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CURIOSITAS

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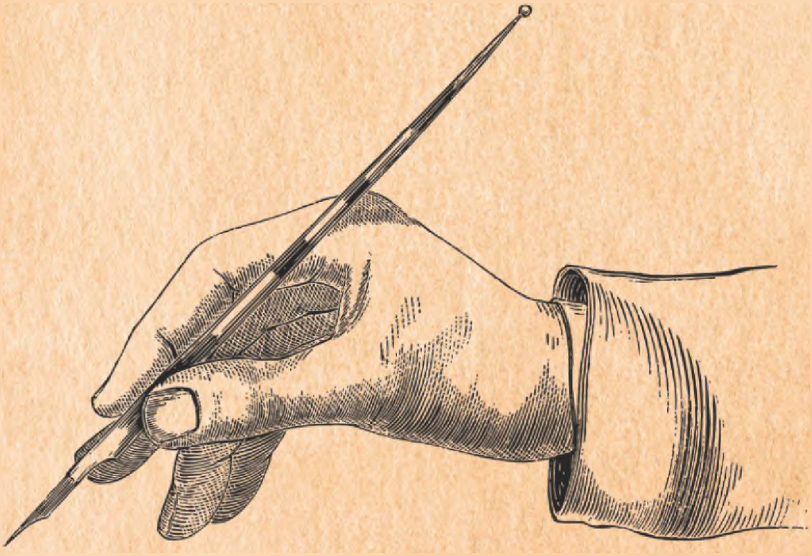

ORIGINS

ISSUE I VOLUME I

CURIOSITAS

Issue One: Origins

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Letter from the Editor

Welcome everyone to 'Origins', the inaugural issue of Curiositas. Curiositas is the new Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) Journal for the School of Humanities at York St John University, and our aim is to showcase the breadth and depth of humanities-based research, creativity, and methodological experimentation within this diverse school. When the idea of a PGR-led journal was proposed, we were insistent that it be edited, double-blind peer reviewed, and produced to the highest standards possible. This was to ensure that it could justifiably stand alongside other academic journals, but that it would also enable authors and reviewers to develop writing, peer review, publishing, and editorial skills. I think you will agree, after reading this issue, that we have achieved this, which is no mean feat for an editorial team who began with very little experience.

One of the most important aspects of Curiositas is that it is Open Access, which means that all articles are available free at the point of access to everyone without the need for membership fees our article purchases. This extends to our authors, as we do not charge anything for our researchers to publish with us. Enabling academic work and research to be accessed, and indeed understood, by all is deeply important to me, and fits within my ethos as a critical ecofeminism scholar and advocate. For those unfamiliar, one aspect of critical ecofeminism is the identification and subversion of the dualisms so inherent in contemporary Western society, dualisms that inevitably position one group as dominant and another as subordinate. In relation to Curiositas, this commitment is reflected in our aim to make cutting-edge scholarship accessible not only to those

within the university system, but also to those beyond it.

This inaugural issue was open to all humanities-based subjects and topics in order to encourage wide participation. We invited and accepted not only traditional academic papers, but also conference reviews and research-in-progress articles. The latter are particularly important; more informal pieces of writing enable researchers in the early stages of a project to share updates and, hopefully, open up spaces for dialogue and feedback. Offering such a wide range of contributions was important to us, as it supports a more inclusive and non-hierarchical academic writing space in which all ways of writing can shine. In future issues, we also hope to receive book reviews and academic research collaborations.

Within the pages of this issue, you can read the latest research and critical thinking on a range of thought-provoking and contemporary themes. These include three peer-reviewed academic papers exploring; goddess triple moon symbolism and its evolving place within changing definitions of femininity; the epistemic harms experienced by plant practitioners within the academic sphere; and an examination of utopia through the novel, Fahrenheit 451. This issue also includes articles documenting the early stages of a researcher's PhD journey, with specific reference to intra-actions between researcher, a habitual coffee shop and its inhabitants; an exploration of liveliness and agency in the non-human within two works of literature; and the phenomenon of hauntology, both as a felt presence within mental health spaces and later as a research framework for a PhD. Finally, we offer a report on the highly successful inaugural Haunted Soundscapes Symposium, held at York St John University during the autumn of 2025.

Not content with focusing solely on the production of the journal's first issue, Curiositas also collaborated on an event for York International Women's Week with Cultivate, the PGR-

led feminist journal from the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. The event, entitled Entangling Stories and Bodies Across York, was held on 4th March 2026 across both universities. Concurrent workshops invited people of all genders to share and write brief reflections drawn from their own lives or the lives of others, using body-shaped paper templates. That evening, both Curiositas and Cultivate met at SPARK in York to assemble these figures and their stories. Curiositas also took part in a PGR Publishing Training Day held at York St John University on 26th March 2026, where we offered advice and guidance on publishing within the journal, as well as insights into the journey of creating Curiositas itself.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the Curiositas Editorial Team, whose commitment has enabled this entire project to get off the ground. This issue would have been impossible without their spirit, enthusiasm, resilience, and dedication, and I offer my sincere thanks to Charlotte Ashley, Sophie Cameron, Sophie Day, Lowen Frampton-Thorburn, and Henry Gillson-Gant. We would also like to thank Romilly Palmer who worked with Curiositas on a Masters degree publishing placement and, along with Lowen, our Creative Editor, was responsible for the wonderful aesthetics of this journal. Thanks are also due to Megan Kilvington for expertise, guidance, and training on all matters relating to copyright and the ISSN; to Ian Staite for WordPress training; and to Richard Bracknellin and Danielle Shaw for invaluable peer-review training. Finally, our thanks and gratitude go to Sharon Jagger, Robert Barnes, Robert Edgar, and Anne-Marie Evans for their guidance, support, and wisdom.

Clare Lesley Hughes, Curiositas Editor In Chief

Curiositas: Origins

Volume I

Contents

Maiden, Mother, Crone: Reflections on the symbol of the Triple Moon within the changing 'feminine'

Niamh Drain

Abstract

Maiden-Mother-Crone (MMC), reflects the three stages of a woman's (female from birth) life from birth to death. Whilst contemporary feminist-motivated witchcraft is an emancipating place for some women – mainly white cis women – there are aspects of witchcraft and wider Neopaganism that do not represent modern-day practitioners. The symbol of the MMC has been critiqued for perpetuating a systematic categorisation of cis-women based on reproduction and cis-heteronormativity and reducing the lives and experiences of women to where they fit in with age and what they can offer the world and men (Stang 2021, 22-23). This study is a combination of autoethnographic & secondary research; through uncovering the established literature surrounding the MMC and my personal voice as a witch, it questions if the MMC dynamic necessarily represents the trajectory of the modern 'woman's' life? This research reveals that the MMC is not inclusive of all those who identify as female, and in fact projects certain expectations of who women should be in line with essentialism. It explores questions such as; what are the gender essentialist implications of MMC? Is the MMC symbol a self-sabotaging form of biological essentialist confinement, or does it continue to be a symbol of power for women? How does the MMC symbol fit within the lives of women who identify as women, but not are not female from birth (FFB)?

Maiden-Mother-Crone (MMC), the Triple Moon, the Triple Goddess: however, interpreted, this trinity (traditionally) reflects the three stages of a woman's (female from birth) life from birth to death. Mirrored within the patterns of nature, the moon and in the likeness of worldly goddesses and gods, MMC is a symbol that has transformed from the roots of Wicca to broader strands of contemporary Neopaganism. The interest in Neopagan practice and belief continues to grow through the freedom of self-initiation and self-knowledge facilitated by popular media such as Charmed (1998) and the platform of social media and the ever-growing WitchTok phenomenon (White 2022, 65). Combined with a blending of New Age and postfeminist female empowerment spaces and practices that make witchcraft accessible and easily digestible, the scope has widened to make space for the individuals who are choosing to identify as witches/Neopagan as a place of personal belonging and empowerment (Quilty 2025, 50). Whilst contemporary feminist-motivated witchcraft is an emancipating place for some women – mainly white cis women – there are aspects of witchcraft and wider Neopaganism that do not represent modern-day practitioners. The symbol of the MMC has been critiqued for perpetuating a systematic categorisation of cis-women based on reproduction and cis-heteronormativity and reducing the lives and experiences of women to where they fit in with age and what they can offer the world and men (Floyd 2017, Stang 2021, 22-23). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the Triple Moon symbol within the changing concept of the feminine. Does the Maiden-Mother-Crone dynamic necessarily represent the trajectory of the modern 'woman's' life? What are the gender essentialist implications of MMC? How does the MMC symbol fit within the lives of women who identify as women, but not FFB? Whilst there is scholarship on the MMC/Triple Moon symbol, modern scholarship on how it is used by modern witches is scarce and so I will aim to unpack modern understanding from an auto-eth-

nographic perspective asan eclectic witch where there are gaps in academic research. In terms of my auto-ethnographic position, there is a level of reflexivity regarding my existence as a heterosexual, female-from-birth and even white practitioner, however I do not dominate this work with self-evaluation. In the scope of what this paper sets out to achieve, my position is a privileged one, based off the fact that I fulfil the traditional imagery and symbolism of the MMC. Whilst I acknowledge this, I am critical of my own positioning and regulate bias where I can, to situate my research in the changing feminine, and not the traditional notion of the feminine.

Origns

Origins of the MMC can be found in the earlier works of Jane Harrison (1850-1928) and Robert Graves (1895-1985). Harrison introduces the Great Earth Mother of whom has 'three forms' and Graves puts forth the White Goddess of whom is referred to as a 'three-form goddess', compared to the seasons and linked to the phases of the moon (Mankey 2023, 309-311). In the early 1950's, Gerald Gardner emerges with Wicca, who based his theories on 'a gentle earth religion in which the goddess of fertility and the god of the hunt were venerated' (Berger 2005, p32). Within Gardnerian Wicca there is an emphasis on the duality of masculine and feminine energy which is reflected in the concept of the Horned God and the Triple Goddess, according to Helen Berger (2005, 32),

> The goddess is eternal but changes from maid to mother to crone [my emphasis]. The god is born of the goddess at Yule, grows to manhood and becomes the goddess's consort at Beltane.

Although there is an emphasis on the shared ener-

gy of masculine and feminine displayed in the High Priest and High Priestess indicating a dual dominance over the coven structure the continual focus on a god figure was not enough (Berger 2005, 33). The need for a greater woman-emphasis came from Starhawk, who widens the scope through Reclaiming and feminist witchcraft (Berger 2005, 38). Through Starhawk, the transformation of the Goddess and who she spiritually, physically and politically represents, the concept of the goddess, the witch and the woman become intertwined, facilitated by a spiritual-activist mentality of 'the personal as political' (White 2022, 60). Similarly to the sentiments of Carol P Christ (1979, 278) and her concept of the goddess not being an 'out there belief', but the goddess being the embodiment of the individual, the focus on the goddess~woman becomes the centre of Starhawk's witchcraft. In The Spiral Dance (1979), Starhawk is able to articulate what exactly the Triple Moon symbol means in relation to individual aspects of MMC, how practitioners/women can access the symbol and how it can be worked with within praxes.

Contemporary interpretations of the MMC is influenced by Mankeys (2023, 308) concept of the folk religion which refers to how over the years practice, knowledge and experience has amalgamated with Wiccan tradition to form the Wicca and broader Neopaganism we know today, evidenced in the contemporary interpretation of the MMC. Mankey (2023, 308) claims that this 'represents an active creative phenomenon, with practitioners shaping the concept of MMC to suit their own needs', therefore it would be productive for practitioners of Wicca and Neopaganism to continue shaping symbols such as MMC to suit their representational needs. From a practitioner standpoint, my belief is too that the MMC should suit the need of the individual, within my practice, I take what I need from the symbol,

whether that be goddesses such as Frejya who sitswithin the Mother aspect, who embodies fertility as a symbol of spiritual growth.

Maiden, Mother Crone: Symbolism and Imagery

Noted in Bergers work, (2005, 32) Gardners goddess is 'eternal but changes from maid to mother to crone' interwoven between the eight sabbats of the year, linking her inherently to nature and the rhythm and cycles of life as well as the Moon, an important aspect of the MMC (Berger 2005, 32). Attributing the likeness of the goddess with aspects of nature and the cosmos it automatically places her within the confines of the feminine and the characteristics of the feminine. In the context of the Triple Moon, the feminine and woman are one in the same – the woman is feminine and the feminine is woman, which is traditionally how the sex/gender constructs of male/man ~ female/woman have been defined evidenced in Gardners notion of 'maid to mother to crone' (Berger 2005, 32). Through her exploration of the relationship between women, the moon, nature and the menstrual cycle, Kari Norgaard (2000, 205) states that the 'ideas of gender and nature intersect and shape one another', more importantly, Norgaard explains:

> We mean two things when we say "feminine nature" or "masculine nature" […] In using these terms, we are not only reinforcing specific gender roles, but different interpretations of nature. Feminine nature is creative, live -giving, fertile, nuturing, while masculine nature is violent, aggressive, and competitive […] Women may be closer to a nurturing nature that is fertile and reproduces.

Women have been linked to the natural world, because

the feminine attributes that define a woman are nurturing, emotional, life-giving, and nature is also nurturing and life-giving. Furthermore, the MMC is often referred to as the Triple Moon, influenced by the way the phases of the Moon fall on specific sabbats and how each of the three phases match up to a specific moon phase, Robert Graves makes reference to this,

> As the New Moon or Spring she was a girl: as the Full Moon or Summer she was a woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was a Hag The New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination (Mankey 2023, p311).

The commonality of the Moon, the Earth and some understanding of the Goddess create a foundation of belief for Neopagan practitioners and there is a general understanding that the Moon is feminine, and therefore most closely related (traditionally) to women (Starhawk 2011, 67). This connection is acknowledged through the parallels between the lunar cycle and the reproductive cycle of women and through goddesses associated with the Moon such as Selene, Luna and Hecate (Cutler, Schleidt, Friedmann, Preti & Stine 1987, Starhawk 2011, 67)). Whilst Starhawk (2011, p15) states that the symbol of the Goddess is both the Earth and the Moon, the Moon is more closely related to the practitioner as an individual, as she emulates the three aspects of the Moon and represents the Mother Goddess. My witchcraft is heavily centred around the Moon and the Earth, and so to be seen and represented within a symbol that encapsulates both those things, alongside the overall energy of the feminine, is powerful as it adds potency when I am connecting in with my goddesses in my praxes.

Maiden

Being the first of three aspects of the MMC, the Maiden is the embodiment of youth and new life, her energy is denoted as young girl and the potential that youth can bring. Within this, there is a focus on 'virginal' language and imagery, noted by Starhawk (2011, 35) as the 'virgin patroness of birth and initiation'. Portrayed as either the Waxing Moon or the New Moon, the Maiden symbolises new beginnings, rebirth, renewal, planning, clarity, intention, life. Starhawk (2011, 263) describes the Maiden as 'the Virgin – not chaste, but belonging to herself alone, not bound to any man. She is the wild child, lady of the woods, the huntress, free and untamed'. The Maiden is often portrayed as Artemis or Kore (Persephone) and associated with Spring, and whilst she symbolises life, she also symbolises rebirth after the Crone aspect of the Triple Moon (Starhawk 2011, 67).

Mother

The Mother aspect is notably the most important given the ability to reproduce and take on the role of the Mother. She is reflected as the Full Moon, symbolising fullness: physically, she is at a stage of completion: spirituality, bound for motherhood and at this time she is the object of anything other than herself. Starhawk (2011, 263) describes the Mother as 'the full moon, she is the mature woman, the sexual being, the mother the nurturer, giver of life, fertility, grain, offspring, potency, joy […] her colours are red of blood and the green of growth'. The Mother is portrayed as Demeter (the mother of Kore/Persephone), in Dianic Wicca she is Hera and Minerva (Johnson 2009, 317). At the Mother stage, a woman is the goddess, emulating the life-giver: however, she is the penultimate stage of a woman's life which is potentially uninspiring,

she is both venerated for her mercy and sacrifice, yet vilified for her depleting sexual sprightliness (Goertz 2014, 104).

Crone

The Crone marks the final aspect of the Triple Moon, honouring the latter third of a woman's life: for Starhawk (2011, 263), the Crone represents 'the old woman, past menopause, the hag or crone that is ripe with wisdom, patroness of secrets, prophecy, divination, inspiration and power'. Societally, the Crone has been the most disregarded aspect of the MMC as she is commonly associated with stereotypical depictions of the witch and evil, and given that she has surpassed menopause and is mentioned as being an old woman, she fades away. The Crone is known as the Waning or the Dark Moon, associated with the shadow side and darkness and she is connected to Hecate, Ceridwen and Kali (Starhawk 2011, 263).

MMC: Issues and Implications

Historically the symbol of MMC has been a way of showing who the Goddess is whilst, simultaneously perpetuating the myth that there once was a matriarchal Great Goddess who governed the Earth. The myth of a prehistoric matriarchal society is one perpetuated by archaeologist and anthropologist, Marija Gimbutas (1981, 4), who's research claims that before 'Old Europe ended' and became 'dominated by males and male gods', there was an 'era of female dominance in religion [that] is documented as continuous throughout some 25,000 years'. It is coined the 'myth' of matriarchal prehistory by scholars such as Cynthia Eller, who in The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory (2002) defines it as a myth due to the lack of historical evidence. In Relativizing the Patriarchy (1991,

281), Eller states 'this sacred history…is an effort to deal religiously with a challenge faced by all feminists: that of finding an adequate explanation for the existence and persistence of male dominance'. In critique of Eller's dismissive use of 'myth' Max Dashú (2005, 186) – whilst also accepting that the concept is historically inaccurate – confronts Eller's dismissal of 'matristic histories as a myth'. Whilst there may be intentions of creating an emblem of empowerment and a vessel for embodying the Goddess that (maybe) once existed, what does the MMC actually do for women but create expectations and limitations? MMC represents women, but in actuality, it is a triad that has been constructed, based on the opinion and outlook of men, evidenced by Graves and Gardners influence. Even discussions surrounding the feminine and the Moon are influenced by the works of Carl Jung, who after reducing the feminine to the 'problematic counterpart' and describing the anima as 'man's bitch and burden (Sadoff 1978, 93). A similar sentiment shared by Irigaray who critiques Simone de Beauvoir's use of 'Woman as Other', by saying that 'the other is the same' – the other is the bi-product of the male, 'all that he has repressed and disavowed' (Whitford 1991, 24).

Jung goes on to award the feminine with the likeliness of the Moon as a way of softening the blow of insulting the 'problem' with feminine intelligence (Jung 1969, 93). Whilst the Moon is powerful, 'it's light is the 'mild' light which speaks to the hierarchical differences that have been awarded to the feminine-masculine (Jung 1969, 94). Whilst there is a level of reverence in the Moon and how she is associated with the Great Goddess – a formidable power of matriarchy – Jung disparages the feminine and the association with the Moon as a consolation of being man's secondary (Jung 1969, 94). This is not only furthered by the language used to describe Jungs theory: 'Jung solves this problem by

deciding that woman's consciousness' or 'Jung now allows women intelligence' it is then sealed with the thought that,

> The female consciousness is somehow more mysterious and less verifiable than is male, and must therefore fail to make adequate judgements and distinctions (Jung 1969, 94).

If the feminine is likened to the Moon as a way of softening abjection, then how does the MMC sustain a symbol of the Goddess as a way of positively representing women? Whilst feminist scholar Carol P Christ (1979, 278) has critiqued the MMC symbol on the basis of biological essentialism, in her work Why Women need the Goddess (1979) it is important to note that she does perpetuate the affirmation of the female body based on cis-women and the biological processes of cis-women. In the context of the MMC being a symbol of patriarchal origin, she notes that:

> Some [women] would assert that the Goddess definitely is not "out there", that the symbol of divinity "out there" is part of the legacy of patriarchal oppression, which brings with it the authoritarianism, hierarchically, and dogmatic rigidity associated with biblical monotheistic religions.

Christ (1979, 278) goes on to say that,

> They [women] might assert that the Goddess symbol reflects the sacred power within women and nature, suggesting the connectedness between women's cycles of menstruation, birth and menopause and the life and death cycles of the universe.

The sacred power within 'women and nature' reinforces the connection women have with nature, but it also essentialises women and the processes that take place within the woman's body. The belief that all women do, and can live out all three stages of MMC, places focus on the characteristics that define womanhood, at the centre of which is the womb (Floyd 2017, 17). Whilst menstruation, birth and menopause may be the traditional cycles that take place within a woman, they only take place within a woman who identifies as FFB. What's more, menstruation, birth and menopause are assumed 'natural'1 processes that exist for all women. The perception that all women (FFB) pass through each of the three natural stages successfully is inaccurate: according to an article published by The Guardian (Thomas, 2025) based on a survey carried out across 60,000 women in England in 2023,

> 28% of respondents were living with a reproductive morbidity, such as pelvic organ prolapse, uterine fibroids, endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome, or cervical, uterine, ovarian or breast cancer.

Therefore, whilst women naturally menstruate, there are a myriad of women who are affected on a daily basis by problems pertaining to their menstrual cycle, which in turn can have an adverse effect on their ability to reproduce. For trans women who do not menstruate, the aspect of the Maiden comes into question regarding menstruation, and consequently, every aspect of the MMC, as it is based on the cisgendered processes and biological phases of a woman's life (Floyd 2017, 54). In the context Neopaganism, some strands such as Dianic Wicca and the Reclaiming Tradition sacralise menstruation and hold menstruation rituals that aim to reclaim the female body, and transform the narrative surrounding blood, from 'dirty' to 'power' (Christ 1979, 282; Fedele 2014, 24). This further excludes the experience of trans women within witch-

craft and Neopaganism and segregates certain rituals and practices based off of essentialism (Quilty 2025, 102-103).

Aside from the focus on menstruation, the Maiden is ladened heavily with virginal symbolism: whether this is interpreted as a manifestation of new life and the cycle of life, death and rebirth taking place, the focus on the hypersexual connotation of 'virgin' can be contentious. The issue with labelling the Maiden as 'virgin' continues the objectification and sexualisation of women and emphasises the state of purity that women are conditioned to be in during their youth. Additionally, there is also the consideration that the male holds dominance within the transition from Maiden to Mother: the traditional view of virginity and the 'taking of', involves male-female intercourse, and so even in reclaimed imagery of the Goddess, the male still holds a position of power. Furthering this, the motivation of the feminist cause is to facilitate a space to move women away from loaded imagery and symbolism, however Carol P Christ (2016) explains that through the MMC it:

> Affirms young women as sex objects while shaming them as sluts; celebrates mothers on Mother's Day, while providing few legal and economic protections for mother; ignores older women.

Since traditional views of what sex means have moved away from heteronormative intercourse between a cis woman and man, the parameters of what traditional language around 'virginity' entails have shifted. I would also argue that this has an impact on the Mother aspect: again, traditional views of sex and virginity would take into consideration the fact that sex was only for reproduction and so where does sex and the loss of virginity between non-cis women and men fit in with the Maiden aspect and moving into the Mother? However, the

Maiden can be a supportive and affirmative place for women, in Kodi Maiers (2021, 175) work, she likens Laika's Coraline character to the Maiden who possesses no association to the virginal imagery that the Maiden traditionally aligns itself with. Instead, the Maiden is the 'curious, intelligent, questing, unpossessed, ambitious, hopeful, passionate, restless, innovative, careless, unpredictable, frustrated, unsure, extreme' that Shan describes in Into the Dark: Paganism & Ageing (1987, 38).

At age 28, the Maiden moves into the Mother stage and stays here until the age of 56, when the final aspect of the Crone takes shape (Shan 1987, 38). The aspect of the Mother is more easily digestible than the Maiden, as it embodies the archetype it claims the name of; however, the Mother highlights a multitude of issues in how it truly represents all women in contemporary Neopaganism. Symbolism of the Mother is inherently what is constructed as feminine; discussions on the Mother particularly by Starhawk (2011) describe the Mother in line with the Great Goddess and the Earth. The Full Moon is a sign that at the Mother, the woman is in her fullest power reflective in the opacity of the Moon at this point in the cycle, also suggesting that the womb is at its most fruitful and ready for birth. In portraying the Mother this way, it gives credence to perpetuated essentialist notions of what women are conditioned to be and presumes their 'fullest' time in their lives is when they are ready to become pregnant and give birth. The issue with the Mother is that it is bound within gender norms which equate the Mother with motherhood: for women who cannot have children, trans women, or women who choose not to have children, this highlights an issue for how MMC represents all women in their Mother phase. Mankey (2023, 318) explores the changing notion of the MMC from the voices of practitioners, explaining that individuals in the LGBTQ+IA community are being disregard-

ed and ignored based off the fact that they can not relate to how the Mother is presented. This is furthered by female witches who have chosen not to have children, due to the focus on childbirth and the sacrality of the womb (Mankey 2023, 318). Challenging the Mother aspect, is to challenge the meanings of the words associated with the Mother, particularly its association with nurturing. For those who do not identify with the Mother in the literal sense of the word, a different kind of relatability is needed if the MMC symbol is still to be deemed useful with witchcraft and Neopaganism. Carol P Christ (1979, 281) makes reference to this, saying:

> The life-giving powers of the Goddess in her creative aspect are not limited to physical birth, for the Goddess is also seen as the creator of all the arts of civilisation, including healing, writing, and the giving of just law. Women in the middle of life who are not physical mothers may give birth to poems, songs and books, or nurture other women, men and children. They too are incarnations of the Goddess in her creative, life-giving aspect.

Career, vocation, personal choice, travelling, socio-economic factors, amongst other things hold greater priority than having children or for some women, they choose to have children later, to fulfil other forms of nurturing. Written in a blog post titled When Maiden, Mother, Crone isn't right… Joanna Van Der Hoeven (2013) explains that 'this triple goddess, however, leaves me a bit cold. Childless by choice, I have no relationship with the Mother aspect of Her, and absolutely no desire for one'. Joanna (2013) goes on to share similar sentiments to the above exert from Christ, but takes it further by saying 'to me, the term mother has always been a literal one. It is partly why I don't believe in an all-loving Mother Goddess. I have a physical mother and no need for a

metaphysical one'. In sharing her experience with the Mother, Joanna (2013) found that substituting the Mother for another figure such as the Priestess or Queen gave her similar symbolisms without the literality of the term Mother. Reflecting on Joanna's account and personal experience as a witch myself, the symbol of the MMC can be relative, flexible and open to reconfiguration based on the personal needs of the individual. In reference to the Mother, what is interesting is that as I turn 28 this year, I do not align with the symbolisms of the Mother from a physical perspective, however, I still accept that this could be a trajectory for some women. Whilst the MMC in its core symbolism does not represent me or my life, I choose to navigate around and interchange parts of each stage: as I move into the Mother, I am not nurturing a child, but instead nurturing my career and small business.

The most intriguing aspect of the MMC, is the final symbol of the Crone, her association with the stereotypical notion of the witch has added an additional layer of distain for the symbol of the aged. The Crone has historically and socially been the most feared figure, she is the depiction of evil in fairy tales and the colloquial term for an older woman (Stephens 2020, 383). When it comes to reclamation, the Crone has been transformed: once demonised, she is now celebrated as a gateway to honouring the wisdom that comes with growing old and passing menopause. In the aspect of the Crone, may come the ability to do the things the Mother couldn't, as the majority of her life has been taken up by fulfilling the traditional feminine role of caring for children, husband and tending to the home (Enzner-Probst 2002, 129). Freedom also means to lose one's inhibition, and to live out their life in however which way they choose. The devaluation of a woman is again based on her appearance, her biological functions and her societal roles: at the point of the Crone, post-menopausal, the

woman is no use to society anymore (Enzner-Probst 2002, 129). Whilst there is evidence of women reclaiming the Crone through croning ceremonies; the associations of ageism, traditional gender roles and the preceding biological bodily functions of menstruation continue to define women based on their reproductive roles. Questions such as, 'does the woman have to have emulated the literal meaning of the Mother to be able to move into her Crone aspect?' and 'can a woman who does not identify as FFB relate to the Crone aspect if she has never experienced the menopause?' must be considered for those who identify as trans women or infertile women.

Whilst age is a dominating aspect of the Crone, so too is wisdom: the accumulated life experience that a woman in her Crone phase possess is an important aspect of the MMC. The Crone also signifies endings and death, and at the point of the Crone, it essential for the cycle of life to continue, that the Crone shares her wisdom, Starhawk (2011, 65) makes reference to this:

> A waning crescent […] she is the Old Woman, the Crone […] the power of ending, of death […] life feeds on death.

Whilst Starhawk prefaces the above passage with how the Crone is a post-menopausal woman, for trans women and infertile women who struggle to relate to the Crone, focussing on how they can harness their wisdom and share their knowledge could be a productive way of embodying the Crone, and could make future strives for those who are not female from birth. In Lydia K Mannings (2012, 6) work on croning rituals, she explains that,

1. The croning ritual is a ritual maker for celebration

and entryway into elderwise womanhood and 2. The croning ritual serves as a way for women to gain visibility and validation as aging women in American society.

Whilst Mannings research only includes the experiences of cis-women, in her hypothesis of what a croning ritual is and does, there is no explicit exclusion of trans women, or the mention of menopause. There is further emphasis on celebration of age, rite of passage, validation and reclamation of womanhood: whilst not dismissing the transition of menopause for women who do experience it, could there also be the possibility of removing the scientific-biological aspects of the Crone and simply focus on the deepened wisdom, and the embrace of later life? In a similar vein to what Joanna Van Der Hoeven previously said, whilst the Crone represents the third aspect of the MMC, one could substitute the Crone for another goddess that simply celebrates wisdom or intuition such as Frigg.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the MMC symbol reinforces biological and gender essentialism, reducing the feminine to stereotypical roles and concepts of who traditionally, 'women' should be. To compile a woman's life into three stages that are clearly marked out with where they should be biologically and socially is not conducive for a symbol that supposedly supports the empowerment and reclamation of women. Upholding women who identify as FFB with a focus on menstruation, procreation and menopause, does not create an inclusive space for women who identify as trans, infertile women or those who choose not to procreate. The MMC will always be associated with the feminine life cycle: whilst it is not traditionally a heterogeneous symbol, in order for it to be relatable

to all women, it has to become a heterogeneous symbol. Upon reflection, there is no presiding dogma with Neopagan practice: practitioners have the freedom to find relatability in what works for them, Women are making strides to find their own way to relate to the MMC through redefining the three stages, or working with the spiritual symbolism instead of following the essentialist underpinnings.

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Smothered Voices and Epistemic Harm: How Wortcunners Navigate Spirituality and Legitimacy in British Academia.

Dr Clare Lesley Hughes

Abstract

This paper investigates how epistemic injustices and harms are perceived and experienced within the British university system by practitioners of nature-based spiritualities. This study draws on semi-structured interviews alongside an autoethnographic component, in which I also interviewed and analysed my own experiences. Interviews were conducted between March and October 2025 and explored the enchanted yet marginalised experiences of plant practitioners living in Britain, also known as wortcunners (from Old English wort, meaning 'plant' or 'root' and cunner, meaning 'one who knows'). Within this research emerged accounts that highlighted how the spiritualities of university-based wortcunners (staff and students) occupied an uneasy and precarious position within dominant academic paradigms. Through their testimonies, I identified various entangled epistemic harms, including testimonial smothering, testimonial betrayal, contributory injustice, and dynamic hermeneutical injustice where wortcunners described being cautioned against "coming out" as witches, observed colleagues belittled or bullied for their spiritual plant practices, and fearing professional retribution or reputational damage. Others adopted self-deprecating language to frame their spirituality as "quirky" or "woo-woo" to maintain academic legitimacy or endured "mortifying" silences when attempting to articulate

spiritual experiences. Collectively, these accounts reveal a snapshot of how nature-based spiritual knowledges are rendered vulnerable within the British university system, and how wortcunners are compelled to navigate and balance spiritual identity with academic legitimacy in environments that privilege normative and dominant Western knowledge systems.

Introduction

The General Concept

The concept of epistemic harm provides a crucial framework for understanding how certain forms of knowledge and experience are rendered less credible within societies where a dominant paradigm prevails. In 2007, Miranda Fricker's seminal publication, Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing, explored two overarching forms of epistemic harm or injustice that have been widely applied across sociological and feminist epistemologies to examine how power imbalances affect and structure knowledge production and its credibility. These are testimonial injustice, whereby "a speaker receives an unfair deficit of credibility from a hearer owing to prejudice on the hearer's part" (Fricker 2007, 9), and hermeneutical injustice when "someone has a significant area of social experience obscured from understanding owing to prejudicial flaws in shared resources for social interpretation" (Fricker 2007, 147). Together, these two forms of injustice or harm expose how epistemic credibility is unevenly distributed across social and institutional contexts.

Numerous authors have taken Fricker's 2007 work and have further explored and refined both testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, harms and oppressions, including Fricker (Fricker 2013; Fricker, Peels and Blaauw 2016;

Fricker 2017) and Allen (2017), Blackmore (2024), Boni & Velasco (2020), Byskov (2021), Coady (2017), Dotson (2011, 2012, 2014), Dunne (2023), Giladi (2018), Godrie et al. (2020), Kotzee (2017), McKinnon (2016), Medina (2017a, 2017b, 2020, 2021, 2022), and Wanderer (2017). I expand briefly on some of the broader concepts below.

Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustices

Testimonial injustices can be understood through three related perspectives: transactional testimonial injustice, where credibility deficits arise within specific interactions between a speaker and a hearer; structural testimonial injustice, where these deficits are sustained, patterned, and reproduced through wider social or institutional arrangements; and testimonial betrayal, a harm that occurs between individuals who share "thick relations of intimacy" (Wanderer 2017, 28, 35). Kristie Dotson develops the concepts of testimonial quieting when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower and testimonial smothering when the speaker perceives one's audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony, resulting in the truncating of the speaker's own testimony (Dotson 2011, 242, 244). Dotson identifies a further form of epistemic oppression as contributory injustice in which a marginalised group possesses the conceptual resources to understand and articulate their experiences but is faced with a dominant group that refuses to adopt or even engage with those resources, thereby maintaining structural ignorance (Dotson 2012, 31).

Hermeneutical injustices can include source hermeneutical injustices that can be either semantically produced whereby harms that have resulted from the unavailability of

labels and cases where understanding fails because words are lacking, and those that are performatively produced where knowers and subjects are judged as less intelligent because of their communicative style as opposed to the actual words used (Fricker 2007; Medina 2017a, 45). There are also dynamic hermeneutical injustices that can be institutional, where institutions refuse to accept specific categories and expressive styles to the detriment of particular portions of society and interpersonal injustices that result in behaviours such as micro-aggressions, sceptical stares, etc. (Medina 2017a, 46). Hermeneutical injustices can also vary in breadth (where concepts can either be vastly beyond the reach of even the communicator, or conveyed in principle), and in their depth of harm (from skin deep harm isolated to just one aspect of a person's life, to harm that is "Marrow of the Bone" and causes considerable repercussions across all aspects of a person's life)(Medina 2017a, 47). Hermeneutical harm can also appear as willful hermeneutical ignorance when "dominantly situated knowers refuse to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally [and] such refusals allow dominantly situated knowers to misunderstand, misinterpret, and/or ignore whole parts of the world" (Pohlhaus 2012, 715).

Injustice and Spirituality in the Western University System

Western educational institutions play a central role in perpetuating epistemic injustices, as demonstrated across numerous studies (Allen 2017; Blackmore 2024; Boni & Velasco 2020; Dunne 2023; Foucault 2003; Godrie et al. 2020; Kotzee 2017; Reibold 2023). Allen (2017), for example, argues that the disciplining of knowledge systems within the academy enabled "the eradication of false or non-knowledge, the homogenisation and normalisation of the content

of knowledge, the centralisation of knowledge around core axioms, and the hierarchisation of different forms of knowledge production," a process formalised through the rise of the modern university as an institution that "selected some knowledge and disqualified others" (Allen 2017, 191). The effects of this hierarchy are disproportionately felt by marginalised groups, including women, non-binary people, and people of colour, whose epistemic harms are often complex, overlapping, and irreducible (Dotson 2014). Reibold (2023) further outlines how forms of willful or motivated ignorance manifest in university settings, including credibility deficits in cases of gendered discrimination, the discounting of student knowledge due to presumed lack of expertise, and the structural burdens placed on women as caregivers. All of which limit epistemic participation and constrain academic flourishing.

Together with these epistemic injustices, practitioners of non-normative or marginalised spiritualities encounter additional layers of spiritual injustice in Western universities. Shahjahan (2005) argues that peer-review systems, dominant disciplinary norms, publishing gatekeeping, and even ethical review mechanisms reproduce colonial epistemic hierarchies that diminish or exclude spiritual knowledge forms (Shahjahan 2005, 691). Panin's (2015) work on Pagan Theology similarly highlights the suspicion or hostility directed toward pagan scholars: their work being perceived as "dangerous for the academia" (Panin 2015, 604) due to the dominant model of European Religious Studies which remains shaped by scientism, empiricism, and historicism frameworks often positioned as "clean" or "untouched" by insider perspectives (Panin 2015, 604). However, research on paganism conducted without some degree of personal entanglement can itself hinder the collection of rich data and may obscure meaning (Harrington 2004; Zwissler 2018b).

This tension contributes to concerns within pagan communities that the academicisation of paganism risks becoming "dogmatic, overgeneralising and ecumenist" (Panin 2015, 605). Recent scholarship calls not only for critique, but also for a transformative reimagining. Zembylas (2025) suggests that scholars can resist Eurocentric epistemic-affective regimes through practices of refusal and affective activism, where emotions can function as political acts, and where feelings such as anger, hope, or vulnerability become forms of resistance against dominant power relations. Whilst Zembylas insists that such practices alone are insufficient, their presence can contribute to the creation of new academic spaces that cultivate less violent pedagogical and research practices for marginalised scholars (Zembylas 2025, 803).

This marginalisation extends sharply to contemporary witchcraft and related spiritual practices. Charnock and Schaller (2025) poignantly ask, what kind of spell are we under? The answer: "a dispellment, the systematic disavowal of witching as both epistemology and ontology within the knowledge-industrial complex" (Charnock and Schaller 2025, 410) and even when witchcraft does appear in the academy, it is often restricted to specific disciplines.

> We notice too that within the humanities, witchcraft tends to be studied predominantly by historians and literature departments…In the context of the former, this is because witchcraft belongs to the past; in the latter, because it belongs to the imaginary world of fiction. Elsewhere in the academy, witchcraft in the contemporary is positioned as a question for anthropology and sociology and, more recently, geography (Charnock and Schaller 2025, 408).

Such an observation highlights how contemporary witchcraft is epistemically contained within the academy.

Epistemic Limitations and Cautions

Defining epistemic injustices, oppressions, and harms too narrowly can cause further problems. While Fricker's original account provides a robust foundation for understanding testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, subsequent scholars have argued that her framework does not fully capture the intricacies, depth or persistence of the epistemic harms experienced by marginalised groups. Kristie Dotson (2011, 2012, 2014), who extended and critiques Fricker by introducing the concepts of testimonial smothering and epistemic oppression, emphasises that epistemic harms are often pre-emptive, anticipatory, and rooted not in mere isolated exchanges, but within the very structure of dominant epistemic systems. Unlike Fricker, who treats epistemic injustice as a malfunction within an otherwise workable epistemology and society, Dotson, who works within the experiencing of women of colour and black feminisms, argues that many forms of epistemic harm are irreducible, meaning they cannot be remedied through any improved hearer practices because the system itself lacks the conceptual resources to recognise specific knowledges as intelligible (Dotson 2014, 116). Dotson (2012) goes as far as to say that Fricker's narrow definitions of epistemic injustices, "if allowed to shape hermeneutical resources, will perpetuate epistemic oppression" (Dotson 2012, 41). Dotson's accounts, therefore, highlight the epistemic vulnerability of individuals whose ways of knowing and indeed, being fall outside Western dominant norms.

Further caution is advised by Pohlhaus, Jr. (2017),

who states that:

> Epistemic injustices are something that occur within the activities and institutions knowers engage in order to know, and given that a chapter that seeks to convey knowledge concerning the varieties of epistemic injustice does, by definition, engage in epistemic activity, we would do well to consider at the outset the ways in which this essay might itself participate in and perpetuate epistemic injustice (Pohlhaus 2017, 13).

Pohlhaus Jr. therefore does not offer an exhaustive list of the varieties of epistemic injustice and prefers to offer initial examples of epistemic injustices so that "readers may begin to understand the grammar of the term "epistemic injustice for future and new use" (Pohlhaus 2017, 13). Hence, this paper will also work in the same reflexive way, and I acknowledge my positioning as a white female academic and the positioning of the testimonies of the wortcunners who all identified as either white female or white non-binary individuals. Whilst themes are uncovered, explored and attributed to various concepts of epistemic harm, this paper does not claim to offer the whole picture, merely the partial situatedness of the wortcunners and the researcher.

Methodology

Designing and implementing a feminist-led and reflexive methodology was of utmost importance to this research project, as it aimed to yield the richest data from individuals who embodied various nature-based spiritualities (for the context of this paper, defined as a spirituality that recognises the natural world as sacred, vital and intercon-

nected), including healer, witch, herbalist, pagan, etc. When studying pagan communities, Zwissler (2018) suggests that we have an ideal opportunity to reflect on and adapt methodologies that explore and push the boundaries of self-reflexivity and integration, particularly as these groups of people tend to emphasise spiritual experiences and where active and personal engagement is desired and encouraged. The design stages of this research methodology, therefore, presented a perfect opportunity to construct a bespoke and targeted methodological approach that enabled a data-rich environment while also ensuring that participants were protected, enabled, and mutually benefited from the interaction.

As a wortcunner and pagan myself, with complementary visible tattoos, it would have been impossible for me to opt for a position of neutrality and would have been reductive. As Harrington (2004) states,

> if we are to develop the study of paganism, it would perhaps be of value to become more reflexive in our work. Rather than trying to eradicate the researcher's personality and pretend that they do not have bias or personal interests by adopting a pseudoscientific approach in a non-scientific field, we could instead aim for further reflexivity (Harrington 2004, 78).

Throughout this study, therefore, I opted for constant reflexivity to guard against bias whilst fully engaging with the rhetoric and discourse offered to me.

The development of rapport was also central to the methodology, reflecting feminist commitments to non-hierarchical, reflexive research (Oakley 1998; Sultana 2007, 375).

I initially chose to adopt a “friendly stranger” role (Letherby 2003, 129), thereby normalising the participants’ experiences, while acknowledging inevitable power imbalances (Campbell et al. 2010 ; Flores et al. 2022, 212–213). However, during the first interview, it became apparent that the shift into what Harvey (2004, 251–253) termed “Guesthood,” a form of participation in mutually enlightening dialogue without fully inhabiting the participants lived experiences, was the most productive and natural approach in maintaining rapport with the wortcunners and their nature-based spiritualities. In adopting a closer relationship with the wortcunners, reflexivity became even more critical and central to my approach, particularly given the substantial shared ground between myself and the participants. By privileging semi-structured engagement techniques, as well as constant reflexive engagement, the study not only captured the wortcunners experiences, but enabled them to verbalise, not only the explicit forms of epistemic harm, but also the more subtle hermeneutical injustices.

Between March and October 2025, twenty-five wortcunners were interviewed using a semi-structured and autoethnographic framework and were recruited through requests posted on social media, word of mouth and ‘snowballing’ from wortcunners who had previously been interviewed. My own positioning within a university environment, as an active wortcunner, also yielded contacts. The stipulations were that all participants were 18 years of age or older, had an interest in plants, whether medicinally or spiritually, and that they resided in the United Kingdom. Additionally, participants were required to identify as female (cis or trans) or non-binary. No stipulations were placed on nationality, ethnicity, culture or level of plant-based knowledge or education.

The research proposal was approved by the York St John University Ethics Committee and Interviews were conducted either via Teams or in mutually agreeable face-to-face settings. No time limit was placed on the interviews, and the wortcunners were encouraged to digress into other spiritual topics of their choosing, thereby enabling me, the researcher, to respond to unfolding situations (Waddell 2016) and adapt the focus in pursuit of richer, thicker, situated knowledge. Each wortcunner was asked to choose a plant-based pseudonym from either a supplied list or one of their own choosing. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a manual thematic analysis was conducted across all interview transcripts, focusing on the theme of epistemic harm, with pertinent, rich quotes extracted. The quotes were lightly edited for clarity, grammar, and flow, while ensuring that the meaning and voice of the wortcunner was not lost.

Findings

Out of the twenty five wortcunners interviewed for this study, ten self-identified as having or currently occupying a position within the UK university sector, either as staff members or students. These wortcunners were Rowan, Rosemary, Juniper, Marigold, Meadowsweet, Artemisia, Thistle, Sage, Poppy and Flora. Not all narratives were deemed rich enough for this particular study; therefore, the quotes below have been selected due to their illustrative power in highlighting the epistemic harms experienced by the wortcunners when expressing their spiritualities in a university setting. Four broad themes have been identified and explored, accompanied by pertinent quotes. However, this exploration is a caveat as all the quotes can be logically categorised across multiple themes, which would result in repetition and an unwieldy dataset. Therefore, each quote is placed under the theme that my positioning

deems the most relevant. Whilst I refer to each theme within specific concepts of epistemic harm, I reflexively acknowledge my potential role in reducing the agency of alternative experiencing. I therefore also offer the quotes so that "readers may begin to understand the grammar of the term 'epistemic injustice' for future and new use" (Pohlhaus 2017, 13).

Spiritual Self-Depreciation

Some wortcunners described strategies they used to downplay or mask their spiritual identities in academic settings to protect their credibility, and in the case of Meadowsweet, the embodied reaction when this mask falls.

Artemisa reflected on the risk of being perceived as "wicky-wacky-woo" when openly sharing her spirituality and admitted that it forms a very important role in her life:

> I wouldn't always share [my spirituality] with people. Particularly when you're an academic, it can almost undermine you by being seen as a bit wicky-wacky-woo, you know. But what I've shared with you today and what I've shown you, that is a very important part of my life, and that's what nourishes and sustains me.

Thistle similarly spoke about downplaying or framing her beliefs as "quirky" or "goofy" to make them more socially acceptable, even when she was in supposedly comfortable environments:

> As people get to know me, I like to show them my quirky side. I have a really lovely team, but I will maybe put myself down, I will put my beliefs in this way

- like, it is a bit goofy.

Poppy noted that using academically recognisable language helped her discuss her animism without attracting judgments of unprofessionalism, but admitted that it is not the language of choice she would want to use:

> I'm glad there are more acceptable terms out there like spiritual ecology, assemblages and attentive listening because these make my animist beliefs more valid and grounded in academic language. It's a shame, though, that I must use terms like that when I really want to say that I love hugging and listening to trees.

Meadowsweet recounted a spontaneous moment of tree recognition that made her appear as if she had "lost it" in front of her students:

> A couple of years ago, I was walking with my students, and I looked across, and I just saw a tree without its leaves. And I just said, oh, my God, that tree looks just like a lung with the bronchi and the alveoli. And I could see these students thinking, OK, she's finally lost it.

Flora described her embodied fears and beliefs about the professional consequences of openly identifying as a witch or pagan:

> It goes back to what I said about people coming out and telling their bosses that they are witches and pagans. They won't be taken seriously. They will never get through. They will be overlooked for a promotion because they will be part of the woo-woo clan. There

will always be that negativity around it.

Direct Verbal Dismissal

Several wortcunners described experiences in which their spirituality or spiritual interests were directly dismissed or actively discouraged by academic peers.

Artemisia recalled being told how her chosen research topic, homeopathy, was "total nonsense," which left her questioning why some areas of inquiry were not treated as legitimate within the university:

> When I first came to [the university], I cannot remember who I met with, it must have been somebody from the executive board who wanted to meet us all and talk about what we did. And she asked me what I had done in terms of my research when I was a scientist because she was also a scientist, and I explained I was doing homoeopathy, and she was like, "Oh, well, that's total nonsense". I was left thinking; we are in an academic world where you feel you should be able to be open and talk about things like that. But it is very clear to me that there are some topics that are absolute no-nos.

Poppy described being judged for holding a supposedly conflicting belief, as though she had to choose between evolution and a higher spiritual power:

> I'm convinced I was thought of as being really weird. I never really fitted in with the whole science environment. I remember another academic saying how strange it was that I could simultaneously believe in

> evolution and a higher power. It was like you could only choose one or the other and needed to commit.

Flora recounted being explicitly warned not to disclose her spiritual identity before completing her PhD, due to potential negative repercussions in her viva:

> I had been having a nice conversation with my supervisor and she said, “Do not come out [as a witch] before you’ve got your PhD”. She told me this horror story of somebody she knew who had come out, very similar to me, but before the PhD, and she had a terrible time in the viva. So, she said, do not come out until you have your PhD.

A Betrayal of Values

Some wortcunners recounted experiences of emotional harm and vulnerability, in which moments of dismissal extended into deeper personal consequences.

Poppy described feeling “mortified” when her attempt to share her spiritual connection with her supervisor was met with silence:

> At my last university, I was so heavily masking that I could not talk about my spirituality. I would wear pagan pendants, but remember trying to talk about my spiritual connection to the natural world to my supervisor and got no response. Just an awkward silence. So, I never mentioned it again. I felt mortified.

Flora reflected on the "nasty" comments she encountered, which have caused her to hold back aspects of herself and remain cautious about any form of spiritual disclosure:

> You often feel like you are sort of living a double life. You always have that feeling because you are in the broom closet. You have this part of you that you cannot come out and talk about because you fear retribution or people making nasty comments or this, that, and the other. So, you just hold back all the time. You are very wary of who you trust with your secret. And it's just something that you live with.

Thistle spoke about the sadness of having to selectively reveal her spirituality, even in an otherwise supportive academic environment:

> I've always been someone who has a very tight knit unit around me and feel very secure in myself so it's not going to worry me that much if I get laughed at. But it is just picking and choosing who you choose to share those things with because it is quite saddening I guess when someone dismisses that.

Harm to the Academic Career

The wortcunners' concerns about potential and witnessed professional repercussions shaped how they negotiated the visibility of their spiritual identities, particularly the label of "witch".

Poppy described a tension between her growing open-

ness and self-acceptance and a fear that appearing "too witchy" could undermine her credibility:

> I definitely worry about being seen as "too witchy" and not being taken seriously as an academic. It makes me feel disappointed in myself that I'm still trying to fit in and appear "normal", although I am vastly more "out" than I have ever been before in my life.

Artemisia reflected more unequivocally and viscerally on the professional risks of publicly identifying as a witch:

> As an academic, you are always weighing up how you use that word [Witch]. I wouldn't ever, at work, use that word witch or call myself a witch…it is a really good way of discrediting yourself professionally.

Yarrow recalled a fellow student's repeated silencing and bullying (referred to by Yarrow as "almost bullying") for incorporating spiritually orientated practices with herbs into the university's medicinally orientated practices, highlighting the potential dangers of expressing spiritual identity in academic contexts:

> It has been very refined [her bachelor's degree course in medical herbalism], and it has also been created to prove itself rather than what we need to be learning. It's just frustrating. Some stuff you were just told to shut up about. There was this one lovely lady. She was great. She made brooches stuffed with herbs. She was brilliant. And she was just quashed and quashed and quashed, you know, by tutors. It was almost bullying.

Moments of Resilience and Assertion

Some wortcunners demonstrated resilience and subtle resistance, strategically asserting their spiritual identities in professional and social circumstances even when such a disclosure may have been problematic.

Birch recounted a moment of surprise and "boldness" during a job interview when she disclosed her ability to read birth charts, briefly offering her authentic self:

> I remember in my interview at (redacted) University, they were asking me about my leadership style and how I work with staff and manage teams, and we were talking about insights, training, and how people have personality types. Then I suddenly said that if I found out their date of birth, I'd probably do their birth chart or astrology. And this was in a job interview! When I said it, everybody laughed, and they looked quite interested. That is definitely the boldest I have ever been. And when I was saying it, I was almost thinking, "What are you doing"? But I felt that I was being naturally me.

Poppy described using her Hedgewitch identity in her email signature as a brief act of self-assertion, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between personal authenticity and academic expectations:

> Hedgewitch [as an identity] feels right to me, but I keep adding it onto my email signature in moments of bravado and then deleting it again after a few days. It feels like a constant balancing act or tug of war between my true self and my career/academic self.

Flora reflected on her plans to openly express her spiritual identity after completing her PhD, framing it as a deliberate act of defiance and one that she appears to be looking forward to.

> If the opportunity arises [to come out, spiritually], I probably would. Yeah, because it feels like sticking two fingers up at the establishment…I will get this PhD and then I will come out, and I will aim towards more witchcraft stuff.

Discussion

Across the interviews, academic wortcunners described strategies of self-deprecation and careful framing of their spiritual practices to maintain academic legitimacy. Terms such as "goofy," "quirky," and "wicky-wacky-woo" appeared to serve as simultaneously protective and yet self-dismissive shields against professional judgment. At the same time, more academically accepted language, like "spiritual ecology" enabled another wortcunner (Poppy) to present her embodied spiritual beliefs in a socially acceptable form. Hence, to Poppy, her type of spirituality is likely to only be palatable when addressed and researched academically by others. Such strategies exemplify a deeper form of hermeneutical injustice (Medina 2017a, 47) and testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011, 244) where wortcunners actively moderated and dismissed aspects of their highly personal and affirming spirituality to navigate a university environment that may be unwilling or incapable of acceptance, unless as already established theories and epistemologies.

Direct verbal discouragement or interpersonal dynam-

ic hermeneutical injustices (Medina 2017a, 46) serve to reinforce these dynamics. wortcunners recounted being told that their area of expertise, homeopathy, was "total nonsense," whilst dualistic beliefs in evolution and higher powers were considered "strange." In another incident, a supervisor explicitly warned a wortcunner against disclosing a witch identity before completing a PhD. Later in the interview, the wortcunner in question mentions that her PhD is unrelated to the topic of witch-based spiritualities and wonders if this is why she was warned not to disclose her spirituality. It may appear therefore that this type of spirituality is only acceptable or permissible if one is engaged in research about it and in all other situations, the spirituality must be hidden incase of repercussions. Such harms represent structural testimonial harm (Wanderer 2017, 28), where the Western academic establishment appears to be both unable and unwilling to encompass non-normative forms of being and knowing. The emotional consequences of harms were both deep, significant and represent a form of testimonial betrayal (Wanderer 2017, 35), with Poppy feeling "mortified" by an awkward silence, Flora describing having to live a "double life," and Thistle expressing sadness at having to share beliefs even within trusted circles selectively.

Structural harms and career considerations further constrained openness. wortcunners regulated their spiritual identities to avoid being potentially discredited, with Poppy negotiating between professional acceptance and personal authenticity, Artemisia viewing the label "witch" as self-discrediting, and Yarrow recalling the observance of repeated suppression of creative spiritual expression. It was interesting to note that Yarrow, having witnessed the sustained bullying of a fellow student by lecturers, referred to the incidents in question as "almost bullying." This suggests the presence of hermeneutical injustice within the experiencing of Yarrow whereby she

struggles to identify bullying even when repeatedly witnessed.

Despite these pressures, moments of resilience and affective activism emerged. Much to her surprise, Birch disclosed astrological knowledge during a job interview, Poppy intermittently signaled her hedgewitch identity within professional spaces, and Flora seemingly relishing a post-PhD engagement with witchcraft as an act of defiance against the system. These instances highlight ongoing agency, subversion and authenticity within epistemically constrictive academic environments, illustrating the complex interplay of marginalisation, risk, and resistance in academic spaces (Zembylas 2025, 803). These acts of subversion and defiance may appear to be simple, but to the wortcunners, are likely to imbue them with a sense of resilience, hope and agency.

Conclusions & Limitations

Through the lens of epistemic injustice, oppression and harm, this study demonstrates how practitioners of nature-based spiritualities, known here as wortcunners, navigate an academic environment that simultaneously values knowledge while constraining which forms of knowing are deemed legitimate. Across the testimonies, the wortcunners describe entanglements of testimonial and hermeneutical epistemic harms resulting in the need for self-deprecation and strategic masking (in case of professional repercussions), where the dismissal of one's spirituality took the form of verbal warnings and uncomfortable silencing, and where instances of bullying and contributory injustice (where spiritual expertise was requested, but simultaneously disavowed) were witnessed.

These experiences, albeit from a small sample size

of participants, still revealed a pattern of exclusions shaped by the dominant and normative knowledge hierarchies of the British university system. However, whilst this study offers an initial insight into the epistemic conditions shaping the experiences of university-based wortcunners, it is limited by its small sample size and its demographic composition. All participants were white, female or non-binary, and their accounts reflect situated experiences shaped by particular histories of whiteness within contemporary Western pagan, witchcraft, and spiritual communities. Further research is therefore needed to explore how epistemic injustices, oppressions, and harms may be differentially experienced by those from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds, those who identify as male and individuals situated within other marginalised esoteric spiritual traditions. Expanding this work would deepen the understanding of how people with these marginalised spiritualities navigate the path between spirituality and academic legitimacy.

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Ignorance is Bliss: Confronting Utopian Ideals in Fahrenheit 451 (1953)

Zoe Keating

Abstract

This paper will explore Bradbury's definition and exposition of utopia in his novel Fahrenheit 451, his showcase of intention versus practice with regard to the society in this text. I will be conducting an analysis of this through the character of Montag at first. The evolution of his journey of awareness, not only of the true intentions of the 'utopia' but also of his lack of security within the system, despite his assumed position of social power as a fireman. Initially, for Montag, dystopia is elsewhere; he actively rejects the realisation that they are living in a dystopia. Later, Montag sees utopia as elsewhen; he is optimistic for the future of culture and society via the Brotherhood.

Next, there will be an analysis of this through the character of Mildred. She exists in her context with a wilful ignorance to an extreme degree, to the detriment of her relationships with Montag and reality at large. She is actively trying to build up Muñoz's "prison house of the present" around her. She plays into the role of the false narrative of the intentional community building of the 50's neoliberalist utopia as escapism.

Another point of analysis will be through the character of Beatty. His desperation to maintain the status quo despite his obvious distress in his position of power, especially

from the perspective of Montag. Beatty is the ultimate goal of his career path, but Beatty is threading the line between authority figure with the burden of knowledge and his desire for a wilfully ignorant vessel to vicariously live through.

Bradbury successfully leads the reader through the utopia/dystopia divide to a point of view that is resolutely optimistic about the state of humanity and the ways in which we rely on and interact with each other; here, utopia exists as simultaneously somewhere and nowhere.

Bradbury's presentation of society through the City in Fahrenheit 451 (1953) is one which throws into question exactly what is classed as a 'utopian ideal'. This paper uses the work of Ruth Levitas in Utopia as Method (2013) to frame an analysis of Bradbury's presentation of utopic ideals. It also uses the works of Science Fiction critic Darko Suvin, which explore the role that utopia plays within genre fiction, as a frame for how Bradbury's characters react to their supposedly utopic surroundings. As Ruth Levitas posits, "The denial of utopia resulted in a triple repression within sociology: repression of the future, of normativity, and of the existential and what it means to be human" (Levitas 2013, 85), Bradbury's world-building plays into this repression in an insidious and subterfuge-filled way. As Levitas puts it, the world of Bradbury is, in fact, anti-utopian; the façade is engineered to prevent individualism and rebellion. Montag's position of cultural capital and his position as an enforcer mean he enjoys a level of stability and security; his wife, Mildred, enjoys the privileges this affords them both; Captain Beatty actively enjoys his role as enforcer and encourages those around him to engage with the façade of utopian society without question.

On the surface, everyone is participating in the society and is content; there is no visible wealth disparity, no visible homelessness problem, and even the public transportation runs on time and is clean.

The façade of this society is one which is specifically constructed in order to look perfect and polished from the outside; it fulfils the picture of the white picket fence life on the surface and absolutely no deeper than that. The issue comes when there is active encouragement to maintain this façade of idyllic life to the detriment of the individual's mental health; "Darkness. He was not happy. He was not happy. He said the words to himself. He recognized this as the true state of affairs. He wore his happiness like a mask" (Bradbury 1953, 9), Bradbury presents Montag engaging with the hollow utopia of his society here and can only allow a moment of self-confrontation under cover of darkness, with another way to hide. From the perspective of Montag, this works to isolate each individual for the simple reason that they each believe everyone else is content in this picture-perfect idyll. Each of the individuals examined here plays a specific role in Bradbury's text, which leads to the interrogation of the structure of this 'utopic' society and ultimately leads to the conclusion that any semblance of questioning it causes at best problems for the individual and at worst an entire state's collapse.

Montag

As previously stated, Guy Montag enjoys a position of cultural power and privilege in his role as a Fireman; he has a level of awareness that he is removing access to information and participates in this as a systemic removal because of the comfort it grants him and the exclusive access

directly to the illicit information. Due to this, he wilfully turns away from the freedom of knowledge on multiple occasions throughout the text. Montag passes through his life with an air of ignorance about him, and yet, he still engages in behaviour which is questionable to his affirmed contentment with his own life; "he showered luxuriously, and then, whistling, hands in pockets, walked across the upper floor of the fire station and fell down the hole. At the last moment, when disaster seemed positive, he pulled his hands from his pockets and broke his fall by grasping the golden pole" (Bradbury 1953, 2). Montag mindlessly jumps into the abyss, a routine element of danger added to his day in order to afford him a shock of adrenaline, a moment of danger and excitement to break away from the mundanity and habitual routine of his regular life. The practise allows him to express and feel something outside of his sedated narrative. Montag, as a character, echoes the attitude from Suvin: "Do not expect from Utopia more than from yourselves" (Suvin 1998, 186). Montag is purposefully not putting his entire personhood into society and is despondent; this is a justified emotional state to him. Bradbury, through the society of F451, plays with Suvin's expectation from utopia here; he composes a society which places the onus on the individual deliberately, implying that the reason the individuals are not fulfilled is because there is somehow an inherent flaw within them, not the system. This is especially the case when everyone else around him is committed to playing the expected role, and the media surrounding him, literally, is showcasing a similitude of this role.

The pervasiveness of the media and its links with the police lead to a society of mindless obedience; "Police suggest entire population in the Elm Terrace area do as follows: Everyone in every house in every street open a front or rear door or look from the windows. The fugitive cannot escape if

everyone in the next minute looks from his house" (Bradbury 1953, 131-2). The media uses the population to the advantage of the government; the people do not recognise that there is more similarity with Montag than the orders given to them – unquestioning obedience – they are mostly ignorant of the exact situation, only that this person is a criminal and therefore doesn't deserve the same comfort or rights as they have as Well-Meaning Model Citizens. The behaviour they rest of the population exhibit about Montag as an entity in their sphere shows the same lack of empathetic connection that Montag and Mildred showcase initially; "They would have killed me, thought Montag, swaying, the air still torn and stirring about him in dust, touching his bruised cheek. For no reason at all in the world they would have killed me" (Bradbury 1953, 122). Montag gains a perspective from the outsider; he is trapped in the same environment, but as a fugitive, the entrapment is much more dangerous. His awareness of the systemic indoctrination of the population leads to a sense of horror for what exactly that means for the impossibility of true rebellion.

Levitas explains that in the 1970s Postmodern utopian studies field, there was "a retreat from reading utopias as programmatic proposals for social transformation; issues of process rather than structure and form rather than content, or form as content, took priority, while 'openness' was preferred to 'closure'. The risk here is that utopia becomes a vehicle only critique rather than of transformation" (Levitas 2013, 103). Bradbury avoids driving the wrong "vehicle" here; F451 does critique but does so in a way that establishes first the idea of a transformed society; the subject of his utopia is away from the transformation and amongst the personal connections humans make with each other. The City of F451 has a veneer of openness and a surface-level perception of contentment with life, but it does not fulfil people beyond that

level. The false openness leads to a more isolated and enclosed lifestyle, which is actively encouraged by the systems in place. Bradbury is both critiquing what he sees as the flaws of his contemporary society, as well as the projection of the transformed society touting itself as a capitalist utopia. Levitas continues with the point that "[narratives of the self] may be delusionary, entailing forms of rural life that require high levels of capital available only to the rich, and not necessarily implying smaller ecological footprints; but they do envision an alternative set of desires and satisfactions" (Levitas 2013, 122). Here, Levitas is analysing the use of narratives of the self within late modernity and the resulting Postmodern diversion from this idealistic framework and towards a more cynical view. Similarly, Montag's Brotherhood is a situation available only to those with the capital and lack of financial dependence to enact; the trappings of his social and financial capital kept him at least docile enough to be an active part of his society.

Montag becomes more aware of the threats to his personal safety and the lack of stability with his role within his society throughout the text. Before this is a conscious thought, he only reacts to the immediate threat of the Hound; "Montag backed up. The Hound took a step from its kennel" (Bradbury 1953, 23). The intrinsic fear of the uncanny existence which the Hound embodies takes priority for Montag here. He comes to the stark realisation that his position of social safety is a precarious one as well as one which the people in power over him have no immediate interest in reinforcing for him, leaving him subject to the same violence that he enacts on others despite his assumed position of social superiority.

The threat of the Hound continues to haunt Montag as a symbol of his paranoia, considering his perceived crimes;

“The Hound, he thought. It’s out there tonight. It’s out there now. If I opened the window . . . He did not open the window” (Bradbury 1953, 45). Montag engages in a level of suicide ideation, mirrored in his wife, Mildred, which again haunts him throughout his questioning of the society. When Beatty confirms his fears that the hound is a source of persecution and he has committed a crime ‘worthy’ of the hound being set on him, Montag accepts this as something he would deserve as a consequence for his crime. After Montag is personally disconnected from the rest of society but still physically within the suburbs, he is more aware of the hidden in plain-sight messaging, “And the war began and ended in that instant” (Bradbury 1953, 103). Throughout the narrative, there is an increased presence of planes but kept on the peripheries, far enough away from the suburban utopia to keep the population disconnected, “The bombers crossed the sky and crossed the sky over the house, gasping, murmuring, whistling like an immense, invisible fan, circling in emptiness. “Jesus God,” said Montag. “Every hour so many damn things in the sky! How in hell did those bombers get up there every single second of our lives! Why doesn’t someone want to talk about it” (Bradbury 1953, 48). The presence of the war at this earlier point in the narrative is inconsequential; the instruments of war are nothing but a passing inconvenience to Montag. The noise annoys him, but he is still not thinking about the disconnect between the action of the bombers flying and the consequences for the far-off place they attack.

The influence of the war is more prevalent with the wives of war; “the Army called Pete yesterday. He’ll be back next week. The Army said so. Quick war. Forty-eight hours they said, and everyone home. That’s what the Army said. Quick war. Pete was called yesterday and they said he’d be, back next week” (Bradbury 1953, 62), there is a desperation

here which acts as a method of self-delusion. The implication of "quick war" and the knowledge that this City are sending an egregious number of bombers from their place of power leads to a sinister conclusion that it is a war of eradication. Bradbury was writing at the time of the Arms Race between America and the Soviet Union. Montag does begin to question his position of privilege as a part of the empirical centre as well as within the social framework of the City, "I've heard rumors; the world is starving, but we're well-fed. Is it true, the world works hard and we play? Is that why we're hated so much? I've heard the rumors about hate, too, once in a long while, over the years" (Bradbury 1953, 70). Along with this scrutiny that he brings to the wider construction of the City, Bradbury brings attention to the power differentials on a larger scale, and drags it away from the aforementioned 'narrative of the self' of the late Modernist era to engage with a more Postmodernist style of narrative, a more complex and deeper narrative. One which his wife, Mildred, refuses to engage with, much to his frustration.

Mildred

Mildred tries to play the role of the perfect citizen within Bradbury's society. She is explicitly blocking out reality as much as possible, surrounding herself with the noise of the peddled society; "She had both ears plugged with electronic bees that were humming the hour away" (Bradbury 1953, 16). Montag follows her lead in the initial perspective in the text, choosing wilful ignorance over the examination of their own emotions and positions in society; "I don't know anything any more," he said, and let a sleep-lozenge dissolve on his tongue" (Bradbury 1953, 15). Here, Montag is despondently confronting his position of wilful ignorance, while Mildred stubbornly refuses to talk about her experiences, instead choosing to keep up the façade of her role in this society.

Montag gets increasingly frustrated with her attitude and practices from a financial perspective, with her frivolous and encouraged spending in order to literally surround herself with the influence of the media, but Montag also experiences a level of emotional frustration with his wife's refusal to acknowledge their mutual despondence. However, this is the role they are expected to play. As Christian Fuchs explains in "The Utopian Internet", "[w]hereas capitalism fetishizes individualism without nourishing the collective and common good, the socialism of scarcity fetishizes collectivism without individuality and does not give enough space to individual interests and needs" (Fuchs 2020, 163). Mildred is purposefully forcing herself to exist in this limited space, reducing her interests and needs to those being sold to her; she has no individuality and is almost comforted by this fact.

Instead, Mildred plays the role of the doting wife to Montag, when company is present – especially Beatty – to an insistent degree. Beatty encourages this role, essentially ignoring her presence in the household in favour of placing Montag in his role as the man of the house. Beatty explains how the limitations of the education system lead to products such as Mildred; "School is shortened, discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. […] Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts?" (Bradbury 1953, 53). Mildred is the expected product of this system, stripped down of expectation and creativity, forced into the continued role of the consumer, the 'pleasure' coming from trying to cover the lack within the soul with objects of desire. She has only been allowed a set amount of preapproved education – not enough to be able to learn of her own desire. Mildred 'press-

es the buttons' of consumerism to attempt to 'pull the switch' of dopamine and happiness within herself, however limited. She 'fits the nuts and bolts' of product and consumer together and loses herself in the process as to which role she fills.

Within this deeply capitalistic society, there is a barrage of stimulation to prevent the ability for in depth or critical thinking, a world "that said nothing, nothing, nothing and said it loud, loud, loud" (Bradbury 1953, 41), Mildred commits to just sitting back within this context, letting the content wash over her but never engaging with it or really even remembering it. She has surrounded herself with a pretence which means she never has to actually confront or engage with anything, including her own life at home with her pursuit of acting, she is so dedicated to playing her role of the perfect housewife that it extends to her hobby of acting, put in Marxist terms, Mildred is alienated from herself, she reads the scripts on a surface level alienation of the self under capitalism almost perfectly, she "never…quite… touched… anything" (Bradbury 1953, 42) and does not have the "education of desire" (Levitas 2013, 4) necessary to deepen her suicide attempt is largely ignored by her; in the conversation with Montag the next morning, she skips over it entirely and denies the narrative he presents in favour of writing her own which aligns with her desired position as a social creature. She outright refuses to confront the horrific acts she engages in as a way of escape from her picture-perfect life. As Fuchs presents, "in the age of authoritarian capitalism, it is important that we dream about, imagine, talk about, envision, communicate, discuss, and struggle for concrete socialist utopias" (Fuchs 2020, 150), Mildred has fully taken this idea of the "dream" to the extreme; she does not engage with reality in favour of the fantasy reading experiences. Mildred buys into the dream being sold to her by the City, and she

believes it to be the promised "socialist utopia"; she requires the education of her own desire as suggested by Levitas, but is trapped by phantasms of the narrative presented to her. She is struggling but outwardly refuses to "communicate" her issues and does not "struggle" beyond her internal world.

Further, Montag engages in the dehumanisation of Mildred as an object, "sitting there like a wax doll melting in its own heat" (Bradbury 1953, 72). To him, she exists as if within a dollhouse space, which they have worked to build. Montag's perception of his own life exists through this lens of the façade Mildred is trying to enforce, meaning he does not possess a space to exist authentically. As Kathryn Grossman explains, "he pities his wife's continuous state of catatonic insensitivity to real life and real people" (Grossman 1987, 138). Montag is trying to reach out to her, to broach the walls she has both physically and mentally constructed as a coping mechanism for survival. His lack of success in this effort leads him to question the exact construction of their society and how their survival is supposed to be viable; and so, "from this process of differentiation Montag has acquired a novel and highly revolutionary view of his society" (Grossman 1987, 138-9). The implication from Grossman here is that Montag stumbles into this thought process primarily out of care for his wife, and the lack of care he actually feels despite the narrative of love expected for their home life. Unfortunately, this falls apart with Montag's lack of focus on Mildred as an individual; "[a]nd he remembered thinking then that if she died, he was certain he wouldn't cry. For it would be the dying of an unknown, a street face, a newspaper image, and it was suddenly so very wrong that he had begun to cry, not at death but at the thought of not crying at death, a silly empty man near a silly empty woman" (Bradbury 1953, 41). Mildred is an object to Montag and one that consistently reminds Montag of the fail-

ings of society as well as his own failings as an active participant in the social structure. This disconnect between the two of them is a purposeful result of the system; they are alienated from each other as well as themselves. The disconnect is perpetuated by Montag's lack of ability to turn to Mildred as a source of comfort for his crimes within this society; the fallacy of the married couple as a united support system ultimately fails as she immerses herself in her role with a desperation to hold onto the narrative of unrealistic standards.

Bradbury presents the social situation in which Mildred is supposed to fit and be content with the introduction of her neighbours. There is a level of a sexist framework in which Bradbury is working, a period-typical desire for the white picket fence and patriarchy, fostered and designed by the Americana of the time (Rothstein 2017). The women are outspoken and misinformed at best; they each have different ideas as to what their role in society is supposed to be. Each of the women has interpreted a narrative from the phantasm, and find that it does not align with each other, also differing from the perspective Mildred has for her own life in social context; "No one in his right mind, the Good Lord knows; would have children!' said Mrs. Phelps, […] 'I wouldn't say that,' said Mrs. Bowles. 'I've had two children by Caesarian section. No use going through all that agony for a baby. The world must reproduce, you know, the race must go on" (Bradbury 1953, 92). The differences in ideology and interpretation of social rules between the three women lead to a further questioning of the foundations of this society, not only for Montag, but in this instance, for Mildred as well. The middle-class idyllic narrative, specifically of the 1950's context of Bradbury, does not know how to include children. Within the narrative, there is a rejection of children within the consciousness of the City to live a more self-involved life, unlocking the ability

to have the social freedom promised. As well as an expectation for women to fulfil the role of the housewife with 'two and a half kids', 'doing their part' for the country, there is a narrative assumption from the women here that this is their role and they are unable – or unallowed – to provide anything else to society (Rothstein 2017). Alongside this, there is the perspective of Mildred as someone so detached from this on a personal level that children are an ambiguous entity left for either the future or to someone else, however, Mrs. Bowles engages in a similar level of detachment from not only the experience of having children, but from being an active mother and having the children impact her personal life as much as possible. In a twisted version of a book club, the women get together to watch the latest shows, while Montag hides his collection of books in the same house. Bradbury also uses these women to present a further illusion of choice concerning their political system; "What possessed the 'Outs' to run him? You just don't go running a little short man like that against a tall man. Besides -he mumbled. Half the time I couldn't hear a word he said. And the words I did hear I didn't understand!" (Bradbury 1953, 93). In naming the oppositional political party the 'Outs', Bradbury engages with this pervasive illusion of choice; the opposition, given the presentation of their candidate, has no intention of gaining power. Instead, both parties are working together to keep up the façade of a two-party system based purely on aesthetics.

Mildred is ignorant of the world around her, wilfully, to the point of repeated suicide attempts. She ultimately rejects anything which does not fit the narrative of the City, switching her interests with the tide of popular – peddled – culture, and privately suffering in her self-imposed isolation in order to maintain this façade which is integral to the success of the City, not the individual.

Beatty

There is an instability within Beatty which Montag picks up on in their interactions, as well as the underlying threat of leaked knowledge between the two. While Montag's perspective is filled with the anxiety of having his secret reading uncovered, Beatty is presenting a thinly veiled concern for Montag to remain in the ignorance of the 'utopia'. Unfortunately, for Montag, the rebellion of his actions places his role as the subject of Beatty's projection under stress; "This isn't the first time it's threatened me,' said Montag. 'Last month it happened twice" (Bradbury 1953, 24). Montag comes to the realisation of how unstable his position of safety is, and the lack of concern from his higher-ups, Beatty specifically, leads to paranoia, "I wouldn't want to be its next victim. "Why? You got a guilty conscience about something?" Montag glanced up swiftly. Beatty stood there looking at him steadily with his eyes, while his mouth opened and began to laugh, very softly" (Bradbury 1953, 25). Here, Beatty offers a confirmation from a position of authority that his safety is not a guarantee; this interaction serves as well to let Beatty know that Montag is breaking away from being useful to him as a tool for vicarious ignorance.

In an early conversation with Montag, Beatty explains the rapid condensation of media with a manic energy that throws off Montag's expectations of the conversation.

> Speed up the film. Montag, quick. Click? Pic? Look, Eye, Now, Flick, Here, There, Swift, Pace, Up, Down, In, Out, Why, How, Who, What, Where, Eh? Uh! Bang! Smack! Wallop, Bing, Bong, Boom! Digest-digests, digest-digest-digests. Politics? One column, two sentences, a headline! Then, in mid-air, all vanishes! Whirl man's mind around about so fast

> under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters, that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought! (Bradbury 1953, 52)

Beatty's desperate tone here reflects the panic he feels when addressing the concerns of Montag. As well as letting slip the fact that his station allows him to gain access to these otherwise forbidden books and knowledge, and that this fact has become a burden on him, he is trapped in his position of concern. Beatty frequently tries to justify his position to Montag, as well as to himself, as if he can make himself believe the lies again if he can keep Montag in that ignorant position. "Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal" (Bradbury 1953, 55). Despite Beatty's insistence, the people within this society are not equal; class and cultural capital still hold power – specifically, Beatty himself has an immense amount of power over not just Montag but the wider population. Ignorance does not, then, lead to a lack of hatred, but instead a lack of awareness of othering due to the isolation imposed on everyone as a structural imperative of the society of Bradbury's F451. Specifically, Beatty's position and intent are obscured to Montag, as Sunjoo Lee suggests, "Beatty's sly remarks, meant to vindicate the work of firemen, only add to the reader's horror of a society built on this vision—for the troubling nature of equality and happiness in such a society has already been made abundantly clear by the point in the story that Beatty makes these comments to Montag" (Lee 2014, 142). Beatty plays on his position to his audience; he exists within the narrative as a changeable yet constant authority, offering both a threat and a comfort depending on the actions of his subordinates. To Montag, Beatty represents the seductive nature of the oppressor; "He's read enough, so he has all the answers, or seems to have. His voice is like butter. I'm afraid he'll talk me back the way I was" (Bradbury 1953, 85). Beatty has the

ability and enough education to be able to take the position of superiority and manipulate the situation and Montag to both maintain Beatty's position of power in society and over Montag, as well as to continue to use Montag as a proxy for the blissful ignorance he represented earlier in the text.

Suvin presents a role which applies to the characters of Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451: "The pretense at inclusion of people into power and meaning is in fact a most frustrating exclusion, where the body or 'naked life' is the final and often only 'capital' left" (Suvin 2021, 26). This mirrors the role which Beatty plays against Montag; he offers a version of capital which would placate Montag back into line with his role as a fireman. Bradbury presents the end of Beatty's life through the eyes of Montag;

> In the middle of the crying Montag knew it for the truth. Beatty had wanted to die. He had just stood there, not really trying to save himself, just stood there, joking, needling, thought Montag, and the thought was enough to stifle his sobbing and let him pause for air. How strange, strange, to want to die so much that you let a man walk around armed and then instead of shutting up and staying alive, you go on yelling at people and making fun of them until you get them mad, and then.... (Bradbury 1953, 116)

This presentation of Beatty proves that, to Bradbury's society, ignorance is bliss. Beatty had access to the information, and it made him a petty and miserable man. Montag recognises the lack of contentment and his acceptance of death as a relief from his burden. Montag takes this recognition and internalises it as confirmation of the wrongness he has suspected throughout the text.

Bradbury first alludes to the phoenix analogy and loops in an Icarus parallel when Beatty confronts Montag: "Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he's burnt his damn wings, he wonders why. Didn't I hint enough when I sent the Hound around your place?" (Bradbury 1953, 107). Beatty continues to drop literary and historical references without giving the context specifically to Montag, along with the confirmed threat, Montag's paranoia is proven to not be unfounded or solely due to his guilt. His place is actually that precarious, not just put down to guilt, but active hunting of disobedience and vicious dealing with that small point of rebellion. Beatty treats Montag as a child, unable to foresee the consequences of his actions; "What a dreadful surprise," said Beatty. "For everyone nowadays knows, absolutely is certain, that nothing will ever happen to me. Others die, I go on" (Bradbury 1953, 108-9). Bradbury presents a derealisation of the personal, following a theory of Marxism – the reason for this derealisation is capitalism, and it is a part of the system to discourage collectivity. Montag experiences a detachment from the feeling that the individual is a part of society to the point where there is no recognition of the possible consequences, because there is supposed to be no desire to break the routine. Beatty recognises this as an optimistic perspective for Montag, a way for him to think about escape, and mocks him for this optimism.

At the time of his death, Beatty dissolves his friendly demeanour to talk down to Montag, "Well, that's one way to get an audience. Hold a gun on a man and force him to listen to your speech. Speech away. What'll it be this time? Why don't you belch Shakespeare at me, you fumbling snob? 'There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats, for I am arm'd so strong in honesty that they pass by me as an idle wind, which I respect not!' How's that? Go ahead now, you second-hand litterateur, pull the trigger" (Bradbury 1953, 113). The implication here is

that Montag knows nothing and therefore has no right to be angry or rebellious; Beatty comes from the position of power that has the knowledge, and therefore he must be in the right for holding his position of authority, and for wielding his authority as brutally as he does. Beatty engages in reading to a depth of understanding which leads to his acute awareness of his own lack; he has an "education of [his own] desire" (Levitas 2013) and the lack of agency to act on it. Beatty justifies his actions by implying that the higher levels of knowledge are a terrible burden to hold and that he yearns for the ignorance and ideally, the bliss, of Montag. Beatty is disappointed with Montag for breaking the rules of their society, not because of the actual rule-breaking, but because Montag is no longer the subject of ignorance upon whom Beatty can project.

Conclusion

In portraying his characters in such a way, Bradbury successfully leads the reader through the experience of the utopia/dystopia divide, within the boundaries of the Forest/City divide, and to a point of view that is resolutely optimistic about the state of humanity outside of the systems at work. The darkness of the City is held in contrast to the light of the Forest, leaving this optimistic narrative conclusion for the future and the ways in which humanity interacts with each other. "If we understand utopia to be a totalizing (though not therefore totalitarian) representation which is holistic, social, future located, unequivocally better and linked to the present by some identifiable narrative, and one which embeds a view of human flourishing, then postmodernism is profoundly anti-utopian" (Levitas 1953, 98). Bradbury's work takes this point to its extreme and therefore to its totalitarianism with his false utopia, it holds the façade of holistic and social, but is distinctly, unsettlingly, unsocial and atomistic. In writing a 'uto-

pia' in this way, Bradbury inverts the expectations of a utopia; Bradbury's protagonist initially is a flourishing subject of the system he finds himself participating in, but instead of a catalyst event, there is a despondence which slowly erodes his sense of self and connection to others, which is emblematic of the postmodern anti-utopianism Levitas is dissecting here.

Bradbury concludes his novel with the following passage;

> There was a silly damn bird called a Phoenix back before Christ: every few hundred years he built a pyre and burned himself up. He must have been first cousin to Man. But every time he burnt himself up he sprang out of the ashes, he got himself born all over again. And it looks like we're doing the same thing, over and over, but we've got one damn thing the Phoenix never had. We know the damn silly thing we just did. We know all the damn silly things we've done for a thousand years, and as long as we know that and always have it around where we can see it, some day we'll stop making the goddam funeral pyres and jumping into the middle of them. We pick up a few more people that remember, every generation. (Bradbury 1953, 156)

There is an inherent feeling of optimism for Montag, the reader, and for the future that Bradbury instils in this conclusion. Bradbury establishes the truest ideal of utopia, at least for Montag, as something opposite to the environment he came from, a natural Romantic landscape, free from technology. The image of the Phoenix follows Montag away from the narrative, as a fireman, the connection is clear that Montag himself is supposed to be the one to rise from the literal

ashes of the city he left behind. Bradbury leaves the novel with the feeling of determination to continue to archive and preserve the knowledge of the Brotherhood, to take the knowledge gained from his experience to not repeat the problems and fall into the trap of thinking themselves better than the rest of the population. Instead, their code of conduct seems to be purposeful in its inclusion of people slowly and ensuring they know the reality and consequences of their position. The Brotherhood of the conclusion are not actively recruiting people but allowing them to come to their own conclusions about the faults of their 'utopia' – and by extension, Bradbury does the same, requesting the reader to engage in introspection about their own position in society and if they are actually content or just playing a game for the perception of others.

Perceptions of utopia only work if you agree with the fundamental ideology completely and refuse to question the hazy edges of an incomplete or unsatisfactory image. Bradbury presents his perception of this request by utopias in a way which promotes community and diversity of opinion, something with which utopic narratives cannot meaningfully engage. He requests of the reader, instead, to engage in introspection about their own position in society and to question the levels of contentment of the self, with the important counterpoint that this may, in fact, simply be playing into the façade of the perception of others.

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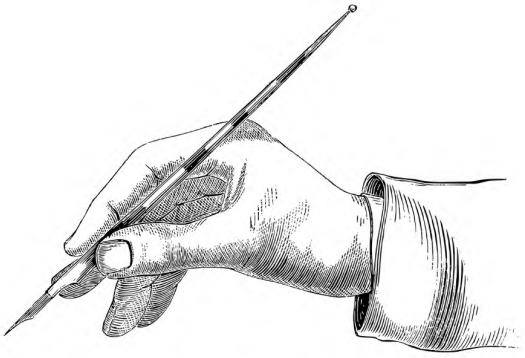

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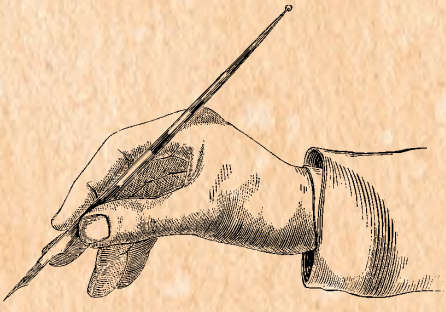

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