated with Murray, comparing witches to shamans is not the same as stating that witches were the European shamans as both Starhawk and Budapest have done.

criticizes Murray's attempt to find rational, material explanations for any aspects of the witch trials that involved magic. Such explanations often "stretched credulity". Simpson demonstrates that Murray's method is antithetical to that of contemporary folklorists and social historians, who would analyze these aspects of the witch's trial by "examining them in terms of recurrent and socially conditioned fears, beliefs and story and patterns".

(Simpson 1994, p. 90) However, much more problematic is Murray's use of source materials. Simpson states: "Murray is far more to blame for the extreme selectivity with which she cited from her sources, producing a cumulative distortion which she unscrupulously exploited." (Simpson 1994, p. 91)

A number of issues arise when Murray's use of her source material is examined. Murray's use of records from European witch trials to create a picture of "a rigidly codified and uniform system throughout Britain and Europe" is problematic. Information was selectively chosen to fit her theory; namely that "witches were keeping alive an ancient religion concerned with fertility, a notion which fitted current assumptions in the 1920's."²³ (Simpson 1994, p. 92) Current historical research on the European witch hunts indicates variation from one region to the next. While commonalities can be found, proposing a uniform system and universal culture oversimplifies a much more complex reality, as has been discussed in the critique of Gimbutas's methodology. Murray also juxtaposes information taken from a great many periods and cultures and makes claims that it all provides evidence for the same "Horned God". She utilizes archaeological findings, folklore and accounts from witch trials to demonstrate a cultural survival – that witches

²³ Murray was influenced by James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which presented "primitive" religions as primarily concerned with fertility.

were carrying on the ancient fertility cult practices of pagan Europe.²⁴ Again we have an example of scholarship based on nineteenth century anthropological theory.²⁵

Given the problems with her work, the question arises: why has Murray had such an influence? A major contribution to her success was her article on witchcraft that appeared in *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1929 and continued in subsequent editions up to 1969. This gave her theories an extensive audience and established her as an authority for the general public. In addition, Gardner's version of her theories regarding witchcraft has made them general currency in the Wiccan movement.

Anne Barstow comes somewhat to Murray's defense. She criticizes Murray for "forcing her evidence too far". However, Barstow states: "Her attention to *what people were doing*, to folk ritual and belief was on the right track." Barstow believes there is "evidence for ancient 'folk religious' practices throughout the western witchcraft material". (Barstow 1994, p. 83) Barstow's comment again raises the "spectre" of cultural survivals. The amount of reliability that can be placed on the western witchcraft material as a source for actual religious practice is a highly contentious issue, which I will not attempt to deal with in this context. Most scholars reject such an interpretation. Whether or not western witchcraft material can provide insights into "folk religious" practices, Murray's problematic methodology and her sweeping generalizations cannot be justified in terms of "her attention to what people were doing".

²⁴ See *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* pp. 17, 231, 238 and *God of the Witches* pp. 37, 43 for some examples of this methodology.

²⁵ This is not surprising given the date of her writing. However, those who use her work as a resource should take it into consideration.

MYTH AND HISTORY:

THE CRITIQUE FROM CLASSICS AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Feminist Wiccans and other spiritual feminists examine ancient mythology for evidence of cultural survivals from the earliest goddess worshipping societies. Greek and Near Eastern mythologies in particular have been scrutinized for traces of original matrifocal cultures, although increasing attention is being paid to African, Asian, and Native American goddess myths. Carol Christ states:

The more I become familiar with the Goddesses of Greece and Crete, the more I recognize that extremely complex histories must be unraveled before they can be understood. Layers upon layer of prejudice that is only partly conscious shroud the history of the Goddesses. These prejudices are philosophical, religious, social, and political. They are deeply and emotionally held even by scholars who claim to be objective. The nature of these prejudices must be understood and challenged if we are to understand how the earliest Goddesses survived and were transformed in the written records of patriarchal myth. Then we must painstakingly sift and reevaluate the information that has come to us through patriarchal sources, searching for pieces of a story that has been hidden from us. (Christ 1997, p. 44)

The attempt to use mythology as source material for reconstructing history is a complex project with a doubtful outcome. Even where there is agreement that a historical event underlies a particular myth, the separation of the element of fantasy from the historical element is a formidable task. According to Sue Blundell, "Myths are traditional narratives in which the many-layered significance of human situations is explored through the application of fantasy." (Blundell 1995, p. 14). She goes on to point out that:

The notion that myths are invented, and that they involve fantasy, does not necessarily imply that there is no grain of historical truth in them. Some of the human beings named may really have lived, some of the events recounted may actually have taken place, and the background to the story – the social customs, the places, and the objects mentioned – may have some basis in reality. But all of this is overlain with a strongly fictional element. Moreover, the versions of Greek myths which we possess were generally composed several centuries, in some cases several millennia, after the events which they purport to describe. It follows that to use myth as a source of information about historical events and societies is a rather dangerous exercise. (Blundell 1995, p. 15)

Although Blundell is discussing this in terms of historical societies, it seems to me that it is equally, if not more problematic to attempt to use mythological sources as a means of

providing evidence of structures in societies that go back even further in time than classical Greece. Here again Blundell's cautions are applicable. She points out that Greek myths have come down largely from educated male members of the upper class in Greece. In addition, "myths went through a constant process of adaptation"; thus there is "no definitive version of any one Greek myth". This would suggest that attempting to find an original matrix of a myth to provide evidence for the existence of matrifocal cultures is a doubtful procedure.

Helen Foley's analysis of the Demeter and Persephone myth demonstrates the "pitfalls" that may be encountered in attempting to identify prepatriarchal elements in myths. Foley uses the myth of Demeter and Persephone, a popular myth among Goddess celebrants, to illustrate that what is often presented as evidence for an ancient goddess centered culture may actually be a more recent strand of the myth. When early versions of the myth are compared to the widely known Homeric Hymn to Demeter, it is apparent, in Foley's view, that Demeter moves from a goddess "whose cult existed at the margins of civic spaces and who played an unimportant role in mainstream epic poetry to one who became central to civic worship". Foley states:

It may not be historically the case, as the spiritual feminists' claim, that with Demeter and Persephone patriarchy suppressed the worship of powerful pre-historic goddesses, but that patriarchy increased their powers precisely to support its evolving cultural agenda. I do not mean to deny the antiquity of Demeter's cult or its significant association with women. Yet rather than preserving the relics of a pre-Olympian past, it is entirely possible that this myth transforms or interprets a particular set of "original" powers of Demeter that are imagined to be relatively free from patriarchal influence precisely so that they can be replaced by honors and powers that appear considerably more significant even while they simultaneously involve the incorporation of the goddesses into the patriarchal system. (Foley 1994, p. 209)

Foley analyzes the way in which Greek tragedy and mythology were used to maintain the status quo, as the above example illustrates. Thus Foley suggests that recovering ancient goddess religion using ancient Greek sources is more complex than the process of

identifying the pre-patriarchal elements of myth. She believes that spiritual feminists also need to analyze the implications for women in the similarity between the modern project that centers new religious forms around ancient goddesses and the practice in ancient tragedy of introducing new cult practices for women through the words of goddesses or legendary women.

In the minds of fifth-century tragic poets, then, the promise of worship and participation in cult becomes a kind of compensation (like the modern goddess cults) to women for the damage and exclusion inflicted on them by a culture dominated by men or offers them an alternative status in the religious sphere that they cannot achieve in a strictly secular context. It should be recalled here that in reality too the citizen women of Athens were allowed important roles in cult, both as priestesses and as participants in familial, local, and civic rituals, even while they were excluded from the rest of the public political and social life of the city. Nevertheless, to the degree that religion served as an alternate space in which women could find honor and an identity denied to them elsewhere, it also reinforced the continuity of the rest of the social structure that excluded them. (Foley 1994, p. 203)

Foley acknowledges that the contemporary and the ancient projects are not completely analogous. Modern goddess celebrants intend to challenge patriarchal structures through women creating religious space for themselves, while ancient Greek cults for women involved citizen men relegating women to a “largely private religious sphere” in the interests of patriarchy. However, she points out that both ancient tragedies, which serve patriarchal interests, and modern goddess spirituality, which aims to challenge patriarchal interests, place an emphasis “on inventing rites and myths to celebrate the stages of the female life cycle, on the celebration of female fertility, and on the honor that should be accorded women in their role as mothers.” (Foley 1994, p. 204) The fact that a similar approach is taken, both in support of patriarchy and in challenging patriarchy, needs to be analyzed. The risk, as Foley sees it, is that of “reinforcing these women’s (spiritual feminists) exclusion from the culture as a whole, and reinstating the association between women, nature, the supernatural, and private life that has helped to shut them out from cultural authority in the broadest sense up to this time.” (Foley 1994, p. 204) If this is the

case, feminist Wiccans and other goddess celebrants need to take a long, hard look at the direction in which they are heading. I suspect full participation in the dominant culture as it now stands, is not a goal of many participants in goddess centered spirituality. They are concerned with presenting a vision of a different type of society based on their reconstruction of ancient goddess mythic history. While this vision based on valuing women and centered on an ethic of care has an appeal for many women, Foley is suggesting that there is a risk of reinforcing the limitations and restrictions traditionally placed upon women rather than extricating women from them. By emphasizing an alternate spiritual space for women, care must be taken not to become isolated from political and social issues.

It is this isolation from political and social issues that forms the main thrust of Rosemary Ruether's critique of goddess mythic history. Ruether is concerned that this model does not adequately deal with sources of oppression. Her criticism is a valid one. While proponents of the goddess mythic history model identify patriarchy as the source of oppression, they are dealing with oppression in very broad, sweeping terms. Ruether finds the proposal that there existed an ancient matrifocal goddess centered society unconvincing historically. Even if such a society had existed, she is not persuaded that a return to the worship of the goddess as presented in this scenario has a practical application for eradicating the roots of oppression. Ruether describes Goddess mythic history as more mythic than historical.²⁶ She identifies this as a narrative that ignores the complexities of ancient societies, and as such, it fails as history. However, as myth it has "truths" to impart

²⁶ Judy Harrow's response to this criticism is to point out that the biblical passages that Ruether finds inspirational have no better archaeological evidence behind them than Gimbutas's theories. She states: "If Christians and Jews can use dubious history as empowering myth, so can the rest of us." (Harrow 1996, p. 15)

that relate to the contemporary concerns of the feminist spirituality movement. Rather than the timeless “truths” in Eliade’s understanding of myth, Ruether suggests that these images from the distant past have caught the imagination of twentieth century women and have been woven into a contemporary myth. Unfortunately, it is a narrative that has absorbed certain traits from the nineteenth century sources it draws upon and these need to be identified. The problems of using a model assuming a prehistoric monoculture have already been discussed. In addition, certain characteristics are labelled as feminine and as such are valued and privileged in goddess mythic history. These characteristics remain a romantic myth where women fit the traditional nineteenth century understanding of femininity, which is then projected back into antiquity. Ruether states:

One major problem with it is its post-Christian Romantic construction of the “feminine” as essentially and unchangingly nurturant, benign, and peaceful, promoting mutuality and partnership. However good such values may seem for us today, to project them on an ancient Neolithic people and to presume that these must have been their values and their understanding of both “women” and “nature”, on the grounds that they had a “goddess-dominated” culture and society is very questionable. (Ruether 1992, pp. 151-152)

This understanding of women sets up the same associations that have been problematic historically for women. Privileging associations of women with nature, body, and nurturing does nothing to eliminate body mind dualism, nor does it encourage men to be partners in the preservation and restoration of the environment and in issues of social justice. Ruether suggests that what is needed is for both men and women to value nature. Ruether concludes: “I do not believe there is a ready made feminist ecological culture that can be resurrected in ancient pasts that might help midwife new futures. We also need to mine our Greek, Hebrew, and Christian heritages, as well as modern emancipatory traditions for useable insights.” (Ruether 1997, p. 41)

Ruether contends that, contrary to the aspirations of some feminist Wiccans, conditions in the late twentieth century make a return to “a Neolithic matricentric village as a basis for gender parity” unrealistic. In this statement Ruether is generalizing as to the intent of feminist Wiccans and other Goddess celebrants. Both Starhawk and Carol Christ are well aware that a return to a Neolithic matrifocal culture is not possible. However, it is fair to say that specific suggestions as to how the positive traits of matrifocal culture could be adapted to current conditions are lacking in their works. Christ acknowledges that ancient prepatriarchal society can’t be recreated because “the world in which we live has a much larger population and greater technological complexity than the worlds of tribal and clan-based societies.” (Christ 1997, p.164)

Although some accounts of goddess mythic history are more nuanced than others, Ruether suggests that a major omission is the lack of analysis of “the weaknesses of the matricentric core of human society that made it vulnerable to patriarchy”. (Ruether 1992, p. 171) If feminists are to grapple with the dynamics underlying the development of the various patriarchal and hierarchical structures found worldwide, and propose viable alternatives, such analyses are vital to their critique. Ruether identifies a major weakness in the matrifocal model in that it does not recognize “the problems for male adult identity when the male remains only ‘the son of the Great Mother’, and a responsible adult male is absent.” (Ruether 1992, p. 171) In the contemporary enacting of this model, Ruether has observed that, while the men participating in contemporary goddess religion as sons of the Great Goddess “cannot be dominators but also cannot be adult peers of women”. (Ruether 1997, p. 38) This is problematic if both women and men are to be true partners in society. To work towards the restructuring of society based on a model of a matrifocal organization

(assuming that this is possible) without addressing the weaknesses of this type of organization invites failure. Ruether believes that proponents of goddess mythic history need to acknowledge that this is a contemporary rather than ancient creation and that much more valuable insights could arise from analyzing the current appeal of the ancient representations whether they are women or goddesses.

Ruether points to a future direction for research into goddess history. As we have seen in this chapter, scholars from several disciplines have brought forward criticisms including the lack supporting evidence for this version of history, the questionable use of mythology for reconstructing goddess history, and the use of outmoded nineteenth century evolutionary and cultural models that ignore the complexities of human relations and social structures. The response of feminist Wiccans to the wide ranging, broadly based academic criticism of their understanding of goddess history has been to either ignore the criticism or to point out the biases of academics. The validity of some of the criticism is acknowledged to a point, but for the most part, they hold onto their vision of ancient history. Thus, there would seem to be a stalemate between those calling for a critical approach to goddess history and those holding fast to the unquestioned existence of ancient matrifocal cultures. The conclusion of this thesis will turn to the issue of the impasse that has been reached in this debate.

CONCLUSION

Most of all, we need to make a leap of the imagination that can let us envision how the world could be. Starhawk. *Truth or Dare*.¹

The intent of this chapter is to suggest a way to move forward from the ongoing argument centered on the authenticity of goddess history. Despite the onslaught of evidence to the contrary, proponents of goddess mythic history are still concerned about proving the existence of the “mother times”. This has resulted in a debate mired in claims and counter claims, unable to be resolved because the evidence does not lend itself to a definitive conclusion. Rather than continue in this vein, goddess mythic history can be appreciated as a modern creation, which functions as a foundational myth for feminist Wiccans. This is not to support uncritical acceptance of goddess history as it is currently presented. If goddess mythic history is to have the potential to disrupt the patriarchal mythos, its shortcomings must be acknowledged and addressed. The previous discussion has highlighted several criticisms of goddess mythic history that need to be addressed if feminist Wiccans are to live up to their claim of presenting a vision of a new world, a new way of being for women. As a suggestion for accomplishing this change in focus, I will look to Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and his dialectic between imagination and critical reason. I will suggest that Ricoeur’s work might offer an approach for feminist Wiccans and others to value goddess mythic history as a contemporary creation, as part of an imaginative “world-making” project. Ricoeur’s work also provides a framework for discussing the positive as well as the negative functions of goddess mythic history as ideology and utopian vision for feminist Wiccans.

¹ From “Resistance and Renewal”, p. 312.

Imagination plays an important role in the religious lives of feminist Wiccans through the use of magic and the creation of new stories and rituals that speak to the experiences of women. Starhawk describes witchcraft as “a religion of poetry”. (Starhawk 1989, p. 22) As we have seen in previous chapters, feminist Wiccans draw from many different sources to recreate goddess history in the image of a golden age to meet the needs of contemporary women. The use of imagination generated by intuition and inspiration from feelings aroused by ancient artefacts and geographic sites is legitimated as a method for reconstructing goddess mythic history. The following statement by Starhawk demonstrates that understanding:

We like to tell ourselves that there once was a time when we were free, that power-over is a human invention, not an imperative of nature. In our dreams, in our deepest minds, sleeps a memory that stirs in the presence of certain ancient things. From the earliest times, the mother-times, no texts have come down to us, no writing, no records of laws or lineage or events, only objects that wake in us some intuitive sense of what was. When we hold in our hands a reproduction of a heavy-hipped Paleolithic Venus, when we see the solid thighs and bountiful breasts of the Anatolian mother enthroned between lions, we feel a sense of power in our bodies, in curve and swelling. When we contemplate the beaked bird-pots of Old-Europe, painted with breasts and wings, we sense some deep connection between nurturing and flight. (Starhawk 1987, p. 32)

Feminist Wiccans share with other contemporary Pagans the practice of privileging intuition and bodily knowing and connection. Graham Harvey states: “Alongside experience Pagans value intuition. An interpretation of an ancient site or artefact, a way of speaking to or about a deity may be said to ‘feel right’”. (Harvey 1997, p. 188) Thus, according to this mode, if it feels right, it is immaterial whether any textual historical evidence either disputes or corroborates the interpretation. If a site feels ancient and holy, then it is an ancient and holy Pagan site. Budapest provides one of the more extreme examples of this method:

In the time of the Matriarchies, the craft of women was common knowledge. It was rich in information on how to live on this planet, on how to love and fight and stay healthy, and especially, on how to learn to learn. The remnants of that knowledge constitute the body of

what we call “witchcraft” today. The massive remainder of that knowledge is buried within ourselves, in our deep minds, in our genes. *In order to reclaim it, we have to open ourselves to psychic experiences in the safety of feminist witch covens.* (Budapest 1989b, p. 4 emphasis mine)

Budapest’s use of psychic experiences constitutes a way of knowing that many feminist Wiccans consider equally valid to knowledge that comes from academic studies and historical accounts. Herein lies a basic conflict between what constitutes evidence for feminist Wiccans and other Pagans versus academics. Traditional academic scholarship would not view an intuitive sense, a feeling of “the awakening of a deep memory”, or information gleaned from psychic experiences to constitute definitive evidence for a particular understanding of history. For feminist Wiccans, intuition and feeling are not just invoked in lieu of other information, but are often privileged over other types of evidence, including texts. This explains in part why proponents of goddess history ignore what constitutes strong arguments for scholars against the verity of the ancient matrifocal goddess worshipping cultures as historical.

Feminist Wiccans hold inconsistent positions on the historicity of ancient matrifocal cultures. Many goddess celebrants, Starhawk included, claim the “inner” or “psychological” aspects of this narrative is most important, while at the same time searching for evidence of an actual historic basis for goddess history. Starhawk states, “the myths, legends and teachings are recognized as metaphors for “That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told”, the absolute reality our limited minds can never completely know.”(Starhawk 1989, p. 22) Yet, as we have seen, she has expended a lot of energy in trying to verify this version of history. This is also exemplified in Carol Christ’s presentation of goddess history.²

² Christ’s refers to goddess history as the Goddess Hypothesis in her most recent book *Rebirth of the Goddess*, while at the same time entitling the chapter “The History of the Goddess”.

Christ's much read and quoted essay "Why Women Need the Goddess" (first published in 1978) emphasized the importance politically and psychologically of the Goddess as a symbol for contemporary women. She states:

The sources for the symbol of the Goddess in contemporary spirituality are traditions of Goddess worship and modern women's experiences. Traditions of Goddesses' subordination to Gods, for example, are ignored. Ancient traditions are tapped selectively and eclectically, but they are not considered authoritative for modern consciousness. The Goddess symbol has emerged spontaneously in the dreams, fantasies, and thoughts of many women in the past several years. (Christ 1987, p. 120)

However, *Laughter of Aphrodite* (1987), in which the above essay was reprinted, also contains an essay entitled "Reclaiming Goddess History". In this article Christ states:

My experience of the power of Goddess symbolism and ritual has led me to question the view that Goddesses always and everywhere support male power. I have not been satisfied to set history aside, to say that the past does not matter. Therefore I have chosen to search the historical and prehistorical record for clues to times and places when religions were, to quote Anne Barstow, "created at least in part by women", and reflected female power. (Christ 1987, p. 161)

Her latest book, *Rebirth of the Goddess* (1997), has an extensive discussion on goddess history. Christ still holds onto and expands upon her views about what the Goddess means for women and she continues to attempt to ground it history. She maintains that goddess history is a plausible account of ancient history.

Starhawk and Christ both exemplify the contradictory nature of feminist Wiccan and other goddess celebrants' positions regarding goddess mythic history. The "inner" truth is said to be more important than its historical verifiability, and yet claims for an actual historical grounding for ancient matrifocal goddess worshipping cultures are held tenaciously despite evidence to the contrary.

In attempting to understand the contradictory positions and the intransigence of proponents of goddess mythic history on the subject of its historicity, it is helpful to begin with one of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic circles, utilizing the concepts of the first and

second *naïveté*. Feminist Wiccan understandings of goddesses and the history of the societies that worshipped them are often at the level of what Ricoeur refers to as the first *naïveté*, where myth is taken at “face value” without a critical perspective. Starhawk’s discussion at the end of *Truth or Dare* provides an example of taking goddess mythic history at face value. She describes a time when all people “knew and honored” the Goddess and lived in balance on the earth. “Women were free and men too, for we had not yet learned how to oppress each other”. (Starhawk 1987, p. 310) Starhawk is presenting here what appears in numerous books that offer similar synopses of prehistory. She does not question the existence of such a culture or how oppression began in the first place if “all people” were living in this blissful state.

A position in the first *naïveté* does not critically assess the myth or the underlying implications of living it out. What is the result of ignoring the complexities of human beings and opting for an original state of purity that has somehow been corrupted? The myth, rather than history, is accepted as self-evident. In contrast, Ricoeur states:

We are no longer primitive beings, living at the immediate level of myth. Myth for us is always mediated and opaque. This is not only because it expresses itself primarily through a particular apportioning of power-functions... but also several of its recurrent forms have become deviant and dangerous, e.g., the myth of absolute power (fascism) and the myth of the sacrificial scapegoat (anti-Semitism and racism). We are no longer justified in speaking of ‘myth in general’. We must critically assess the content of each myth and the basic intentions which animate it. Modern man can neither get rid of myth nor take it at its face value. Myth will always be with us, but we must always approach it *critically*. (Ricoeur 1991, p. 485)

Ricoeur’s statement suggests the importance of recognizing the practical implications of paradigmatic myths. As discussed in Chapter Three, goddess mythic history is based upon an androcentric model of prehistory that devalued women. Women were associated with nature, body and emotion with the intent to demonstrate the superiority of patriarchal systems of organization. To accept this myth at face value without assessing this original

intent runs the risk that these associations will continue to be used as arguments justifying the limiting of women's full participation in society. Thus, the second point on the hermeneutic circle involves the application of a hermeneutics of suspicion, in this case by critically examining the presuppositions underlying goddess mythic history. Using critical reason beliefs can be evaluated and a new level of understanding can be achieved. This transformative dimension, Ricoeur's second *naïveté*, forms the third part of the hermeneutic circle. It may result either in the rejection of a position or opting to maintain a belief system but at a new level of awareness capable of being translated into action in the world.

Critical analysis has been a weak point in presentations of goddess mythic history. The paucity of critical analysis has resulted in a circular process where feminist Wiccans and other Pagans refer to each other's work in a closed system, mutually reinforcing each other's beliefs. Ronald Hutton states:

It may be observed that the 'earth mysteries', the 'Celtic mysteries' and Wicca have during the past twenty years all become movements which build, like medieval scholasticism, upon closed systems of belief. Up to about the 1970s the bibliographies appended to their books contained works by 'establishment' scholars as well as by people of their own persuasion. After then, all have tended to read only one another and to write only for one another. All have almost totally ignored the tremendous outpouring of new academic publications relevant to their interests... This did not appear to be a conscious process of censorship so much as a genuine loss of contact with thought worlds other than their own. (Hutton 1993, p. 340)

In addition, challenges to the authenticity of goddess history have resulted in denials and the entrenchment of positions rather than a careful reappraisal of the evidence or lack thereof.³ Hutton points out that, particularly in North America, some Pagans have begun to question the antiquity of their sources. This trend can be seen in Starhawk's work. She does not remain entirely in the state of first *naïveté*. She has done some evaluation of what

³ One of the inherent difficulties lies in the establishment of what constitutes valid criteria for evidence.

she calls “craft oral tradition”. For example, she moves from an unquestioning acceptance of Margaret Murray’s theories in her first book, *Spiral Dance*, to a position in her latest book, *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying*, where she no longer holds as literal fact that an unbroken lineage of witches has existed from the Palaeolithic period. However, she still presents witches as the ones who preserved “the old ways”, i.e. paganism, in secret through centuries of persecution and holds onto most of her earlier understandings of goddess history.

Most feminist Wiccans do not seem to be questioning the basic outline of their presentation of history. In addition to Carol Christ’s analysis of history in *Rebirth of the Goddess*, Charlene Spretnak’s re-issue of *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality* (1994) also holds firmly to ancient history as presented by Marija Gimbutas. Spretnak has removed the debate about the historicity of Neolithic matrifocal cultures in this new edition of *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*.⁴ As far as she is concerned, the debate is closed:

The archaeological record of Neolithic European settlements with egalitarian (between female and male) burial patterns, no caches of weapons, no fortifications, and abundant matrifocal art is well established among European archaeologists. Moreover, the pioneering work of the late Marija Gimbutas regarding the patterns and timing of migrations from the Eurasian steppes into southeastern Europe during the Neolithic era has found parallel verification in current historical gene-mapping projects. (Spretnak 1994, p. xx)

Ricoeur’s work values both imagination and critical reason and suggests that they can be in conversation with, rather than in opposition to, each other. Ricoeur describes imagination as “the free play of possibilities in a state of noninvolvement with respect to the world of perception or of action. It is in this state of noninvolvement that we try out new ideas, new values, new ways of being in the world.” (Ricoeur 1991, p. 174) This is the

⁴ The 1982 edition contained an appendix entitled “Are Goddesses and Matriarchies Merely Figments of Feminist Imagination?” Sally Binford argued against the historicity of ancient matriarchies and Merlin Stone and Charlene Spretnak presented arguments in favor of their existence.

positive side of the feminist Wiccan approach to goddess history. Diane Purkiss suggests:

Most of all, modern witches offer a new way to see history from below, history as a space that can be colonised and occupied by people who are not part of academic institutions. Because they are not constrained to interpret the witch according to the rules of evidence, modern witches have recovered the early modern possibility of appropriating her in order to tell stories about their own identities and about power and its operations. (Purkiss 1996, p. 52)

However, without the application of critical reason to direct and check this process it takes flight into a realm of fantasy. Purkiss points out that “modern witchcraft can be solipsistic, mired in a self-centred present, and far too willing to ignore inconvenient truths.” (Purkiss 1996, p. 53) Ignoring unpleasant or inconvenient truths does not seem particularly helpful for generating and enacting “world-making” projects. Through a dialectical process, imagination and critical reason can open up new ways of being in the world that moves beyond fantasy, and have the potential to be acted upon. Ricoeur suggests that fiction has a “heuristic force”, which he describes as a “capacity to open up and unfold new dimensions of reality by means of our suspension of belief in an earlier description.” (Ricoeur 1991, p. 175) Starhawk utilizes this capability of fiction in her combination of fiction and historical analysis in *Truth or Dare*. As was discussed in Chapter Two, her fictional accounts introduce each section of her historical discussion and serve to draw the participating reader into a visceral response to the material, allowing new worlds “to open and unfold”.

This is an effective technique but if this vision remains in the first *naïveté*, it remains fantasy rather than a possibility. Presenting the complexities and ambiguities help to ground the vision in reality, increasing the feasibility of enacting it in the world. For example, Starhawk’s “Mother Times” narrative in *Truth or Dare*, presents a romanticized scenario of a mother giving birth. The vision of a community of women chanting and supporting a laboring mother, complete with the shamanic journeying of the community’s

priestess is an ideal with great emotional appeal, particularly for women who have given birth in sterile and dehumanizing hospital settings. However, when this narrative is examined critically, it is apparent that it cannot provide a model for suggesting new possibilities for women giving birth unless the complexities of childbirth are taken into account. The scene portrays an ideal birth, neglecting the common place of complications in childbirth, which prior to modern medical care could result in the death of the mother, the infant or both. To make this vision feasible for contemporary women, a balance could be sought between a loving, sacred place where the laboring mother is in community with other women who assist with the birth and facilities where emergency assistance can be provided. Visions need practical reason in combination with imagination if they are to be brought into the realm of the concrete. Bernard Lategan, in his discussion of Ricoeur's theory of the imagination, states: "The move to the poetic and to fiction is an essential *detour* to gain a new entrance to reality and therefore must lead us *back* to reality if it is to be successful." (Lategan 1996, p. 218)

I believe that Goddess celebrants cling to goddess mythic history as ancient history in part because it is foundational to the ideology which holds this diverse group together. It sets feminist Wiccans and certain spiritual feminists apart by providing a counter ideology to the dominant patriarchal one of contemporary western society. Goddess mythic history provides a symbolic system that allows feminist Wiccans to interpret the conflicts they experience as rising out of the patriarchal order. Starhawk states:

Male domination, racism, economic exploitation, war, centralized control, heterosexism, religious persecution, human dominance over nature and animals, all drive the machine that is taking us somewhere nobody wants. To change direction, or better, to dismantle the machine altogether, we must recognize that the system does not just act upon us – it shapes us and acts within us. Patriarchy has created us in its image. (Starhawk 1987, p. 67)

Ricoeur describes an ideology as the image that a group creates of itself. In its positive function “ideology is the framework that recognizes the symbolic structures of life”. (Ricoeur 1986, p. 8) It creates a bond between members of a community, society or nation and serves to preserve social structures. Ideology’s positive functions exist in tension with its negative aspects. According to Ricoeur:

The emerging pathology of the phenomena of ideology comes from its very function of reinforcing and repeating the social tie in situations that are after-the-fact. Simplification, schematization, stereotyping, and ritualization arise out of a distance that never ceases to grow between real practice and the interpretations through which the group becomes conscious of its existence and its practice. (Ricoeur 1991, p. 182)

Goddess mythic history performs a positive function by undergirding the ideology that creates a unity among goddess celebrants. However, in its negative aspect, goddess mythic history has become entrenched and reified. It functions to maintain the status quo in feminist Wiccan groups. Those who critique its historicity are accused of being co-opted by patriarchal ideology and are relegated to the status of outsiders.⁵

Ricoeur suggests that the specific identity of a culture is situated in a “hidden nucleus” that he refers to as “the imaginary nucleus” or the “foundational mytho-poetic nucleus”. Starhawk and other goddess celebrants recognize patriarchal mythology as forming the “foundational mytho-poetic nucleus” of western culture, although Starhawk does not articulate it in those terms. Starhawk is cognisant that transcendent divinities described in male terms and mythologies based on heroism and war are connected to, and supportive of, male dominance and the presence of hierarchical structures in society. Thus, while she asserts that the divine power that permeates the cosmos is not gendered, she

⁵ Janet McCrickard, a former participant in goddess spirituality, found when she questioned key beliefs that: “This skepticism was constantly treated as spiritual impurity and interpreted as an attack upon or betrayal of my sister feminists.” (McCrickard 1991, p. 65)

believes celebrating the Goddess is important in the light of the current need in our culture to value women, physical bodies and the natural environment. Starhawk states:

We of the Reclaiming tradition honor many Gods, many male images of deity. But our emphasis is on the imagery of the female, the life-bearer, because we value life itself as the domain of the sacred. We do not elevate spirit above matter, we hold that spirit is immanent in matter, in the physical world... We also feel that at this time in history an emphasis on the female is necessary to counterbalance millennia of male domination in the spiritual as well as the material realm. (Starhawk 1997, p. 8)

I would argue that it is not necessary to lay claim to an ancient goddess worshipping past to render effective divine female imagery. Spiritual feminists cling to the notion that the existence in the past of women centered, goddess worshipping societies is crucial to the claim that such societies can exist in the future. Christ states: "Still, knowledge that there was a time when human beings lived in peace with each other and the web of life suggests the possibility that we could do so again." (Christ 1997, p. 165) Starhawk claims: "Knowing that such societies are possible, we need not accept warfare and domination as inevitable. To identify with the Goddess is to consciously choose cooperation over domination, peace over war, freedom over systems of control." (Starhawk 1997, p. 10) But perhaps such a claim need not be based on actual historical evidence, but rather on a utopian vision. Ricoeur's analysis of the social imagination presents ideology and utopian vision in a creative tension, when both are functioning positively in society. While ideology creates social bonds and preserves social order, utopias question the status quo, disrupt the settled patterns and assumptions of society by putting forward a vision of a new order. Ricoeur states:

This crisscrossing of utopia and ideology is the result of two fundamental directions of the social imaginary. The first moves toward integration, repetition, and reflection. The second, because it is excentric tends toward wandering. But you cannot have the one without the other. The most repetitive, the most reduplicative ideology, insofar as it mediates the immediate social bond... produces a gap, a distance, consequently, something potentially excentric. On the other hand, the most erratic form of utopia, insofar as it moves 'within a sphere directed toward the

human', remains a desperate effort to show the fundamental nature of man in the clarity of utopia. (Ricoeur 1991, p. 186)

All of Starhawk's work contains her vision for the future, a vision that is common to feminist Wiccans and many other Goddess celebrants – a future where women and men share power (or for some feminist Wiccans where women form their own communities without men), where women's bodies and procreative powers are respected, where all matter is understood as sacred and interconnected. There is also a soteriological dimension to her vision. To save ourselves and the planet from self-destructing we need to acknowledge and experience the interconnection of all matter and all beings in the cosmos, value what has traditionally been the women's sphere – emotions, relationships, the body. Starhawk wants "to change the terms of reality itself, to generate new systems based on different values". (Starhawk 1987, p. 75) She imagines what the world would be like if we "create systems and relationships that liberate and empower." (Starhawk 1987, p. 77)

Starhawk's commitment to political action can be seen as her attempt to create paths towards this model of the future. The question remains as to how effective any changes can be if they are modeled on a romanticized mythic history. Plotting strategies for change would seem to involve a conversation between imagination and critical reason. Perhaps it is time to set aside claims of historical authenticity and accept goddess mythic history as a modern creation.⁶ In proposing that feminist Wiccans abandon their historical claims, I am not suggesting the abandonment of all attempts to situate women in prehistory, nor am I calling for an end to research on goddesses. Contemporary feminist scholars in disciplines such as history, archaeology, anthropology and religious studies are working on projects

⁶ In my view, the arguments regarding the authentic historicity of the "mother-times" simply cannot be resolved on the basis of current evidence.

quite separate from the reconstruction of a monolithic goddess history. They are attempting to recover women's stories and to create new methodologies for uncovering information about gender relations in the past. I see these as valuable projects. It is necessary to grapple in a critical manner with the complexities of the historical and archaeological record if an understanding of the intricacies of today's problems is to be attempted. In light of this, it seems counterproductive to ignore current research and new strategies for recovering and analyzing gender relations in the past, or to accuse those feminist scholars who critique the model of reality presented in goddess mythic history of supporting the "male power elite".

Imagination and myth making could be valued in its own right, while recognizing the process for what it is. Diane Purkiss asks: "What if women writing history allowed their invention to play about freely in the fields of the past, searching for fantasies that might be at least temporarily enabling or interesting, rather than (or as well as) for new ways to do empirical history?" (Purkiss 1996, p. 53) She suggests "We could try to think about how to harness the power of the imagination and the power of feeling without abandoning the project of telling the truth." (p. 53) The recognition and celebration of goddess mythic history as a modern creation could create a space for a more nuanced understanding of the roles that goddesses have played in history and the recognition of how multivalent are the visions of what it means to be female and how they have been used both for and against real women in a variety of contexts. Thus, feminist Wiccans could enrich their tradition by being open to a new level of understanding that acknowledges that at least some components of goddess mythic history are constructed to meet needs of some contemporary women.

There is much that is positive in this movement - the provision of safe spaces where women can come together and celebrate their spirituality, the expression of the divine in female imagery and the attempt to locate and tell about women's history and women's stories. I identify with Carol Christ when she writes:

"In the beginning, people prayed to the Creatress of Life...At the dawn of religion, God was a woman. Do you remember?" So wrote Merlin Stone in a book that inspired many to seek to uncover the history of the Goddess. When I first read those words, my flesh tingled. (Christ 1997, p. 50)

I also experienced a surge of excitement when I read the same words a number of years ago, words which helped to propel me on my search for accounts of female religious imagery and women's religious experiences. However, there remains much that is problematic for me in the feminist Wiccan presentation of goddess history, particularly the over reliance on intuition and psychic ways of knowing and a lack of willingness to incorporate a critical reasoning process. This approach to history needs to be evaluated and modified if it is to have any impact outside of goddess worshipping communities and their sympathizers. It is my hope that the problems I have identified and presented in this thesis and the suggestions I have put forward might point in the direction of a revised approach to goddess history for feminist Wiccans.

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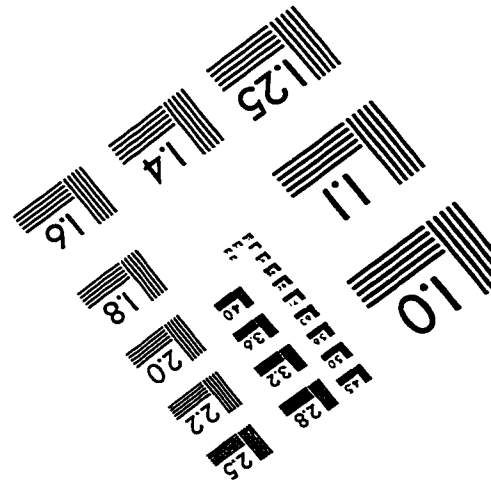
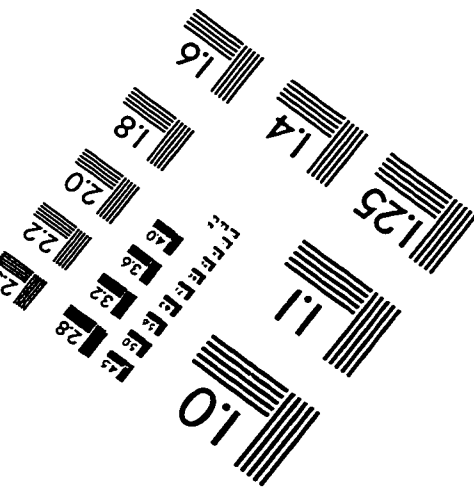
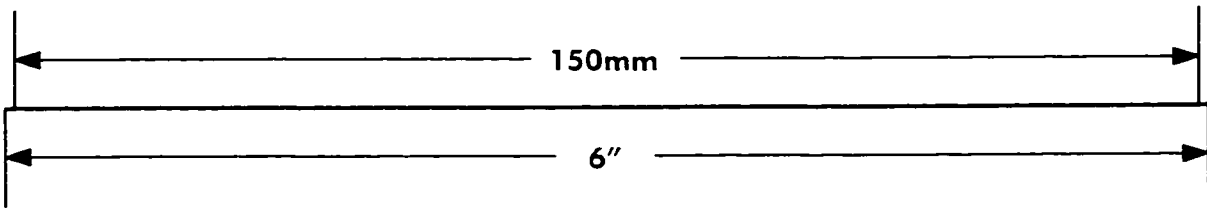
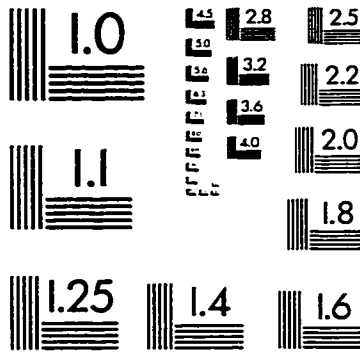
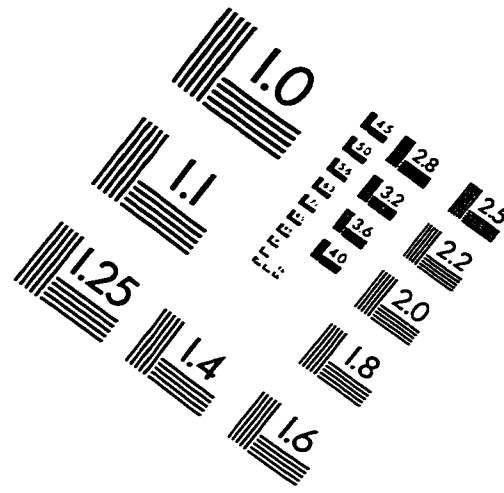
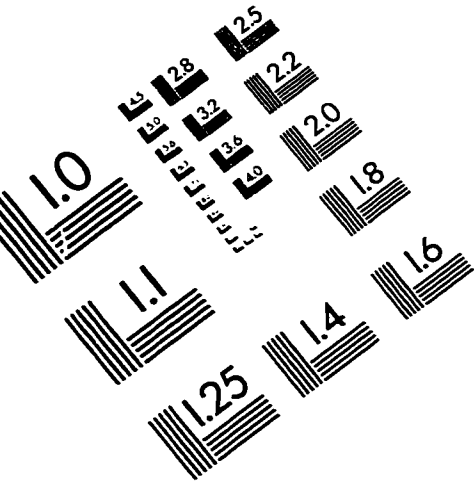
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IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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