

Re-gendering Sacred Nature: From Mother Earth to the Lord of the Wild

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Abstract

Nature as a mother-figure is an enduring imaginary in Western epistemology, epitomised in the modern pagan Earth-Goddess. However, recent eco-criticism rejects this imagery of nature as female and as motherly, arguing that it absolves humanity of responsibility for the damage we inflict on the natural world. But a masculine nature is also seen as flawed, associated with personal domination and emotional repression. The threat and disturbance traditionally associated with masculinity seem to have no place in emerging epistemologies of nature.

This paper challenges the notion that masculinity is inherently toxic to nature, and brings to attention the Horned God, a central deity of modern paganism, as a figure of masculine sacred nature alternative to the Earth-Goddess. As the Goddess's counterpart, the Horned God is a vehicle for exploring what masculinity looks like for modern pagans from his emergence in the 1930s until present day. This paper further argues that the Horned God, although possessed of masculine traits, is not confined by the definition of masculinity prevalent under patriarchy as "characterised by violence, exploitation, a reverence for the scientific absolute, and a systematic 'rape' of nature" (Swaim and Koen), but is instead a hybrid figure that challenges the notion of both masculinity and nature as categories within binary systems. The paper applies Timothy Morton's ideas on Queer Ecology and Dark Ecology to discuss the Horned God as a figure who embodies fluidity, disturbance, decay and death — elements that have gone underrepresented in popular environmentalist literature.

Keywords: Horned God; environmentalism; modern paganism; gender; masculinity; feminism

Introduction

In 1989, prominent Alexandrian Wiccans Janet and Stewart Farrar appealed to their readership to heed the impending climate catastrophe:

Never was the Horned God of Nature more needed than today. Mankind's technological revolution is a gift of the God of Wisdom, which can be used or abused like any other – and it has been both. We are exploiting Mother Earth to a perilous extent, and have the power to destroy her and ourselves. We are in imminent danger of overpopulating her disastrously ... We are chopping down the rain forests which are our global lungs, and aerosoling great holes in the ozone layer which is our protective shield. We are polluting our oceans and imperilling whole species.¹

They saw the nature-centric modern pagan religion as a framework for fostering a caring relationship with the natural world. But their words are also representative of the way nature has been (and continues to be) gendered within pagan circles. It is the male Horned God, associated with death, rampant sexuality and wilderness, who is the eco-warrior pitched against anthropogenic destruction, while the Earth-Goddess is seen as imperilled, but ultimately passive in the hands of her abusers. This gendered divide between the pliant and forgiving female nature and the violent and vengeful male nature is not confined to modern pagan writing: it appears in equal extent in eco-criticism and nature writing of the past thirty-some years. It also continues the popular imagery of nature as female which has persisted in Western epistemologies for centuries.

However, in recent decades this imagery has come under scrutiny as outdated and, in some cases, downright harmful to environmental causes. One source of such criticism is Queer Ecology, “a loose, interdisciplinary constellation of practices that aim, in different ways, to disrupt prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature.”² A contributor to the Queer Ecology discourse, eco-theorist Timothy Morton notably criticises the

1. Farrar and Farrar, *The God of the Witches*, 33.

2. Sandilands, “Queer Ecology,” 169.

image of the Earth-mother that is significant to many modern pagan movements. Building on Emmanuel Levinas' critique of Martin Heidegger, Morton rejects "our concepts of 'faceless generous mother nature' [that] are based on 'sedentary' agricultural societies with their idea of 'possession'."³ For Morton, the association with motherhood leads us to imagine nature as benevolent and forgiving, and to ultimately disavow responsibility for anthropogenic impact on our environment. An alternative to this concept of a forgiving Earth-mother is the Horned God, whose nature is fraught with violence, decay, and death, and whom modern pagan authors already name as "the deity to call on when the government turns its back on preserving the natural world."⁴ However, Queer Ecology, including the work of Morton himself, does not seem to hold truck with masculinity. It dismisses masculine nature as a site of "personal domination in the guise of hunting, fishing... and other outdoor activities" or as a concept "afraid of its own shadow."⁵ *En route* towards, one supposes, a gender-queer nature, some theorists of Queer Ecology outright discard any part of it that may be perceived as masculine.

All such discussions, necessarily, occur in the context of feminist and gender studies, as well as the more recent critical studies of men and masculinities. In the words of Raewyn Connell, hegemonic masculinity is a "historically mobile relation" which "embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy."⁶ While the socially constructed and enforced markers of masculinity vary across communities and time periods, the feature of hegemonic or patriarchal masculinity most readily seized upon by both Queer Ecologists and modern pagan authors is the assumption of dominance. Morton refers to masculine nature as a site for "personal domination," which can equally apply to domination over the surrounding environment and over an

3. Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 7.

4. Mankey, *The Horned God of the Witches*, 4.

5. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erikson, *Queer Ecologies*, 3; Morton, *Queer Ecology*, 279.

6. Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

individual's human nature. More broadly, Connell writes that the environmental movement (as it was in the 1990s) “posed a challenge to hegemonic masculinity through its own ethos and organizational practices,” elaborating those practices to be centred around equality, solidarity, personal growth and organic wholeness.⁷ Pagan author Starhawk, one of the key figures at the juncture of paganism and second wave feminism in the United States, criticises the patriarchal “power-over”: “the power of annihilation that backs up all institutions of domination,” in favour of the new feminist “power-from-within”: “the power of the low, the dark, the earth; the power that arises from our blood.”⁸ She, too, situates “power-over” in a masculine relationship with nature:

He will be dependent on the woman he possesses, as the small boy was on his mother ...

Nature, the world itself, will come to feel to him like the mother – alluring, threatening, desirable, dangerous in a way that it is not to women. Again and again, over and over, he will need to assert his fragile mastery, his control, his power-over others.⁹

Arguably from its earliest public inception in the form of Wicca in the 1950s, modern paganism offered a spiritual setting that rejected male spiritual superiority over women.¹⁰ Alongside environmentalism, feminism, LGBTQ+ activism, and criticism of Western male-dominant religions have had and continue to have a tangible impact on modern paganism, which influences them in turn. However, modern paganism is also the inheritor of the many structures it purports to criticise, especially when it comes to gender.¹¹ Furthermore, modern paganism is an assemblage of spiritual movements with some trends, but no uniformity among them.

7. Ibid., 127–28.

8. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, 3–4.

9. Ibid., 77.

10. The complexity of this supposition is discussed in detail by Shai Feraro in “Penis, Power and Patriarchy,” 131–66.

11. Hoff Kraemer, “Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Paganism,” 390–401; Schuler, “A Balancing Act: A Discussion of Gender Roles within Wiccan Ritual,” 47–59; LePage, “Queerness and Transgender Identity: Negotiations in the Pagan Community of Montreal,” 601–19; Doyle White, “A New God for a New Paganism,” 201–27.

This paper calls for a reassessment of masculine sacred nature in the image of the Horned God as a concept that continues to be useful to the ecological thought. It argues that, contrary to Morton's criticism of masculine nature as "afraid of its own shadow," the Horned God is a creature of Dark Ecology, an avatar of disturbance and decay that complements the Goddess's benevolence and vitality. Morton's Dark Ecology fits into the posthuman turn in ecocriticism alongside the anti-pastoral and the EcoGothic, with notable contributors including Terry Gifford, Ruth Heholt, William Hughes and Richard J. Schneider.¹² Dark Ecology hones in on the uncanny enmeshment between the human and the other-than-human, inviting us to contemplate our own hybridity with our environment. As a being in equal measures human, animal, and divine, the Horned God embodies that hybridity. Furthermore, a similarity between Dark Ecology and modern paganism more broadly has already been suggested by Bron Taylor, who termed the latter a "dark green religion."¹³ The first half of this paper explores how the Horned God is represented as a masculine avatar of nature in modern pagan writing and in popular nature writing informed by modern paganism, focusing on the period from the 1980s to 2020s. Extending the reading of the Horned God as a hybrid being, this paper then contemplates the deity as a queered being. Returning to Queer Ecology's aim of disrupting binary imaginaries of both gender and the natural world, the paper offers a gender-queer version of sacred nature through an inclusion of multiple genders, rather than through their rejection.¹⁴

12. Smith and Hughes, eds., *EcoGothic*; Schneider, ed., *Dark Nature: AntiPastoral Essays in American Literature and Culture*; Heholt and Downing, eds., *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*.

13. Bron Taylor, 2010, ix; Ethan Doyle White also highlights Taylor's position in his recent article "A New God for a New Paganism," 218. However, while Doyle White focuses on the Green Man as the version of the masculine divine more aptly representative of environmental concerns than the Horned God, I maintain that the Horned God remains an environmentally rich figure despite not having the word "green" in his title.

14. An alternative to writing this article would be a study of the Goddess that goes beyond her association with passivity, maternity, and forgiveness. Starhawk attempts to divorce the notion of polarity from "our culturally conditioned images of male and female," insisting that neither

Brief History of the Horned God

The Horned God is a palimpsest male anthropomorphic deity, often horned or antlered, associated with chthonic forces, rampant sexuality, and wild nature. Palimpsest, here, refers to the collation of multiple folk and mythical figures across disparate cultures and historical periods that are combined to make up the Horned God. The most impactful of these are Pan, Cernunnos, and Herne the Hunter. The God is often described at the head of the Wild Hunt, a supernatural procession that strikes terror into all who observe it and which is often used as a metaphor for natural disasters or the inexorable cycle of nature that trumps human industry. Popularised by “grandmother of Wicca” Margaret Murray in *The God of the Witches* (1931),¹⁵ the Horned God was adopted into both Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wiccan traditions by the 1960s, and disseminated more widely from there. Although consistently mentioned throughout the early days of modern paganism, the deity gained new popularity in the 1980s, in the wake of — as a response to — Goddess Spirituality’s predominant focus on female divinity. The disparity between representations of the Goddess and the Horned God are still felt today, both in pagan writing where the majority of the texts about the god reiterate material presented in *The God of the Witches* (1931),

the Goddess nor the God are “‘active’ or ‘passive’” (27), but her argument is muddled by the continued use of Male and Female as representations of polar duality, and by the emphasis on the Goddess’s function as life-giver, mother, and a representation of the material aspects of the universe (78). In recent decades, a number of scholars engaged with the image of the Goddess as mother, woman, and feminist. Notably, Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future* and Coleman, *Re-riting Woman: Dianic Wicca and the Feminine Divine*. It is also worth mentioning the research project Beyond Mother Goddesses: New Directions for International Scholarship on Motherhood in Religious Studies, a multi-institutional endeavour funded through the American Academy of Religion.

15. Margaret Alice Murray (1863–1963) was an Egyptologist and anthropologist working at University College London. She was a populariser of the “witch-cult hypothesis” in the United Kingdom, a theory that people accused of witchcraft in the Early Modern period were the inheritors of a pre-historic fertility cult that co-existed with Christianity for centuries. Her entry on “witchcraft” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and her three monographs on the same topic, though debunked as academically spurious, had an enormous impact on popular perceptions of witchcraft and on the nascent modern pagan community.

and in the academy where, as far as I know, no monograph on the Horned God in his entirety yet exists.¹⁶ Michael Howard highlighted this disparity in the 1996 introduction to Nigel Jackson's *Masks of Misrule*: “the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. Many pagans in rejecting patriarchal views and authority have also rejected the masculine principle in their spirituality.”¹⁷ This rejection appears similar to Queer Ecology's dismissal of masculine nature as inherently toxic.

Coming into prominence in the 1980s, the Horned God was necessarily impacted by the trends of the day, namely environmentalism and the rising popularity of fantasy fiction. This cemented his role as the protector of the Earth (who was the Goddess) both in pagan texts, as demonstrated by the example at the start of this paper, and in popular culture. Arguments have been made by both scholars of speculative fiction and of modern paganism that, in this transformation, the Horned God actually gave way to the Green Man, a figure seen to be related but distinct. The Green Man is a term initially attached to vegetative bosses depicted in European churches, usually a male face with vines of leaves framing the face or bursting out of its orifices. It was articulated by Julia Somerset, Lady Raglan in a 1939 article for *Folklore* as a remnant of pagan imagery in Christian spaces and as evidence that pre-Christian paganism survived alongside the official religion in many European countries. Recently, the Green Man has also been speculated to be connected to the mystical figure of Khidr, the Green One, in Sufi Islam, for instance by Diana Darke.¹⁸ Somerset's theory appealed to the adherents of Murray's witch-cult hypothesis and those modern pagans who held that they were the inheritors of an indigenous, pre-Christian European religion. Early Wiccan authors, including Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente, took the Green Man as a pagan deity related to the Horned God. Ethan Doyle White offers a comprehensive study of the Green

16. Individual figures that inform the Horned God have been explored in greater detail, notably the god Pan in Robichaud's *Pan: The Great God's Modern Return*.

17. Howard, “Introduction,” in *Masks of Misrule*, 5.

18. Darke, “The Legend of the Mysterious Green Man,” no pagination.

Man's development and distinction from the Horned God in his paper "A New God for a New Paganism: The Green Man in the Modern Pagan Milieu" (2023). There he also argues that the increasing popularity of the Green Man since the 1970s is, in part, due to the growing understanding of paganism as a nature-religion:

as a figure covered in foliage, a symbiosis of man and plant, this character provided an ideal iconographic personification of this tendency, offering a *nature god* for a *nature religion* [emphasis original].¹⁹

To Doyle White, the Green Man seems more appealingly "green" than the Horned God with his Devilish associations. A similar sentiment is expressed by scholar of fantasy fiction Peter Bramwell in 2009. When comparing Herne the Hunter, the version of the Horned God most numerous represented in fantasy fiction, and the Green Man, Bramwell opines:

Authors and many readers might struggle with Herne's defining characteristic of hunting, which is often either evaded or redefined, and so this could be one reason why the Green Man currently looks more likely than Herne to be Pan's literary successor.²⁰

Hunting, especially the type of hunting for sport practiced by the Western upper classes that Bramwell seems to refer to, brings to mind environmentalist efforts to bring an end to exotic trophy hunting and fox hunting.

Despite these well-substantiated stances that the Green Man is to outstrip the Horned God as a more appealing green deity, the Horned God continues to have a strong presence as the protector of nature in both modern pagan writing and in fantasy fiction. On the fantasy side, from Andre Norton's *Horn Crown* (1981), to Pat Mills and Simon Bisley's *Slaine: The Horned God* (1989–90) (inspired by the writing of Robert Graves, John Rowan and Monica Sjöö), to Mark Chadbourne's *Age of Misrule* (1999–2001), the Horned God consistently appears as an embodiment and protector of a both dangerous and imperilled natural

19. Doyle White, 218.

20. Bramwell, *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction*, 42–43.

world. On the pagan side the last two decades of the twentieth century, and the first two of the twenty-first saw a number of publications that foregrounded the Horned God as either the central deity of male mysteries, or as a sadly overlooked, yet powerful nature god in his own right. Among these are Michael Howard's powerful introduction to Nigel Jackson's *Masks of Misrule* (1994), Alan Richardson's *Earth God Rising* (1991), Zan Fraser's *The Horned God of the Wytches* (2007), and the 2021 book by Jason Mankey, which confusingly shares its title with the preceding publication.²¹ Compared to the Green Man, the Horned God offers a more nuanced personification of the natural world due to, I argue, his complex and ever-evolving relationship with gender, discussed in the following section.

The Horned God's Manhood

Since its public inception in the form of Wicca in the 1950s, modern paganism has been preoccupied with the interaction between spirituality and gender and sexuality. The direction of that preoccupation varied (and continues to do so) between time periods, countries, types of pagan practice, and individual practitioners. Furthermore, recent pagan explorations of gender and sexuality take place against a wider backdrop of Western societies reevaluating their understanding of the two concepts. Developing out of the, at that point unnamed, God of the Witches as described by Margaret Murray, R. Lowe Thompson, Gerald Gardner and their contemporaries, the Horned God at first appeared not to challenge conventional gender presentation. Beyond being a counterpart to the Goddess rather than her master, he was possessed of masculinised attributes like hunting prowess and physical power. Gardner describes Herne the Hunter, an English folkloric huntsman, as “the British example *par excellence* of the

21. Howard, “Introduction,” 5; Richardson, *Earth God Rising: The Return of the Male Mysteries*; Fraser, *The Horned God of the Wytches*.

surviving tradition of the Old God of the Witches”²² reifying the pursuit of game, physical violence, assertiveness, and a hardy demeanour as the Horned God’s expected qualities. However, with the entanglement of modern paganism and second-wave feminism in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, the Horned God’s connection to masculinity defined through violence is increasingly problematised. Authors of the period, like Starhawk, John Rowan, and Nigel Jackson, seek to reclaim the Horned God’s “good” masculinity, that supports the Goddess, from the “bad” masculinity defined variously by capitalism, the Christian Church or humanity’s estrangement from the natural world. In his recent article “‘Penis, Power and Patriarchy’: Troubled Masculinities in British Paganism Set Against the Feminist Challenge of the 1970s and 1980s” (2022) Shai Feraro provides a detailed overview of the shifting understanding of the Horned God’s gender in Wicca and Wicca-derived spiritualities. He concludes by aligning with Ronald Hutton’s earlier stance, that

during “the early decades of Wicca the Horned God was more or less the equal of the Goddess, but by the 1980s he had generally become the junior partner, her ‘son and consort.’” This observation corresponds neatly with the findings presented in this article. Feminist critique of patriarchy during the 1970s and 1980s seems to have stymied many male British Wiccans and Wiccan-derived Pagans, who began to search for alternative models of masculinity in the face of the feminist challenge.²³

These alternative models of masculinity seem to tend towards an incorporation of or submission to the feminine. For instance, in 1987 John Rowan describes the Horned God being able to “go down into the collective unconscious and start to understand at a deep level what it is to menstruate, what it is to give birth, what it is to have a hole instead of a pole.”²⁴ Teresa and Howard Moorey, in 1997, compare the curve of the god’s antlers to fallopian tubes.²⁵ The latter may

22. Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, 163.

23. Feraro, 158, quoting Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*, 338

24. Rowan, *The Horned God*, 93.

25. Moorey and Moorey, *Pagan Gods for Today’s Man*, 35.

be an echo of Margaret Roy's 1979 interpretation of the God as wearing "the Lady's horns on his head," which leaves the image open between the horns of the moon and features of female anatomy.²⁶ Meanwhile the former is a conscious response to the feminist writing of Monica Sjöö and Starhawk.²⁷ Starhawk's own stance on the Horned God is decidedly less focused on physiology, but instead positions the deity as emotionally intelligent and sensitive:

The image of the Horned God in Witchcraft is radically different from any other image of masculinity in our culture. He does not fit into any of the expected stereotypes, neither those of the "macho" male nor the reverse-images of those who deliberately seek effeminacy. He is gentle, tender, and comforting, but He is also the Hunter. He is the Dying God — but his death is always in service of the life force. He is untamed sexuality — but sexuality as a deep, holy, connecting power. He is the power of feeling, and the image of what men could be if they were liberated from the constraints of patriarchal culture.²⁸

To further distance the Horned God from patriarchy, he is positioned as a lover and son, rather than father to the Goddess. This role of the deity as an alternative to the patriarchal Christian God is evident in the Farrars' distinction between the Horned God of Nature and the God of Wisdom, and in John Rowan and Teresa and Howard Moorey endowing the Horned God with a profound understanding of the female condition.²⁹ While the examples above offer alternative masculinities, they also define the Horned God solely in relation to the Great Goddess: his death serves her life, his appearance mimics pieces of her body, and his enlightenment is achieved through the understanding of childbirth and menstruation. In a reversal of roles, the masculine Horned God becomes a member of the "second sex," a response to the statement of the Goddess.

Such an understanding of the Horned God is not a universally accepted one. One of the more vehement criticisms noted by Feraro was written by John

26. Roy, "Power of the Dark Goddess," 33.

27. Feraro, 157.

28. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, first edition, 94. This passage is reproduced without change in the two subsequent editions (1989 and 1999).

29. Rowan, *The Horned God: Feminism and Men*, 93; Moorey and Moorey, *Pagan Gods for Today's Man*, 35.

Matthews for the 1991 essay collection *The God of Wicca*:

If you take away the image of the dominant male, what remains? The New Age wimp? The consciously bisexually-minded male whose recognition of his own femininity has actually weakened his position, both in society (which still, by and large, recognises men as superior) and in personal relationships?³⁰

Like the Farrars' seemingly genuine befuddlement at how the Great Rite between anyone other than a cis-gendered, heterosexual man and woman would work – “we are utterly heterosexual ourselves, and our own concept of Wicca is built around natural maleness and femaleness of mind, body and spirit”³¹ – Matthews' series of questions suggests a lack of understanding of identities beyond the exclusive conventional masculine or feminine, and of the power the nuances of those expressions can bring.

However, though not ubiquitously accepted, distancing the God from the role of patriarch, and revising his sexual and sensual attention to the Goddess still offers interesting possibilities for reading the God environmentally. These possibilities are especially valuable since, while the Horned God has been distanced from the role of father, the Goddess remains connected with the role of mother and, therefore, with the criticism that “faceless generous mother” nature is harmful to environmentalism.

The God's status as the Goddess's lover also makes him good to think with about the environment. Coding human interactions with nature as a relationship between lovers rather than one between children and parent is one of the ways in which Queer Ecology seeks to destabilise binary imaginaries of both nature and gender. The aim of this reorientation is paraphrased by Suzanne L. Barnett in her explanation of the EcoSexuality movement, which seeks to distance our conception of nature from that of self-sacrificial motherhood:

30. Matthews, “Introduction,” 10.

31. Farrar and Farrar, *The Witches' Way*, 170.

treating nature as a mother has not exactly worked out well for the planet — mothers, after all, tend to forgive the transgressions of even the most wayward children — but if twenty-first century humans begin to see nature as a lover who, presumably, will not tolerate mistreatment and neglect, perhaps they will be more mindful of their environmental impacts.³²

It is implied that a mother-figure *would* tolerate mistreatment and neglect to a greater extent than a lover. EcoSexuality is not the only movement that makes use of the erotic to explore the human relationship with the more-than-human world. Ellen Meloy's *Eating Stone: Imagination and the Loss of the Wild* (2005) is championed by Queer Ecologist Dianne Chisholm as a narrative which

places the reader with the narrator in the zone of proximity where human and wild animal “meet,” and where the border of difference is both most intense and most porous. The “intercourse” that ensues is neither zoophilic bestiality nor anthropomorphic romancing; rather, it is a transmutation of human being into something other, prompted by the closeness of the human body to the vibrating heat and rhythms of the animal pack.³³

Meloy sees both individual human and animal bodies and communities as mutable when engaging with one another. She and Chisholm find the language of the erotic useful in describing this porousness without straying into the pornographic. Another example, the Norwegian non-profit organisation Fuck for Forest founded in 2004 by Tommy Hol Ellingsen and Leona Johansson, stages public sexual acts as a means of protest and fundraising. The three ways of engaging with the erotic highlighted by the above examples can be directly tied to the Horned God: 1) the subversion of patriarchally-enforced duties of the mother, 2) the porousness between the categories of human and animal, culture and nature, and 3) the acceptance of sexual activity as an indelible part of our social and natural lives. The Horned God's position as a “humanimal” linked to sexuality but distanced from patriarchal structures responds to Queer Ecology's use of the erotic.

32. Barnett, *Romantic Paganism*, 277.

33. Chisholm, “Biophilia, Creative Involution, and the Ecological Future of Queer Desire,” 361.

The Horned God's history is by no means perfect and by no means over. The constraints of this paper require that I omit the discussion of the Horned God in speculative fiction, which has a significant impact on the modern pagan movement. Fictional depictions of the Horned God draw on a wider range of inspirations, while preserving the central notion of the deity as a denizen of the wild. Furthermore, while I discuss the Horned God as a masculine avatar of sacred nature, a logical continuation of this discussion would address the inferred "natural" heterosexual relationship between the God and the Goddess. As modern paganism shifts away from the gender essentialist and "utterly heterosexual" approach of early Wiccan authors,³⁴ there seems to be no consensus as to what position queerness and queer individuals have in pagan practice. In 1969, openly gay witch Leo Louis Martello discussed the "borderline bi-sexuality of many mystics" in *The Weird Ways of Witchcraft*.³⁵ Exploring Martello's impact on paganism, Peter Levenda notes that although not all covens were open to homosexuals in the 1960s and 70s, a "gay coven could still respect the idea of polarity and gender but in a more nuanced and sophisticated way."³⁶ Therefore, it would be reductive to draw a categorical divide between heterosexual polarity magic and magic favoured by queer practitioners. Levenda continues that Martello sought to remedy the exclusion of queer practitioners, with some success, serving as an inspiration for the Minoan Brotherhood. The Brotherhood, described by its founder as "a Religious Revival for Gay Men,"³⁷ is just one branch of modern paganism openly engaging with queerness that exists today, alongside the Radical Faeries and the Feri and Phoenix traditions. However, in his 2022 book *The Satyr's Kiss* Storm Faerywolf notes that even in

34. Farrar and Farrar, *The Witches' Way*, 130.

35. Martello, "The Borderline Bi-Sexuality of Many Mystics."

36. Levenda, interview with Antonio Pagliarulo, "You are the candle, you are the sword," no pagination. <https://wildhunt.org/2021/06/you-are-the-candle-you-are-the-sword-a-profile-of-dr-leo-louis-martello.html>.

37. Buczynski, "Official Page of the Minoan Brotherhood," no pagination.

the second decade of the twenty-first century, “in many traditions and covens across the world queer people are little more than an afterthought.”³⁸ Writing about the Horned God largely does not engage with the notions of queerness and queer practice, preferring such discussions to the reiteration of the conventional relationship between God and Goddess. One can only speculate whether that will change in the future. Nor can the Horned God be seen as the perfect embodiment of sacred nature to the exclusion of all else, as that defeats the purpose of the queering attempted in this paper. Instead, this article aims to include his masculine attributes into imaginaries of the natural world not confined by the gender binary.

Dark Ecology

In addition to being a creature between categories, the Horned God also embodies a certain darkness inherent in nature, which is the purview of Dark Ecology. Dark Ecology is a term coined by Timothy Morton in his eponymous 2016 book. It is part of a broader posthuman turn in environmental thought that includes ways of thinking that spotlight the uncanny, violent messiness of humans being in the natural world. Morton explains the term in a decidedly magical way:

What is dark ecology? It is ecological awareness, dark-depressing. Yet ecological awareness is also dark-uncanny. And strangely it is dark-sweet. ... Do not be afraid. What thinks dark ecology? Ecognosis, a riddle. Ecognosis is like knowing, but more like letting be known. It is something like coexisting. It is like becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn't become less strange through acclimation. Ecognosis is like a knowing that knows itself.³⁹

Thinking Dark Ecology involves accepting the casual deaths and disruptions implicit in nature. The coexistence and interpenetration of the eco and the ego is, to Morton, the Mystery on which Dark Ecology is based. The movement

38. Faerywolf, *The Satyr's Kiss*, 3.

39. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5.

through the three stages of darkness, from dark-depressing through dark-uncanny and towards dark-sweet, is Morton's invitation for us to confront the natural world in its fullness, unfettered by the confines of bucolic "faceless mother nature."

The Horned God is a creature of Dark Ecology. His domain is the old growth forest, the dripping cave, he is not to be trifled with lest you invoke his wrath. Leo Vinci surmises that "Pan is not a god for idle experimentation, neither for example would Cernunnos or Herne be. The Horned Gods could be very difficult to handle if they decide to take you at your word."⁴⁰ This perspective is upheld by pagan author Melusine Draco and anthropologist Susan Greenwood as the former discusses her personal spiritual experience and the latter summarises a Wild Hunt Challenge ritual she observed in Norfolk, UK. Both begin their descriptions in the woods, which are meant to be peaceful and safe, but instead evoke a sense of anxiety. Draco writes:

The day would be peaceful and calm ... the whole wood alive with bird calls. ... Then, almost imperceptibly, there would be the sound of muffled footsteps following quickly in the undergrowth. Your pace quickened and so did that of your stalker ... heart thundering in the chest, breath almost impossible to take. Then you turned to confront this persistent intruder only to find ... nothing.⁴¹

For her, Pan represents an "atavistic fear of Nature uncontrolled" that she directly contrasts with the god's traditional abode in Arcadia, the "idyllic vision of unspoiled wilderness."⁴² Pan is neither idealised, nor removed; he is here, breathing down the author's neck.

Susan Greenwood also discusses the notion of uncanny nature as she recollects her own participation in the Wild Hunt Challenge, organised by Richard and Louise, followers of an eclectic "Herne Path" which Greenwood described as "similar to the Romany way of life, but also different."⁴³

40. Vinci, *Pan: Great God of Nature*, 129.

41. Draco, *Pan: Dark Lord of the Forest*, 43.

42. *Ibid.*, 45.

43. Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic*, 122.

Recognising the agency of nature seems to be a large part of Richard and Louise's practice. Greenwood records Richard comparing their practice with that of another Norfolk pagan group: "they . . . go out and hug trees, we go out and the trees hug us — we know what the outside is."⁴⁴ The Challenge involves following a predetermined path through the forest alone at night, attentive to the emotional states and experiences that arise during it. Before starting, Greenwood acknowledges that her perception of the wood is shaped in no small part by her imaginary of nature: her "own imagination about what might be lurking — [her] own fear of being in the wood."⁴⁵ Conversely, Mary, another participant of the Challenge, described the Wild Hunt and its leader, Herne the Hunter, as an "uncontainable force" of nature, externalising her anxieties.⁴⁶ Greenwood records her elaborating: "when it sees destruction — ecological or whatever — the Wild Hunt comes in and sweeps it all clean. It is earth energy — tornadoes, flood and earthquakes. It is a wild energy — of rain and storm."⁴⁷ In Mary's words and in subsequent discussion there is a tension between human perception of anthropogenic despoliation of an ordered nature (the ecological destruction) and the disorderliness and violence of natural disasters embodied by the Wild Hunt. On the one hand, the Wild Hunt is imagined to remove human impact, to render everything "clean," on the other — the aftermath of a natural disaster is neither clean nor orderly.

Both Draco and Greenwood reference their fear in the forest, a sense that they enter an environment in which they are not in control. But this fear is not a product of a straightforward power reversal from anthropocentric to ecocentric. By engaging with the Horned God's two aspects — Pan and Herne the Hunter — both writers bring to mind the inherent lack of purity in nature. Pan is not the inhabitant of an idyllic pastoral Arcadia; Herne's Wild Hunt

44. *Ibid.*, 123.

45. *Ibid.*, 128.

46. *Ibid.*, 127.

47. *Ibid.*

does not restore a mythical natural order, it leaves decay and debris in its wake. The Horned God prompts us to confront the fundamental hybridity of nature, so frightening to rationalistic sensibilities, and in that he fits right into Dark Ecology. Onto the dark-depressive stage of ecological collapse the Horned God emerges as the dark-uncanny denizen of the otherworld. He cannot be ordered or categorised, and thus contained. He is threatening, in the way that he challenges human assumptions about nature, but also in the way nature is threatening to itself with the indiscriminateness of tar pits, infection, and hunger. Morton argues that “ecognostic jigsaws are never complete,” that Dark Ecology can never reach the stasis of full understanding.⁴⁸ So, too, with the Horned God: when we have reconciled his human and his animal parts, the divine part evades us.

Another example of the Horned God as a Dark Ecology being is Nick Hayes’s description of Herne the Hunter in *The Book of Trespass* (2021). Although this book is not an occult text, the description belies Hayes’s debt to modern paganism and serves as evidence that the Horned God’s environmental influence spans beyond solely pagan circles. The book traces Hayes’s social experiment of tramping through land that would normally be barred to him and discussing how enclosure and privatisation of the British landscape affects those who are excluded from it. In the final chapter, Hayes travels to Windsor Great Park, a section of woodland surrounding a royal residence, half-expecting an encounter with Herne the Hunter, the mythical figure said to haunt it. Hayes’s description of Herne shows a familiarity with his pagan interpretations, rather than a close knowledge of Berkshire folklore:

Herne was a legend long before Shakespeare. He is a small branch of a great tree of folklore that links him with a multitude of other Celtic myths. He is one of a long succession of horned gods whose storylines lead to one central horned god, the god of everything from life, to death, to fertility, and the inexorable power of nature: Cernunnos.⁴⁹

48. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 6.

49. Hayes, *The Book of Trespass*, 353.

This passage is a point-by-point summary of the Horned God's sacred history. The identification of both Herne and Cernunnos as horned gods is due to both these figures (and many others) fitting into the palimpsest of the Horned God. The reference to the deity being a god of everything gestures towards a mistranslation of Pan's name to mean "All" and the inclusion of this figure into the Horned God palimpsest as a universal deity. This translation is disputed by Patricia Merivale in favour of *pa-on*, meaning "grazer," but continues to be popular in writing about the God.⁵⁰ The association of Herne with Celtic myths is a product of esoteric writing that connects him to Gwyn ap Nudd, an otherworldly hunter from Welsh mythology. Even the narrative with which Hayes opens the chapter, presenting Herne as the beloved groundskeeper of Richard II, was authored by the Victorian novelist William Harrison Ainsworth, and only acquired the status of folklore through the work of Margaret Murray.⁵¹ There is no surviving record of a ghostly figure called Herne the Hunter prior to William Shakespeare's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602), which makes arguing for or against his folkloric roots impossible. Instead, Hayes's Herne is a localised version of the Horned God of Nature described by the Farrars, complete with a connection to Dark Ecology.

Hayes directly links Herne's "wild growth [and] untameable passions" with defiant poaching:

though there is no documented evidence of this, the legend of Herne seems to have influenced the spirit of sedition in Berkshire. It is no great leap to see the echoes of Herne's devastation of King Richard's deer stock in the practice of the eighteenth-century Blacks, who trespassed the private deer parks of Berkshire and Hampshire, especially concentrated around Windsor, leaving the deer carcasses, as Herne did, bloodied on the ground.⁵²

50. Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God*, 9.

51. In *The God of the Witches* (1931), Murray references Herne the Hunter "seen in Windsor Forest by the Earl of Surrey in the reign of Henry VIII," an episode which only occurs in Ainsworth's *Windsor Castle* (1842) and has no historical underpinning. Margaret Murray, *The God of the Witches*, 21.

52. Hayes, *The Book of Trespass*, 354.

The clandestine and violent activities of the poachers are re-inscribed into the landscape and into the readers' minds. Moreover, poaching is valorised through its link to the "inspiring and seriously cool" figure of Herne.⁵³ Hayes celebrates the bloodied deer carcasses and his own trespass into the private section of Windsor Great Park with a boyish bravado, but towards the end of the chapter he adopts a more sombre tone:

Camping one night in autumn, years ago, just north of Rannoch Moor, I was kept awake till dawn by the rutting stags... a haunting, powerful noise from the animal kingdom, a raw, timeless awakening to the world outside human ken. In Scotland, this magic is my birthright. In England, it is a crime.⁵⁴

Hayes lays down his claim not just to accessing the natural world, but also to magic, and that magic is undeniably male, embodied by Herne and the rutting stags. By including Herne's story in the final chapter of his book, Hayes sets it up to be the most evocative example he provides. He challenges royalty with his trespass and seeks out a "god of everything" in a powerful call that access to the natural world is every human's physical and magical right. Hayes's use of the Horned God above other deities of the wild suggests that this figure specifically is deemed the most appealing as an avatar of nature both for modern pagans and for secular readers.

Towards Queering the Horned God

From the outset, the Horned God stands in defiance of binary categories such as nature and culture, human and animal. This stance, as discussed above, already aligns with Queer Ecology's aim of disrupting the binary understanding of the categories of nature and gender. The god affords potential for both, as a figure whose gender is open to queering and as a Tolkienian queer, weird entity.⁵⁵ Some early experiments into communicating the Horned God's

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 372.

55. J. R. R. Tolkien uses the term "queer" in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) to describe alien, strange and sometimes mystical things characters come into contact with. His use of the term

profound understanding of femininity can today be read as queer, such as John Rowan’s 1987 description of the deity as being able to understand “what it is to menstruate, what it is to give birth, what it is to have a hole instead of a pole”⁵⁶ and the Mooreys’ 1997 comparison of his antlers with fallopian tubes.⁵⁷ While both these examples are couched in female reproductive imagery and in the equation of femininity with motherhood, they are none the less, early examples of the sacred masculine transcending male physiology. Similarly, in the passage from *The Spiral Dance* (1979) quoted above, Starhawk imagines the Horned God as possessed of emotional intelligence, a quality that is conventionally associated with femininity. Imagining the Horned God beyond the confines of patriarchal masculinity not only creates a space for queer pagans to engage with him, but also challenges our preconceived notions of gender in nature.

Earlier in this paper, we encountered Peter Levanda’s position that queer pagans may “respect the idea of polarity and gender but in a more nuanced and sophisticated way.”⁵⁸ One example of this sophistication is Parker Zimmermann’s description of his self-initiation using the Wiccan Great Rite. Zimmermann begins by stating that he “found . . . acceptance in pagan circles as an openly gay man both from other LGBTQ+ pagans as well as their straight/cis-gendered counterparts,” though he does not specify a particular group of pagans or a country.⁵⁹ He then describes undergoing the Great Rite, using the athame and the chalice in a symbolic union of the masculine and feminine principles. However, to Zimmermann,

this act constitutes the unification of yin & yang, spirit & matter, and creation & incarnation itself. Drinking the wine and taking it in me, I am made a child of the Goddesses and the Gods. ...

can be compared with Timothy Morton’s “weird,” a term for “strange of appearance” that also hints at fate (wyrd) and the “dark shimmering of faerie.” The Horned God’s capacity to mystify and disturb is, in this sense, queer.

56. Rowan, *The Horned God*, 93.

57. Moorey and Moorey, *Pagan Gods for Today’s Man*, 35.

58. Levanda, interview with Antonio Pagliarulo, no pagination.

59. Zimmermann, “Queering Paganism: A Gay Practitioner’s Perspective of Wicca-Craft,” no pagination.

And even though I talk of Goddesses and Gods I am not talking about physical gender. The divine transcends everything physical, including gender. I am talking about yin & yang, about light & dark, and good & evil. Gender isn't restricted to Gods or Goddesses despite how they may appear.⁶⁰

He further distinguishes between the generative aspect of heterosexuality, worshipped in Wicca, and other forms of erotic union, to him, equally accepted by the movement. But the deities Zimmermann invokes are easily recognised as the traditionally feminine Earth-Goddess and the traditionally masculine Hunter-God, “master of all wild things and keeper of the dead.”⁶¹ It seems that twenty-first century pagans have no trouble with reconciling traditionally masculine attributes of the Horned God (such as aggression, predation and wilderness) with the knowledge that these attributes are not intrinsically masculine, nor that the Horned God can only be male because he has masculine traits.

The Horned God's potential for queerness is also not restricted to gender. Coming back to Dianne Chisholm's summary of Ellen Meloy's *Eating Stone* . . . (2005), the charged yet porous boundary between human and animal can be read as inherently erotic and inherently queer. While the God's description frequently echoes the one Zimmermann gives him, that of “half-man, half-stag” (or another horned animal), it is ambiguous as to which part is which. His descriptions and depictions range from those of a man with antlers, to a more hybridised figure with a stag's head and hindquarters, but human torso and arms. In the variety of the Horned God palimpsest depictions, it seems irrelevant which parts are human and which are animal.

Finally, Woody Fox's Cernunnos Camp, a queer space dedicated to the deity, initially established in 1998 and set to resume in April of 2023 after a several-year hiatus, is evidence that the relationship between the Horned God and queerness is a topic of persistent interest. In addition to being queer and a

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

longstanding member of the pagan community, Fox is also an environmental activist “for animal and human rights (both physical and magical) . . . the Earth, all of its inhabitants and their right to freedom and equality.”⁶² The camp’s rootedness in queerness, environmental activism, and the worship of the Horned God reinforces the notion that the Horned God as a masculine (but not necessarily solely masculine) embodiment of sacred nature is good to think with about the environment. While the camp, unfortunately, did not run in April 2023 due to logistical difficulties, it is my sincere hope that the deity’s involvement with environmental topics receives more academic attention and follow-ups to this article will discuss a future Cernunnos Camp and the Horned God’s role within it.

Conclusion

In the last forty years, the Horned God emerged, on the one hand, as an alternative to patriarchal conceptions of the male divine and, on the other, as an embodiment of sacred nature that demands recognition and respect. His masculinity, and his attitude to both criticised and lauded masculinities more generally, remains a topic of vigorous discussion in pagan circles, as highlighted by recent work by Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White. More prescient still is the Horned God’s role as protector of the natural world, foregrounded by pagan authors like Jason Mankey and Zan Fraser. The Horned God’s increasing popularity calls attention to both these topics and to how they intersect, but writing on the deity is hampered by a persistent rejection of masculinity as toxic both in modern pagan writing and in eco-criticism.

Rather than rejecting masculinity *en route* towards a queering of both environmentalism and paganism, this paper suggests that the Horned God is a successful example of a deity not restricted by the hegemonic gender binary. This paper holds that, as an alternative to mother nature, the Horned God offers a balancing force to our perception of nature as passive and forgiving,

62. “Teachers,” *LoveLove*, no pagination.

and that, while he stands as a male counterpart to the female Earth-Goddess, he is ultimately able to transcend his gender. All these factors make the Horned God of Wild Nature good to think with when it comes to challenging the epistemological divide between female and male, tame and wild, and humanity and nature.

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