

**REIMAGINING GENDER POLARITY IN THE
GARDNERIAN TRADITION OF WITCHCRAFT**

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INTRODUCTION

Ritual is central to Wicca, and has been since its earliest days, when Gerald Brousseau Gardner popularized its contemporary form. The Gardnerian tradition, named after him, is particularly orthopraxic - defined by what members *do*, rather than what they believe. A Gardnerian coven performs symbolic actions to create sacred space between the World of Spirit and the World of Form. In this liminal space, ritual acts generate and entrain altered states of consciousness in participants, the goal of which is access to the Mysteries lying beyond the five senses and everyday rational consciousness. Ritual also brings the coven a temporary shared reality, social bonds, and group solidarity; all of which ritual ensouls, through repetition, to form the coven's *egregore*. Ritual also invites deities, spirits, ancestors, and other beings of the World of Spirit into the sacred space, and generates their communion with humans. Also, since the vast majority of Wiccans are converts, rituals are key to needed identity (re)formation and meaning-(re)making; along with experience and reinforcement of Wiccan ideology – what Wicca considers natural and right.

On July 18, 2022, 47 anonymous Gardnerian Elders of the second and third degree electronically published “A Declaration of the Traditional Gardnerian Wica” (*Declaration*), representing a schism in the tradition related to the 21st-century transformation in the Western conception of gender. An understanding of the Gardnerian ritual experience can be applied,

along with knowledge of how rituals change and evolve, to examine this schism and help reconcile the conflict.

The rituals Gardner revealed to his initiates, passed down in the traditional Book of Shadows (the BOS) and innovated upon by his downlines, date from the 1930s when Gardner himself was initiated. They were radical and transformative for that time, placing the Divine Feminine on equal footing with the Divine Masculine, explicitly giving equality and authority to women, and rejecting industrial society to idealize an agrarian past along with the fertility and freedom of wild Nature. Independent Gardnerian scholar Donald H. Frew has tracked significant textual changes to the BOS following Gardner's death in 1964, leading to a contemporary Gardnerian practice which, especially in North America, has many features of a 1970s second-wave feminist mindset. Victor Turner tells us that "all genuine ritual is transformative", and Gardnerian ritual, with these features, certainly was – in a 20th-century Western patriarchal rationalist paradigm where men had primacy, women were secondary, and deity was exclusively male.

The liminal space "between the worlds" generated by Gardnerian ritual has been, therefore, a post-patriarchal, post-rationalist one where covenmates can temporarily enjoy equality of the sexes, female authority, and, since many Gardnerian covens meet indoors, connection to an imaginal Nature. It is informed, however, by a 20th-century lived experience of gender as interchangeable with biological sex; and a conception of both that offers only two options – male and female. Early on, Gardnerians extrapolated this view onto their idealized agrarian past and wild Nature, defining "fertility" within the male/female heterosexual human framework they knew. In the 21st century, Western science has expanded to acknowledge many variations in biological sex and sexual orientation, and Western culture is transforming its view

of gender, to see it as subjective and not connected to either. Into this shifting paradigm comes “A Declaration of the Traditional Gardnerian Wica”, in which a group of elders (TGW) seek to define “Traditional Gardnerian” ritual practices as those which generate *only* a binary-gendered, heteronormative liminal space.

GARDNERIAN LIMINALITY

In light of the paradigm shift in the Western World of Form, I question whether TGW practices can continue meeting Turner’s definition of “genuine ritual”. Ritual that is no longer subversive and creative but maintains the status quo, in this case binary gender and heteronormativity, ceases to be ritual and becomes ceremony. I suggest that Gardnerians are experiencing, along with Western society, a tradition-wide liminal stage with regard to gender. Arnold van Gennep states that liminality has a way in and a way out. We can view past Gardnerian binary polarity work as the pre-liminal stage leading to the present moment; but with no celebrant leading this rite of passage, there is no one to guide Gardnerians to the “way out”. It falls upon Gardnerian covens, which are by nature autonomous, to envision their own post-liminal stages and what the resulting status changes and integration will look like.

GROUP UNITY AND EGREGORE

The social aspect of Gardnerian coven membership flourishes and evolves organically as members create and reinforce their *egregore* through repeated ritualizations. Since the tradition is orthopraxic, ritual frameworks often remain the same, and if a given coven follows the BOS closely, covenmates experience a “symbolic fusion of ethos and worldview”, in Clifford Geertz’s words, dating from the 1930s to the 1970s. By becoming ritualized bodies within such a space, covenmates also connect with a social order from the 1970s, informed by second-wave feminism and featuring a hierarchical structure led by a High Priestess.

Since covens are autonomous, and all members are bound by oaths of secrecy, there is no way to generalize about how closely they follow the BOS handed down to them. It is, however, plausible that many have absorbed binary gender polarity and heteronormativity. Gardnerian ritual fuses ethos and worldview; in other words, the world lived and the world imagined become the same world. For these covens, this binary and heteronormative world, in which they encounter the Mysteries, feels right, natural, and Gardnerian.

On the other hand, the same autonomy has led many other covens to define differently what is right, natural, and Gardnerian, innovating their ritual practices in response to LGBTQI seekers becoming initiated and proceeding to eldership in the tradition. The presence of queer Gardnerians inevitably opens the BOS to re-examination and innovation, and rituals to modification in ways dictated by elders and/or agreed upon by the coven as a whole. Their energies, their bonds with their covenmates, their experience of solidarity, and their share of each temporary shared reality integrate into the coven's *egregore*. Some have suggested that the impact of queer Gardnerians is so great that such covens become something other than Gardnerian; it is certainly on the minds of the authors of the *Declaration*:

It is...necessary to practice biological female to biological male and vice versa, within a Traditional Gardnerian circle. We acknowledge that anything other than this is not Traditional Gardnerian practice, and will lead to different currents of power and different mysteries. (Anonymous, 2022)

I suggest that the anonymous Gardnerian elders may be equally concerned with a perceived Gardnerian social order, inhabited by covenmates during ritual and when Mysteries manifest. With the outcome of the Western cultural gender transformation still unfolding, they may be concerned about the traditional Gardnerian religious hierarchy and its highly gendered nature, with all female Gardnerians potential High Priestesses, and male Gardnerians potential

High Priests. With the introduction of additional genders comes confusion about who is a candidate for what role.

Alternatives to binary gender polarity may feel, to use Turner's term, *ultraliminal* – that is, threatening to the social order:

This unruliness itself is a mark of the ultraliminal, of the perilous realm of possibility of "anything may go" which threatens any social order and seems the more threatening, the more that order seems rigorous and secure. (Turner, 1979, p. 478)

For older Gardnerian women elders, the post-patriarchal ritual space in which they live out their hard-fought equality is a treasure they may feel slipping away. Having earned the title of High Priestess and the authority it brings, they may fear being erased from religion once again, this time by transwomen; or that in the wake of the overturn of Roe v. Wade, they may lose one more precious source of empowerment.

GARDNERIAN IDENTITY FORMATION AND IDEOLOGY

In an orthopraxic tradition, coreligionists identify deeply with what they *do*. One example is the firmly ingrained Gardnerian custom of always moving deosil, or sunwise (clockwise) around the ritual circle. The ritualization of sunwise movement links it closely to what it means to be Gardnerian, and leads to widdershins (anticlockwise) movement feeling “wrong” in circle. I have heard elders warn their students that if anyone moves widdershins, *the circle won't be Gardnerian*. Such rooting ritual gestures *are* important, since in liminal space, “one's sense of identity dissolves to some extent, bringing about disorientation, but also the possibility of new perspectives”. Most Gardnerians are converts from other religions or were previously non-religious, so this identity dissolution and reassembly through ritual is critical to their religious identity formation, relationship-building with the Gardnerian deities, meaning re-making, and integration into the coven and tradition.

Religious identity is generally considered separate from gender identity, yet the authors of the *Declaration* make one dependent on the other when they insist that only biological females and biological males may participate in TGW rituals. We read in the *Declaration* that “Our Craft is inclusive and is open to anyone who is called to it and *who is willing to work within traditional guidelines*”; implying that non-heterosexual, transgender, intersex, and non-binary seekers are welcome only if they are willing to perform against their sexual orientation since fertility is considered a heterosexual process only, or against their own gender identity, their bodies becoming ritualized as biological female or male, something other than their true selves. For TGW, then, only cisgender female and male seekers may benefit from the identity reformation and meaning re-making Gardnerian ritual bestows; and there looms the real possibility of psychic, mental, and emotional harm to non-cisgender, non-heterosexual participants.

Emile Durkheim stated that “ritual is the means by which beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, experienced, and affirmed as real by the community”. The authors of the *Declaration* represent one subset of the Gardnerian tradition, and all other covens who have welcomed LGBTQI members, or wish to welcome them, likewise generate, experience, and affirm their inclusivity as real. All Gardnerians treasure their coven rituals as a place where they can perform identity away from their perceived Others. For some, these are the forces of patriarchy, rationalism, and environmental degradation; for others, these include LGBTQI people. TGW have ascribed a negative meaning to the difference between themselves and non-cisgender, non-heterosexual people, which ideologically alters the ritual they engage in – from one which in the 1930s was revolutionary by including both binary genders, to one that reinforces the status quo by excluding other genders. I am reminded of Jenny Blain’s

descriptions of the issues faced in Heathenry around the concept of *ergi*, or *argr*, an insulting term for transgressing normal boundaries of hegemonic masculinity (usually) or femininity; while carrying another connotation, “versed in witchcraft”. She suggests that Heathen seidhworkers reclaim *ergi* and use it to mean “walks between worlds” when referring to themselves. She references Maria Antonina Czaplicka, who wrote in 1914 that shamans belong to neither male nor female, but a third gender.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Here is a 1993 quote from Lynna Landstreet:

But ultimately, for me at least, polarity transcends sexuality completely. Sex can be a manifestation of it, but it is not inherently based on sex, or even on deity in an anthropomorphic sense. If I had to choose one image that most embodied, for me, the primal act of creation I see embodied in the wine blessing, ... That moment of lightning striking the primordial sea to create the first living organism is what I see when the athame touches the wine. (Landstreet, 1993)

I propose a resolution for the conflict between female/male gender polarity, as practiced in the Gardnerian tradition, and the gender transformation underway in Western culture. It would involve a new layer of understanding of the “Witch” as a third gender, composed of those who carry the knowledge of primordial polarity – the lightning striking the sea to create life on Earth. Those LGBTQI folk who are already part of the Gardnerian tradition should lead this effort so that their perspective can be uplifted in the community.

I also propose a new ideal for Gardnerians, to supersede the ideal of spiritual androgyny which is their heritage from the Western esoteric tradition. In solidarity with the myriad genders now available to humans in this new era, an ideal of gender *fluidity* would expand Gardnerians’ ability to shift consciousness among genders. Shapeshifting is already an area of study and inner work for Witches and gender-shifting could be a natural extension of that discipline. Again, I would appeal and defer to LGBTQI Gardnerians to advise and lead the way.

The 1930s/1970s Gardnerian rituals currently in use addressed a previous cultural paradigm by fusing and integrating the opposing categories of female and male, making peace between them and imbuing the female/male heterosexual relationship with sacred meaning. Likewise in our current cultural transformation, ritualizing multiple genders and orientations can fuse, integrate, and imbue these with sacredness, incorporating them into the psyche of every Gardnerian. The categories of “female” and “male”, instead of being only literal and physical, could then become symbolic alongside other categories previously Othered. In the beginning stages, perhaps a ritual specifically exploring the liminality between and among genders, with cross-dressing and trading traditional High Priestess and High Priest jewelry, would open the consciousness of individual Gardnerians to other possibilities. Perhaps learning from transgender people about their experience of living “between the worlds” would elevate Gardnerian consciousness. Since for Witches, ritual has magical effect reverberating throughout the interconnected web of existence, such rituals will change the World of Form and the culture of Wicca.

CONCLUSION

No less a spiritual luminary than the 14th Dalai Lama has declared,

If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change. In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own worldview. (The 14th Dalai Lama, 2005)

The Gardnerian tradition could learn from this approach, expanding its horizons to include all that Western science knows about biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender. Rather than reading GBG’s words literally, and becoming fundamentalists, TGW elders could

see his work and lived experience as one point on a line leading from the past into the future of humanity.

Covens could ritualize an opening up to all that Western science has learned about biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender and read examples “into the record”. Storytelling could entrain a new understanding of polarity, for example, this account from John Seed’s

Evolutionary Remembering:

The third planet from the sun, our own earth, came into being about 4.5 billion years ago.

The ground then was rock and crystal, beneath which burned tremendous fires. Heavier matter like iron sank to the centre, while the lighter elements floated to the surface, forming a granite crust. Continuous volcanic activity brought up a rich supply of minerals, and lifted up chains of mountains.

Then, about 4 billion years ago, when the temperature fell below the boiling point of water, it began to rain. Hot rain slowly dissolved the rocks upon which it fell and the seas became a thin salty soup containing the basic ingredients necessary for life.

Finally, a bolt of lightning fertilized this molecular soup and an adventure into biology began. The first cell was born. You were there. I was there. For every cell in our bodies is descended in an unbroken chain from that event.

Through this cell, our common ancestor, we are related to every plant and animal on the Earth. (Seed, 1988)

They could also ritualize storytelling about GBG’s place in occult history, and tell a new story about themselves and the next phase of Gardnerian spiritual evolution.

If the Gardnerian tradition is to survive in a World of Form where cisgender heterosexual female and male are only two of myriad possibilities, and where inclusivity is the norm, fundamentalism and a literal reading of GBG’s words is not the answer. Rather, it is time for a new chapter in the history of the Gardnerian tradition, a new understanding of polarity, and a new layer of identity for the Witch.