Olivia Caputo

Water and Stone: The Re-Enactment of the Masculine in the Pagan ‘Reclaiming’ Tradition

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore models of masculinity present within the contemporary spiritual community of the Reclaiming Collective in San Francisco, United States of America. The Reclaiming Collective is part of the wider contemporary Goddess spirituality movement, a movement which promotes the importance of changing patriarchal images of the divine through focus on the Goddess. Through an analysis of both the writings of Starhawk, the most read and published member of the collective, and the discussions and articles within the collective's long-running journal Reclaiming Quarterly this paper reveals the conflict between patriarchal and more radical models of masculinity. It concludes that the fluidity of gender promoted within the Reclaiming Collective stimulates members to understand masculinity as positive, anti-sexist and multifaceted.

BIOGRAPHY

Olivia Caputo is a PhD candidate at The University of Queensland's School of History Philosophy Religion and Classics. Her research involves critique of gender theory in the writing of two pioneers of the feminist Goddess movement, Carol P. Christ and Starhawk. Olivia has travelled to both the U. S. and the U. K. to gather material about contemporary Goddess communities such as the Reclaiming Collective in San Francisco and the Priestesses of Avalon in Glastonbury. She has presented papers at the Alternative
Expressions of the Numinous conference in 2006 and at the Association for Research on Mothering conference in 2007. Her other research interests include community radio, sustainable agriculture and the alternative D. I. Y. craft movement.
WATER AND STONE: THE RE-ENACTMENT OF THE MASCHULINE IN THE PAGAN ‘RECLAIMING’ TRADITION

This paper seeks to explore the re-enchantment of the masculine within the contemporary Witchcraft movement called the Reclaiming Tradition. The Reclaiming Tradition is a feminist, earth-based branch of modern pagan religion which centres on the re-emergence of the Goddess, usually seen as a tripartite deity (Maiden, Mother, and Crone) embodying the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Founded in San Francisco by popular writer and activist Starhawk and her contemporaries this collective is inclusive of all genders and has sparked interest in its particular brand of Witchcraft worldwide. Reclaiming members teach and make magic. They hold workshops and public rituals to celebrate the traditional pagan wheel of the year, and work extensively on personal and communal empowerment, collective transformation and healing. Although the movement has predominantly female members, men have also been drawn to Reclaiming’s spiritual edicts and style of ritual. The God, in the form of a Green Man or Horned divinity, is often invoked alongside the Goddess as a counterpart.

The role of men within a movement that is so focused around the rediscovery of the feminine divine has, of course, been problematic. The men’s movement and the popular discourse of ‘masculinity in crisis’ has impacted upon Western cultural memory. The macho, bread-winning, head-of-the-family image has not disappeared, but within feminist political and spiritual circles this image has lost its magic. To borrow a term from the men’s movement, the ‘menaissance’ has arrived; it’s time to put the magic back into being male. Reclaiming is interesting as a spiritual movement where men and women work together to achieve a redefinition of the masculine and of male divinity, often claiming to reject traditional gender polarities. Using a text-based approach focused on gender analysis I will explore Reclaiming’s understandings of masculinity, firstly through Starhawk’s writings and then through the findings of a sociological study of Reclaiming. I then present the writings of men within the tradition who speak for themselves about their masculinities, and Reclaiming’s impact upon them.

I conclude that re-enchanting masculinity is central to Reclaiming’s spiritual work, especially for men, but also for women and those outside the gender binary. The masculinities of Reclaiming are dynamic, intuitive, fluid and social. Some men feel closer to God and some to Goddess. Male members recognise that male bodies can and have been used as weapons of destruction, not tools of creative transformation. New masculinities are set up in opposition to the omnipotent patriarchal father God of monotheistic religions. Reclaiming men do ritual and magic within men’s circles that is transformative, and allows them to access a positive connection with the earth and with each other that defies traditional stereotypes of masculinity.

RECLAIMING AS A FEMINIST TRADITION

The feminist movement has cast a disapproving shadow on traditional ideals of being male. A re-enchantment of masculinity requires a re-evaluation of the mysteries and mythologies around being male. Some men’s groups re-enchant their masculinity by distancing themselves from feminism, feeling it has wounded them. Within the Reclaiming Tradition feminism is fully incorporated into mythology, ritual, and teaching. It is a self-identified feminist Witchcraft tradition:

Reclaiming is a community of women and men working to unify spirit and politics. Our vision is rooted in the religion and magic of the Goddess — the Immanent Life Force. We see our work as teaching and making magic — the art of empowering ourselves and each other. In our classes, workshops, and public rituals, we train our voices, bodies, energy, intuition, and minds. We use the skills we learn to deepen our strength, both as individuals and as community, to voice our concerns about the world in which we live, and bring to birth a vision of a new culture.

Liberty, equality, and social justice are key values in the Reclaiming Witchcraft tradition. They embrace a multiplicity of expressions of masculinity and femininity and claim to oppose all prejudice. A history of

---

http://www.reclaiming.org/.
Reclaiming given in their newsletter states that all members are ‘feminists and advocates of non-violence.’

The group originally came out of a series of Witchcraft classes taught in San Francisco by Starhawk and Diane Baker in 1978. A collective consisting of both women and men was formed which began to publish Reclaiming newsletters, organise and lead public rituals, teach classes in feminist magic, and run week-long intensives which came to be known as Witchcamps. Today they are a tax-exempt religious organisation. Starhawk is still seen today as the face and voice of Reclaiming. Other authors within the movement have been influential, such as Diane Baker, M. Macha Nightmare, Hilary Valentine and T. Thorn Coyle, but for the purposes of brevity I will focus on Starhawk here.\(^4\)

At the beginning of her magical practice Starhawk was trained in the Feri tradition by Victor Anderson, a well-known poet and hereditary male witch.\(^6\) Starhawk’s writings are extensive, so I will draw chiefly on her most popular work here, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess*, published first in 1979, and now in its 20\(^{th}\) anniversary edition.\(^7\) She begins *The Spiral Dance* with a treatise on ancient matriarchal religion where the Mother Goddess, the ‘birth giver,’ is central and immanent. She then traces modern Witchcraft from this time in a continuous line, and concludes that Goddess religion is ‘unimaginably old.’ Starhawk claims that the Goddess is a psychological symbol, but is also a manifest reality. The God, also a part of this ancient tradition, represents powerful and positive male qualities and is the counterpart of the Goddess. Starhawk states that ‘to reclaim the word Witch is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful; as men, to know the feminine within as divine.’\(^8\) She still, however, wishes to focus on the importance of the Goddess symbol for women. Starhawk professes that because the Goddess also has a male aspect, deity can be seen as either male or female. However this bisexual understanding of deity only goes so far- the female nature of the earth is stressed because the process of creation is a birth process, the world is born, not made.\(^9\) The view of male and female forces as polar opposites is a common tradition of Western Witchcraft and paganism.\(^10\) The emphasis placed on the erotic heterosexual connection between female and male forces in *The Spiral Dance* is plain:

Goddess and God, Female and Male, Moon and Sun, Birth and Death…Polarity, the force that holds the cosmos together, is love, erotic, transcendent, and individual…She is the Great Mother who gives birth to Him as the Divine Child Sun…He is the sower and seed…She is the Initiatrix…He is the young bull; She is the nymph, seductress. In summer, when light is longest, they meet in union, and the strength of their passion sustains the world.\(^11\)

In the wheel of the year myth presented in *The Spiral Dance* there are specific roles for male and female divinity to play. Her view of female and male complementarity is essential to the mythology presented in the book. She states that ‘Polarity, which we call the Goddess and God, creates the cycle that underlies the movements of the stars and the changing of the seasons, the harmony of the natural world and the evolution within our human


\(^6\) The Feri tradition claims an eclectic heritage, from African Shamanism, Celtic paganism, and Hawaiian Kahuna Magic, and is still a living tradition. Although not all Reclaiming priestesses and priests are Feri practitioners, there exists an initiatory lineage of Feri within San Francisco Reclaiming. See Cora Anderson, *Fifty Years in the Feri Tradition* (San Leandro, California: Cora Anderson, 1994; reprint, 2004).


\(^8\) Ibid., 41.

\(^9\) Ibid., 48.


lives. The Spiral Dance is interesting as a record of the evolution of Starhawk’s ideologies and concepts of gender. In the editions of The Spiral Dance that followed the first, she critiques her own writings, stating how her twenty years of working with the Reclaiming community and feminist politics have affected her own thoughts on magical polarity:

When I originally wrote this book...I believed, along with Jung, that each woman had within her a male self, and each man a female self. Now I find these concepts unhelpful and misleading. Today I don’t use the terms female energy and male energy. I don’t identify femaleness or maleness with specific sets of qualities or predispositions. While I have found images of the Goddess empowering to me as a woman, I now no longer look to the Goddesses and the Gods to define for me what man or woman should be. For any quality that has been assigned to one divine gender can elsewhere be found in its opposite. If we say, for example, “Male energy is aggressive,” I can easily find five aggressive goddesses without even thinking hard. If we say “Female energy is nurturing,” we can also find male gods who nurture.

This constitutes a major shift in both her gender theory, and her magical theory. In her notes she states that magical polarity was taught to her as part of the Feri tradition, and although it is a powerful force, it is only one way to understand energy. She no longer describes the essential erotic energy flow that sustains the universe as male/female polarity. She recognises that this makes heterosexuality the basic pattern and essentialises men and women’s characteristics. However, Starhawk’s conception of masculinity, though flexible, still rejects any model of God as father, and she requires men to connect with the Goddess to achieve ‘wholeness.’ Her continued focus on the birth metaphor in both text and ritual may serve to alienate men who want to focus on the re-sacralisation of the male body. The God, in her writings, can be described as a benign figure, mischievous perhaps, but not allowed the same ‘dangerous’ destructive potential of the Goddess. While this is understandable given that feminist Witchcraft developed in part as a reaction against the traditional image of omnipotent and vengeful male deity, the God presented by Starhawk may seem too innocuous to inspire a re-enchantment of masculinity.

Starhawk’s opinions, while part of the Reclaiming tradition, should not be taken as the last word on attitudes and understandings of masculinity. To discover what Reclaiming masculinity looks like, we must turn to sociological studies and the voices of the male members themselves. The most extensive ethnography of the Reclaiming movement was carried out by Norwegian scholar Jone Salomonsen. She spent several years within the Reclaiming tradition and published her findings in 2002. Regarding the early history of Reclaiming she notes that while female members were most active in spiritual work some noteworthy men had begun to mark the community’s spiritual work: Raven Moonshadow, Rick Dragonstongue, Jody Logan and David Miller. She states that most men seem to have found a place here only because they were feminist men, or sympathisers of feminism. Reclaiming classes (where students are taught elemental magic and ritual) ideally have a teaching couple consisting of two women, or a man and a woman, but never two men. This prohibition was meant to counter the students predisposed attitude of seeing men as religious authorities. Nearly half the classes taught in San Francisco Reclaiming during Salomonsen’s research period were for women only. Obviously, Salomonsen had access only to women’s and mixed groups for her research. What men do in public/social circles is different to what men do in secret. She acknowledges that the research now needed is a focused study of Reclaiming men.

RECLAIMING MEN

The chant below serves as a good introduction to men in this tradition. It was written by Reclaiming men and is used in their Witchcamps (intensive Reclalmign retreats), rituals and gatherings:

---

12 Ibid., 56.
13 Ibid., 20.
14 We must keep in mind that the general reader may not necessarily have read the latest edition of The Spiral Dance, and indeed the book has probably sold at its best in the first edition.
16 Ibid., 12.
17 Ibid., 45. Although I have not seen it mentioned anywhere in Reclaiming literature, I have since learned from personal communications with Reclaiming members that discussions were held at official meetings in 2006 about the prohibition on male teaching couples. I was told that at least one male teaching couple has been approved to conduct Reclaiming classes without the presence of a female teacher. These men had many years experience teaching in the Reclaiming tradition.
The Horned God is seen as the embodiment of animal and organic life and his image is often used in men’s only magical groups as an example of eco-friendly masculinity. David Miller is an author, priest, and teacher of Reclaiming who was instrumental in organising the traditions first men’s circles. He has become a well-known public figure, not least (it may be said) because he is now ‘consort’ to the Reclaiming ‘Goddess’ that is Starhawk. In his 2002 book, Miller writes that although at first the men were reserved and hesitant in his men’s circle, they ‘shepherded’ each other ‘through births, deaths, marriages, divorces, relationships, and fantasies.’ He leaned heavily on his men’s circle during difficult times and his circle brothers responded with helpful support and ritual. When Miller’s father died his circle buried his ashes under their garden plum tree. They had their own men’s Halloween, or Samhain, which eventually became a public men’s ritual. They made Green Man masks and wands:

A smiling, foliate face of the green man emerges from her [the Goddess’s] vulva…He is the spirit of vegetation, the growing vine. He emerges from her dark womb and speaks the secrets of nature…Like the stick wands, we knew that our cocks and our entire bodies were magical tools. We resolved in song, movement, and words that we would use our sacred bodies as magical tools of love and friendship – not as instruments of power over others…Let’s not use our bodies as weapons. Let’s especially not use our cocks as weapons.

Their inaugural circle spawned more men’s classes and workshops in San Francisco Reclaiming. Other male members of Reclaiming have participated in discussion about gender and masculinity almost since the group’s inception. In 1984 Reclaiming teacher David Kubrin published an article in the Reclaiming newsletter challenging what he saw as the confusing sexual debates within the community. His questions about the understanding of male sexuality and male mysteries within Reclaiming were prompted by hearing his young son singing songs from his mother’s women’s circle which said ‘we don’t need the men/ we don’t need to have them ‘round, except for now and then.’ Kubrin’s article instigated a newsletter discussion that lasted for years and presented the multifaceted masculinities of Reclaiming men. Rick Dragonstongue, a collective member and woman-identified man, but not gay, disagreed with Kubrin, saying that women and the Goddess must have greater ritual importance in order to approach a balance of spiritual power. Many Reclaiming women agreed with the politically correct attitude expressed by this statement.

Gender and sexism within the community was discussed recently as a theme section within Reclaiming Quarterly in 2005. Lynx Adamah, a female member, writes that although men within Reclaiming are willing allies with women in ending sexism, subtle sexism still exists in the form of men interrupting, not listening, confusing closeness and sex, pursuing connections with younger women etc. Male member, Jonathan Furst,

---

18 Moonshadow, Reclaiming and Friends.
19 Miller is very active in the community today. He holds workshops with Starhawk focusing specifically on magic for men and women. In this workshop, Starhawk and David make sacred and safe space for men and women to bring personal stories, challenges, and tales of love, struggle and conflict. Through sharing these experiences using the tools of magic and ritual, the participants work on finding the strength to face conflict creatively in their own communities, including that between women and men, and better support each other to take action to make peace in the larger world.
21 Ibid., 169, 294.
23 Salomonsen, Enchanted Feminism, 243.
agreed that subtle sexism existed in Reclaiming and states that it could only be transformed by men learning how to use their power well, learning when to step back and make room for others. Male teacher Keith Hennessy responded saying that this identifies men as the problem, instead of admitting that sexism is something we all participate in. Hennessy also stated that central to Reclaiming is the rejection of masculine-centric spirituality, and commented that the fact that the majority of elders, teachers, and organisers are women shows how Reclaiming interrupts and transforms sexism. When asked in a roundtable discussion about male roles in Reclaiming Keith had this to say:

Men's role in Reclaiming is to practice a feminist and queer-inspired transformation of male identity, body, and imagination; to innovate and experiment with masculinity; and to integrate a re-claimed femininity into a whole self that is more creative, more sexually mature and alive, more intuitive and intelligent, more connected to the web of life and death…Ritual with men and gay sexual healing have been laboratories for magic and prayer…Reframing the mature man as Earth steward, queer uncle and father to the world’s children, and as a sensitive artist and healer, is integral to the process of my spirituality, including my participation in Reclaiming.25

These men have found the Witchcraft tradition of Reclaiming vital to their selective reconstructions of masculinities. Viewing feminism as healing, instead of wounding, they transform and experiment with gender through ritual work with other men. They present an infinite variety of masculinities of changing face and form to represent their many roles, identities, sexualities and aspirations.

CONCLUSION: LIVING MASCULINITIES, RE-ENCHANTING MASCULINITIES

Although I have presented only a small sample of male Reclaiming members, their conceptions of male identity and masculinity are revealing. These men focus on many different images of male identity because they are disenchanted with the typical aggressive vision of masculinity. Many have come to the Reclaiming community fleeing from the authoritarian male God of monotheistic traditions. Consequently, they set their reconstructions of masculinity in opposition against a God who is patriarchal, solitary, and transcendent. Their transformation of masculinity also has a social function. Acceptance within the wider Reclaiming community of women and other genders requires that they project an acceptable image of masculinity that the community can appreciate and feel comfortable within spiritual work. Starhawk has commented that invoking masculine deities in Reclaiming ritual is difficult, as images that express power to some may frighten others.26 The men of Reclaiming are determined to restore masculine symbols that reflect love, compassion, and individual creative expression.

What the men in Reclaiming say about masculinity; that their bodies can and have been used as weapons of destruction, not tools of creation; that they need to transform to feel emotions and connection to the earth, shows how they conceive of contemporary masculinity as disenchanted. Reclaiming offers men freedom from stereotypical gender roles, although the Horned God and the Green Man may be seen as conforming to stereotypes about male vitality, aggression, and drive for progress. Essentialism has been raised as a problem by radical feminists for women within the movement because reinforcing the link between women and nature through the Goddess seems to conform to traditional religious and cultural dualisms. Scholar Kate Rigby notes that for men Goddess symbolism may perpetuate their construction of nature as ‘other.’ 27 It may be true that the privileging of the Goddess as a metaphor for creativity within Reclaiming does detract from men’s ability to see their bodies as sacred. However, I would argue that by focusing on the immanence of male deities men make a complementary connection to their bodies and the earth. Like the Goddess, the Gods in Reclaiming are conceived of as being in and of the world, not transcendent. By invoking the Horned God, the Green Man, Osiris, Pan, Dionysus and other male Gods as immanent, the Reclaiming tradition allows men to claim an intrinsic closeness to nature and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.28 Claims that these symbols are

28 It should be noted that ancient mythologies are almost always modified within the Reclaiming tradition so as not to perpetuate patriarchal ‘his-story’. My research has revealed a definite desire among the members of Reclaiming to move away from violent images of masculinity. A male Reclaiming teacher told me he felt that some people in Reclaiming still see the penis as a tool of violence because of the influence of radical feminism. He has had to work around this preconception but still encounters it.
essentialising gender must always be balanced with reference to the actual lived experience of men’s ritual and magical work in Reclaiming. The men I have introduced here do report that they feel closer to the earth, and also closer to other people as a result of their Reclaiming spirituality. Furthermore, by acknowledging that they have also been hurt by patriarchal limitations Reclaiming men can access a deeper connection with women. Part of their re-enchantment involves concentrating on integrating femininities to achieve a holistic vision of self-identity. While it is true that men may have to overcome feelings of guilt and inadequacy around being male, the Reclaiming community is committed to supporting and caring for its ‘brothers.’ Men within this progressive pagan movement are re-enchanting relational, supportive and inventive masculinities. It remains to be seen how Reclaiming masculinities will evolve and shift due to the increasing propensity to view gender and sexuality as fluid within this tradition.