

The Myth of the Burning Times and the Politics of Resistance in Contemporary American Wicca¹

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Abstract

Many contemporary Wiccans organize their narratives of oppression around the historical model of the Burning Times - the early-modern persecution of witches, i.e. women and marginalized persons, providing them a powerful set of symbols to organize their concerns. These narratives seek to transcend questions of victimization and provide Wiccans with a means of resisting totalizing pressures and also help create novel formations of the self and community. This remains a tenuous process, exacerbated by conflicting responses within Wicca to the needs of a growing religion. The creative aspects of the Burning Times mythology, however, do present an idealistic set of possibilities.

Introduction

[1] Contemporary American Wicca encompasses a diverse group of Pagan practitioners, who call upon ancient pre-Christian and Native American mythologies, along with developments in the Western Spiritualist tradition, to construct novel religious formations.² Although many Wiccan groups claim a continuous lineage to ancient times, surviving on the heaths and moors of Great Britain, the attitude I encountered at a local Pagan circle is more common. A sign there reads, "Our religion is 100% true, we make it up as we go along." This reflects a pragmatic attitude toward symbols, as the latter are appropriated as required by contemporary conditions. While some hold to a thesis of historical continuity, it is by no means a necessary or foundational belief. For many contemporary Wiccans, history is more a laboratory of ideas than a mere chronicle of events. Perhaps the finest example of this stance and one that permeates most of the Wiccan subculture is the narrative of the "Burning Times." Thus, although Wiccans are likely to read these events as "that which happened," the accounts assume greater importance as they reflect contemporary struggles against religious persecution and the oppression of women and give a powerful voice to these concerns.

¹ This research more properly discusses the "unstructured" assortment of American Wiccans, focusing less on structured traditions such as the Gardnerians or Alexandrians. To clarify this usage further, "Gardnerian" refers here to a specific aspect of Wicca, a usage different than that of Aidan Kelly, who uses the term to refer to the broader Neo-Pagan witchcraft movement, based upon a shared historical lineage. One might object that the individuality and diffuse nature of this population would make it difficult to generalize, but the indisputable commonality they share seems to be a focus on self-development and celebrating individual differences. The specific expressions of difference may be difficult to generalize, but this core dynamic or "metaphysic of difference" is a shared value throughout American Wicca. The object of this study could be termed a Wiccan pop-culture, as once freed from the idiosyncracies of individual groups and covensteads certain commonalities like the celebration of difference and the ethic of self-transformation remain. To this end, while my research features some participant-observation, I gather the majority of my primary data from the increasing variety of Wiccan publications consisting of books, magazines, newsletters, and especially websites.

² Cogent accounts of the cultural and intellectual underpinnings of contemporary Wicca are provided by Aidan Kelly, Loretta Orion, and Margot Adler.

[2] According to Wiccan accounts, the early-modern period in European history, roughly 1450-1700, witnessed the victory of an emerging rationalism, a new ethos which separated people from the Earth and encouraged exploitation of the environment and the colonization of individual bodies, forcing them into restricted economies as productive units. Those who resisted, collectively known as witches, paid an ultimate price. Witches stood for the deeper desires of the human psyche, the freedom to experience powerful emotions and not fear their awesome power (Foucault 1988a: 280-82). It was an experience of liminality, of not only living on the edge of the village, or the heaths, but on the edge of consciousness, living in a larger world than what most knew. Others would even come to witches to seek the wisdom of their journeys without having to embark themselves. But something went horribly wrong on the way to modernity. Purveyors of the emerging scientific-rational world no longer considered liminality desirable and sought to reduce human experience to the empirically verifiable. Those bodies who refused to speak with this new, more rational voice were executed, usually burnt or hanged. The methods for eliminating enemies of the empirical order have since become more elegant and insidious but still exist, ready to re-incorporate the marginal into the social body. This is the world contemporary Wiccans protest, and the Burning Times image provides them with a powerful model for imagining new ways of constructing themselves and their communities.

[3] For Wiccans who uphold the myth of the Burning Times, the early-modern period contains a repository of symbols for organizing their contemporary struggle against oppressive cultural forces. It is not, however, a foundational mythology or a narrative that explains why people must behave a certain way. Rather, modern-day experiences of oppression from the mainstream society have encouraged Wiccans to find historical analogues that might provide a language for contemporary concerns. This is similar to what cultural theorist Edith Wyszogrod refers to as the *ficción*, or an account written in a heterological sense, defying traditional conceptions of “what happened,” at least from the perspective of mainstream historiography. Wyszogrod writes:

By *ficciones* I mean what fictions become when they take themselves up into the story of their own ontological errancy. Both fact and fiction are transformed when shards of metaphysical history through which they have passed, in a return of the repressed, percolate at the surface of the narrative (32).

Put differently, *ficciones* do not re-present that which happened in a fact or fiction model, but rather present the kernel of contemporary concerns read through a historical lens, enhancing the affective sensibilities that remain hidden in mainstream historical writing. The *ficción* is not a lie or a fabrication; it is, rather, an attempt to explore *possibilities*, discarding that which “could not have been” but retaining that which “could have been” (Wyszogrod: 216). As Wyszogrod demonstrates, this method attempts to avoid the totalizing effect inherent in any attempt to state, “It could *only* have been thus” (214). Moreover, to question its empirical verifiability on the basis of a totalized reading misses the point of the contemporary discontent it narrates. As such, *ficciones* attempt to preserve the passionate sense of suffering that mainstream accounts cannot convey.

[4] Wiccans deploy this practice to illustrate the genealogical development of oppression and discriminatory attitudes toward women and other marginalized peoples, much as German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche and French theorist Michel Foucault trace the rise of bureaucratic, objective structures of power in their accounts. Wiccans review a time before their practices seemed “deviant” or “evil,” thereby calling into question the assumptions of mainstream culture that their

practices are inherently “contrary to nature.” Through the exploration of the early-modern period, Wiccans also seek to explore the *possibility* that individuals, or subjectivities, might once again carve out alternative spaces within society where they might practice self-transformation unmolested by authorities. Whether resistance is indeed possible, however, remains a difficult question, as does the larger issue of Wiccan community. These two issues will receive more extensive treatment below.

Toward a Wiccan Ficción: The Burning Times

[5] Whether or not Wiccan accounts of the Burning Times are historically accurate is of little concern to this study. What matters is that Wiccans themselves value the account of these events, a narrative that *reflects* rather than directs their contemporary resistance. Many critics of Wicca miss precisely this point (Starhawk 1997: xxix). They question a movement that allows itself to be crippled by an historical narrative, especially a false one that can only support a permanent status of victimhood. This is the position of historian Diane Purkiss. Purkiss not only misinterprets the nature of the mythology, but also narrows the story itself.³ She writes:

Once upon a time there was a woman who lived on the edge of a village. She lived alone, in her house surrounded by her garden, in which she grew all manner of herbs and other healing plants. Though she was alone, she was never lonely; she had her garden and her animals for company, she took lovers when she wished, and she was always busy. . . . Even though this woman was harmless, she posed a threat to the fearful. Her medical knowledge threatened the doctor. Her simple, true spiritual values threatened the superstitious nonsense of the Catholic church, as did her affirmation of the sensuous body. . . . She was burned alive by men who hated women, along with millions of others just like her (7).

[6] Purkiss’ reading is not necessarily incorrect, at least in its scope, but it does reduce Wicca to only one of its aspects, what she calls the radical feminist one. While the feminist aspect looms large in contemporary readings of the Burning Times, it is related to a larger phenomenon. “Witches” were not only healing women, they also included the elderly, infirm, widowed, mysterious, or the politically and geographically unfortunate, if one uses Boyer and Nissenbaum’s research on Salem Village as a guide. Many more women than men were victimized in the majority of territories involved, but an obvious, primary relationship to matriarchal values was part of a larger issue. Wiccan scholar Loretta Orion traces the Burning Times not to a victory of patriarchy, but to the larger issue of what patriarchy has stood for in the popular imagination. Orion claims that the medieval alchemist-magician Giordano Bruno was executed for the paradigmatic sin of witches: he encouraged spiritual and intellectual growth. Orion writes:

Bruno was burned as a witch in the burning times for urging learned gentlemen to hope for more than the constant conflict among contending reformers and to acquire the powers that Starhawk and Hussey encourage witches to reclaim - the creative, visionary capacities - so that they might bring the vision into being (230).

³ Purkiss takes her objections from Starhawk’s “Dreaming the Dark” text. The actual passage, however, read within its context, illustrates that Starhawk does not view history as determinative of any contemporary “victimization” narratives.

[7] Although reading Starhawk back into Bruno is a bit risky, it nevertheless represents an effort at achieving an effective narrative, even if the historiography is suspect. This hints at Purkiss' ultimate concern: she appears to hold history's prophetic value even higher than Wiccans, which is ironic given her charges. For Purkiss, this kind of play is anathematic in a game of more historical than thou. Purkiss' real objection appears to lie in her attitude toward difference and Wiccans' own resistance to social organization.

[8] Purkiss accuses witches of indifference to social ills, engaging in a sort of narcissism. It is here, however, that one finds Purkiss' chief objection: Wicca, as a movement, has traditionally eschewed reification into formal pressure groups that push for objective, societal changes. Rather, Wiccans have spoken for the individual and her or his relationship to the social structure, a method that has proven efficacious.⁴ Most important, however, is that this resistance to reified social movements preserves the *difference* of individual and smaller forms a polity - not a small achievement in contemporary culture.⁵ For Wiccans, this is a major lesson from the Burning Times, the tolerance and preservation of subjectivities against cultural pressures to make them into productive units.

[9] The early-modern period brought these developments concomitant with the employment of "normalizing" pressures. Michel Foucault's research into the history of madness illustrates this process. Authorities allowed medieval deviants to remain in their particularity, albeit on the margins - literally - of village life. The classical age, as Foucault calls it, instead recognized the productive capacities of bodies and sought to rehabilitate them, or re-*incorporate* deviants into the social body. This process of institutionalization reversed to flow of forces from an external, coercive one, to an individually operative, inward one. Individuals no longer took pleasure from their peculiarity but instead felt shame and guilt due to their deviance from an externally imposed norm.

[10] One finds similar themes in witchcraft persecution narratives. Gerald Gardner, a major figure in the emergence of modern Wicca, presents prototypical persecutions - usually featuring both torture and execution - in graphic detail. Although Gardner's uncritical acceptance of anthropologist Margaret Murray's disputed studies make him a suspect witness for any empirical investigation, his importance in formulating the "Burning Times" mythology cannot be understated. The mythology, at least in abstract terms, narrates the inscription of the emerging order and its "truth" upon the body of marginals, often associated in persecution narratives with the witches' bodies.

[11] Elaine Scarry discusses the phenomenology of this process. Torture serves several functions, but the first is to eliminate the subject's "voice" and exterior environment through the inflicting of "blinding pain." The tormentors aim primarily to destroy whatever the subject was,

⁴ I am thinking here of Selena Fox's "Lady Liberty League," an advocacy group for Neo-Pagans. The LLL most often handles cases of discrimination against Neo-Pagans.

⁵ This is not to say that such a movement is not underway. The trajectory is a tenuous one, however, between resistance and the creation of a new normativity. One suspects that if Wiccans increasingly come to define themselves in resistance to a discourse propagated by conservative Protestants, the temptation to reify into formal bodies that inscribe victimhood as a semi-permanent status may arise. That is, the creative, ascetic aspect of Wicca may be surrendered in a movement that can only provide the obverse of Fundamentalism, itself becoming a sort of typological fundamentalism in the process, i.e. Christians are . . . Wiccans are. . . . The politics of identity threatens to re-emerge whenever one deploys a myth as powerful as this one.

and take hold of its power and appropriate it. Scarry formulates this: “Across this set of inversions pain becomes power. The direct equation, ‘the larger the prisoner’s pain, the larger the torturer’s world’” (37). The mechanism, however, is the most insidious aspect of the process. Strategies allow the tormenter to disassociate from his or her actions, while the onus of guilt shifts to the subject. The torturer seeks information, thereby justifying the actions, and the subject must surrender this data. And, in so doing, the subject commits an act of betrayal - internalizing the transgressors’ guilt and further legitimizing their actions (Scarry: 28). Worse, torture destroys the subject’s own voice and replaces it with the shadowy, impotent voice of its oppressors. Michel de Certeau summarizes:

What the torturer in the end wants to extort from the victim he tortures is to reduce him to being no more than *that* rottenness, which is what the torturer himself is and knows that he is, but without avowing it (1997: 41).

[12] Thus, the overarching goal is to erase the subject and its previous codes and replace them with the marks of the torturing society. The latter, which existed previously only in the minds of the tormentors, inscribes itself onto the body of its victim, with the prior invisibility of personal pain now made into a political manifesto (Scarry: 28; de Certeau 1997: 41).

The Burning Times Narrative: Opening a Space for Resistance

[13] One could read the Wiccan revival as an attempt to throw off the shackles of the torturing society and re-assert their subjectivity by creating narratives of resistance, an effort to re-inscribe a nature-based spirituality in place of an order that exploits the Earth. But, Michel de Certeau argues, social marginals, or in my usage, witches, have only limited means of resistance. Whereas the dominant culture moves through “strategies,” practices that assume a base of operations and an external target, marginals must use “tactics” - “calculated actions determined by the absence of a proper locus. . . . The space of the tactic is the place of the other.” Whatever one wins through tactics must be surrendered; any victory is only temporary (de Certeau 1984: 36-37). While campaigns are not possible, one can constantly find weak points and attack, however, especially through the interpretation of texts, or the “practice of everyday life” as a cultural text.

[14] De Certeau’s research takes place within consumer societies. Some theorists, like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari might assume that the capitalist order controls one’s demand and thus one’s space for resistance, but de Certeau rejects this notion, asserting that cultural consumers do not blindly appropriate products, despite the mass media’s best efforts” (de Certeau 1984: 31). He continues:

The technology of the media does not touch the assumption that consumption is essentially passive - an assumption that is precisely what should be examined. . . . The result of class ideology and technical blindness, this legend is necessary for the system that distinguishes and privileges authors . . . in contrast with those who do not produce (1984: 167).

The act of reading culture for de Certeau must not be literal or “scriptural”; rather, one must read the text as open and not as a “private hunting reserve” (1984: 168-172).

[15] De Certeau labels the individual act of appropriating meaning subversively as an example of *la perruque*. *La Perruque* represents the worker’s attempt to construct his own projects on “company time,” using company materials. The worker, imbricated within a large, faceless

organization, must find a way to “reintroduce ‘popular’ techniques of other times and other places into the industrial space” (de Certeau 1984: 26), or be “a pagan in a nine to five world,” as one author puts it (Voigt: 173-88). *La Perruque* involves a whole series of *tactics*, including the apparently wasteful use of resources through the *gift* - a term anthropologist Marcel Mauss made chic in a number of disciplines. De Certeau views the gift as an outgrowth of industrial society. It is a subversive tactic, “transformed into a transgression in a profit economy: it appears as an excess (a waste), a challenge (a rejection of profit), or a crime (an attack on property)” (De Certeau 1984: 27).

[16] The most effective use of *la perruque* lies in its ability to re-interpret or even produce stories. Stories for de Certeau are “treatments of space,” which are fields of action (de Certeau 1984: 118, 122). Stories typically function as apologies for the social order:

From initiation ceremonies to tortures, every social orthodoxy makes use of instruments to give itself the form of a story and to produce the credibility attached to a discourse articulated by bodies (de Certeau 1984: 149).

A bit later, de Certeau adds that stories are typically *fictions*, narratives that function in advertising to create the real and suppress superstition (1984: 186-87). Consumers can, however, use *fictions* to resist power by producing “anti-stories” (1984: 106-7). Anti-stories open up new spaces for expression, whereas “rumors totalize” (1984: 107). In this sense, the Wiccan myth of the “Burning Times,” along with contemporary ritual and practice, serves as an anti-text - a construction of *la perruque* designed to open up alternative spaces.

[17] De Certeau describes a victory of the anti-text over the totalizing discourse of a culture. One must remember, however, that even this anti-text with its incumbent waste and deliberate flouting of efficiency still lies imbricated within the larger culture. It is but an island, forced always to defend its boundaries through guile and legerdemain. The anti-text speaks the language of Odysseus, mired between the Scylla and Charybdis of forces that may eventually destroy it. But this is resistance. Involving neither direct confrontation nor outright avoidance, the marginal must use the tools at hand to form novel combinations. Such is the witch’s formula (Magliocco: 113-14).

[18] De Certeau’s tactics, while opening a limited space for resistance, do not totally favor the ethics of self-transformation so prominent within Wiccan discourse. For Wiccans, resistance also involves a creative aspect, one that critics like Purkiss overlook. Just because Wiccans have thus far failed - if that is the proper term - to develop a centralized movement does not mean their readings of the Burning Times lead only to feelings of victimization. Rather, Wiccans engage in what Foucault calls “Technologies of the Self,” forms of *askesis* or self-transformation that aspire to “care of the self,” practices that enhance community - defined in this case as a cooperative venture on the part of individuals to help each other explore his or her subjectivity (Foucault 1997: 223-52).

[19] For Wiccans, transformation begins with individuals and extends outward to social structures. This method seeks to free itself from the “disciplinary” models that characterize contemporary social discourse, instead preferring what Foucault calls the ancient Stoic approach - a means of self-transformation that records incongruities and lapses only to help the individual improve herself or himself, rather than formulate punishment. More traditional models use an opposite approach, seeking to transform individuals in an objective, “top-down” technique, disciplining subjectivities into conformity with the “norm.” This is precisely what Wiccans resist

when they appropriate the Burning Times mythology. Call it patriarchy, bureaucracy, capitalism, or whichever label one prefers, it represents the forced assimilation of individuals into an economy that circumscribes meaningful dissent and individual difference.

Conclusion: The Possibility of Wiccan Community

[20] The creation of this type of alternative community, one that resists the pressures to normalize behavior and institutionalize forms, remains an idealistic process, however, as Sarah Pike's work on Neo-Pagan festivals demonstrates. The temptation always exists to reify the movement into a "PC Paganism," or an externally imposed morality that undermines the delicate process of negotiating an ethics of community between free subjects. For Pike, the difficult demands of festival life often conflict with mundane reality and the tendency to form clandestine elites, leaving the process incomplete (Pike: 51-56). Pike's Foucauldian archaeology of power within Neo-Pagan festivals reveals that the ideals are far from the deployed practices, as she points out with debates over drumming and routine groundskeeping. Pike's research, however, may help Neo-Pagans approximate the ideal, as it encourages a re-assessment of certain qualities Neo-Pagans take for granted, like egalitarianism. By constantly rooting out vestiges of objectified power, one might yet approach a polity that emanates from free individuals, a limit condition re-negotiated in every moment across time and space not allowing for the development of harmful absolutes. In this sense it is even more like Foucault's articulation of a self-transformation that ends only at death. Wicca, like many other contemporary spiritual movements, constantly encourages new opportunities for self-transformation. Taken this way, the Burning Times mythology reads not as a crippling apologia for victimization, as some critics charge, but as a manifesto for growth.

[21] Power, however, must remain flowing, never allowed to reify into new orthodoxies. Wiccans describe power as something emanating from the Earth and all its occupants, both organic and inorganic. The witch is one who channels and directs this power, bending and directing energy through acts of will. But unlike the Hegelian subject as discussed in Foucault's *The Order of Things*, the idealized witch's body does not represent the center of the universe or the locus of power discourse. Wiccans seek to re-initiate alternative power relations. Admittedly, however, this is a difficult and dangerous process, but nevertheless one of which Wiccan writers are well-aware.

[22] Wiccan author and activist Starhawk describes this condition, quoting a close friend, Lauren, who summarizes both the opportunities and dangers the mythology provides:

The torture stories and the rage come from the dark. But if you retell the horror without creating the dark anew, you feed it. You do not break the mold. We need to dream the dark as process, and dream the dark as change, to create the dark in a new image, because the dark creates us (Starhawk: xxviii).

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