

# Dancing with the Sacred Third

## A Personal Trans/Othergender Pagan Theology

By **Kerrick A. Lucker**

I stopped believing in gender when I was small.

I have a clear memory of this process, although it may not be a true and accurate memory. First — I was sitting in a bathtub, crying, because I'd just cut my chin with a shaving razor.

My mom, who was the center of my whole world and could do no wrong, dabbed the blood off my chin and asked me what I thought I was trying to do. Shave like daddy, of course.

And my mom — who fixed cars and rode motorcycles and whose example made it possible for me to grow up never questioning the fact that

women could be strong as well as gentle — told me that I was, in fact, a little girl, and little girls don't shave their faces. Grown up men do. Little girls grow up to be women, and women can shave their legs, if they want to.

Some transgender kids fight back at this point, but to my ears Mother was speaking ex cathedra. My reaction is perhaps best described as: "Oh."

Second — maybe a year later, my mom cutting my hair with dog clippers, then parting it on the side, rather than in the middle as I was accustomed to. I remember asking "Isn't this a boy's haircut?" and thinking "Is it okay that I like having a boy's haircut?"

My mother (possibly embarrassed

that her child grooming skills were not as great as her dog grooming skills) may have said gruffly, "It doesn't matter."

My reaction: "Oh."

I learned that there was gender, and that it didn't matter. It only mattered when it hurt, when it made me cry and bleed, but not when it made me proud. I decided to pretend it didn't exist.

But eventually I noticed that gender is a real thing, in spite of the fact that it's a process we enact socially rather than a structure that exists biologically. I stopped being able to pretend it didn't exist. I could see how it shaped all my social interactions, even the way I related to my own body, in ways that hurt me.

I thought that if I were "really transgender," I should somehow have known it ever since my mom told me I was a girl. I decided, very rationally, that I would live as a third gender person for what I thought were purely ideological reasons. I had a hard time acknowledging the depth of the yearning I felt to have a place in my community where I felt at home.

### MYSTERY OF THE SACRED THIRD

What did I know then about that Mystery that is outside Woman and Man?

My first exposure to the Sacred Third came as a teenager when I read a theogony by someone styled the "White Bard." In this contemporary myth, the Goddess and the God, each tripartite, were accompanied by a tripartite Third, called the Holy Fool, who was Trickster, Chaos, and the Void, and who was

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*Raven Kaldera is a Northern-Tradition Pagan shaman, herbalist, astrologer, FTM transgendered intersexual activist, homesteader, and founding member of the First Kingdom Church of Asphodel. He is the author of the Northern Tradition Shamanism books, Pagan Astrology, Drawing Down the Spirits, Northern Tradition for the Solitary Practitioner, and many others.*

## Sacred Third

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called She, He, or It in turns throughout the tale.

It felt right to me. Everywhere I looked and saw supposed “dualities,” I sought their synthesis, a balance point between them, or something that fell completely outside them.

Day, night — twilight. Fire, water — steam. Life, death — rebirth. Self, other — relationship.

Man, woman — me?

### SEARCHING AND RESEARCHING

The world I lived in could not accommodate me living as a third-gender person. So deeply ingrained is the binary view of woman and man in our culture that unless I threw all my energy into confounding expectations, I would immediately be pigeonholed as “woman”.

I found myself “butching up” more than I felt. I tried to be hard and fierce, like my warrior mom, but it was wearing me out. I wanted to be able to smile in public. I wanted my gentleness to be the surprise and not the expectation. I wanted to approach the Sacred Third from the other direction — as a queer man.

At the same time, as a college student, I was searching for a thesis topic. I’d tried a few on for size and was

leaning toward a thesis on Greek and Egyptian funeral rituals, but it was a broad topic, and my adviser had warned me that I risked communicating to grad programs that I had spent five years flapping around in black eyeliner and a velvet cape (true, but not the whole story).

Then I encountered the Gallae. I found them in a Roman novel by Apuleius that combined vulgar humor with a heavy-handed and somewhat satirical mystical message.

In Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, the Gallae are reviled figures of abuse — “men” who have cut off their penises in frenzied worship of the Goddess Cybele, who dressed and spoke as women and

history of Cybele’s worship for me, and incidentally caused me to question the narrative of a single paleolithic Mother Goddess, theorized by Marija Gimbutas and others. Some of the most moving and telling pieces of evidence for ancient Mother Goddess worship are small stone figures of women, often with their maternal features greatly emphasized.

But in addition to the Goddess figurines, there are a number of male figurines, and still other figurines with androgynous characteristics. What do we make of this?

This is in no way to discount the powerful work of Marija Gimbutas in expanding our awareness of the mystery of paleolithic people’s relationships with

the Divine Feminine. Without her, we might not have a modern Goddess Movement, or if we did, it might look very different, and I’m grateful for how the Goddess Movement has shaped the world. And I think like any truly great scholar of the ancient world, Gimbutas would

probably not insist that she has written the last word.

Yet it makes sense to me that there were a lot of different ways of conceiving of the Mystery in ancient times, just as there are today. For instance, in Sumer, as among the ancient Norse, the moon was represented as masculine.

One of the other Great Gods of



lusted after the book’s transfigured protagonist. I instinctively knew there must be more to the story than this. After all, a man who claims to have been turned into a donkey (as Apuleius’s narrator does) is not always the most reliable witness.

My research turned up, not a great deal of information, but some very good information. I read Lynn Roller’s book *In Search of God the Mother*, which illuminated the complexity of the

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## Sacred Third

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Sumer was Inanna — a warlike Goddess whose wrath caused storms, shook the earth, withered the crops. She was also known as the “head-overturning one,” the one who “makes the man become the woman, the woman become the man.” Among her worshipers were those called kurgarra and gala-tur, who were people assigned female who dressed and lived as men, and people assigned male who dressed and lived as women.

In the Sumerian account of the Descent of Inanna, when Inanna is killed by Ereshkigal, the Goddess of Death, Enki creates two beings, Kurgarra and Galatur, who are genderless, to go down and revive her with the food and water of life. When they go into the Underworld, they find Ereshkigal raging in great pain. In history’s first recorded use of active listening, the Galatur and Kurgarra echo Ereshkigal’s cries of pain until she is soothed and gives them Inanna’s body in gratitude.

The role of the Kurgarra and Galatur seems to have been to represent the anger and pain of the Gods, Inanna particularly, and by acting it out in frenzied lamentation, soothe their wrath and bring the Divine world and the human world back into a harmonious relationship.

In researching the rites of Cybele, I believed that is precisely what the Gallae were doing for this other, quite different Near Eastern Goddess who had repeatedly been brought in as an outsider to the pantheons of Greece and Rome.

## CUTTING OFF PARTS OF OURSELVES

In one version of the Greek myth of Cybele, she had once been a hermaphrodite deity named Agdistis. The other Gods were much afraid of Agdistis’ mysterious power, and asked Zeus to force Agdistis to choose whether to be male or female — if male, to rip

Zeus offered to Agdistis in this account.

But Agdistis did not want to be confined to being either male or female.

Many intersex people identify as solidly on one side or the other of the female/male dividing line. But some intersex people, like some non-intersex people, identify as something different, or as a combination of both.

Here the ancient story becomes confused and tragic. Zeus castrates Agdistis and throws his penis away, where it becomes an almond tree. Agdistis becomes the goddess Cybele. An almond from the tree impregnates a river nymph, who gives birth to a beautiful youth called Attis, whom Cybele seduces, then eventually, maddened by his infidelity, sends him into a frenzy in which he castrates himself and later dies of his wounds.

It’s likely, however, that originally “Attis” was a Phrygian name or title for Cybele’s chief Galla, and the Greeks — needing an explanation for why any man, in their understanding, would choose to castrate himself and become a woman — invented the mythological figure of “Attis” to explain how Cybele, missing her dead lover, would reinvent him by seducing young men into becoming eunuchs.

In truth, the Gallae seem not to have been castrating themselves in imitation of Attis, but Attis along with other Gallae were becoming

women — at least partly in imitation of Cybele, like the gala-tur of Inanna, to take her grief and pain into themselves and thus heal it.

While I was learning these ancient stories, I was learning my own. I had felt most authentically myself as a walker between worlds, and now I saw myself in a representation of the Divine that was likewise a walker



out the womb so that no male can give birth, and if female, to castrate Agdistis, so that no female can wield a penis.

In this demand we can see exact echoes of how children born with ambiguous genitalia are today hated and feared. Surgeons cut into infants’ bodies to make their genitalia appear “normal,” often with disastrous results — and without even giving them a chance to choose what gender they will be, as

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between the worlds. I saw in the Galatur and Kurgarra echoes of my most compassionate and generous self, the self that I wanted to free from the constraint of being assumed to be female.

I realized that whether there was any essential thing that could be called “really transgender” or not, this was the story I was being called to live into the world.

And thank Godth, I have not had to castrate myself to fit into anyone else’s ideas of what a man or a woman or a third-gender person is.

### SPIRAL DANCE

When I realized that my devotion to the Sacred Third was calling me to invoke Hir in the Samhain Spiral Dance last year, I was anxious. I’m not accustomed to putting myself out as a ritual leader, and I’m afraid of that part of myself that likes the idea.

I was afraid to dance the Sacred Third in the form I was most called to, because it made me feel vulnerable, and because one of Hir defining features is willingly taking on suffering in order to alleviate it, and suffering frightens me. I was afraid because I didn’t know how to dance, and the Sacred Third as I was called to honor Hir is a superb dancer.

But I did put the idea out there, and to my surprise and delight (and terror) there was a lot of support for it. When I heard Starhawk had written some music for our invocation, I was floored. And when I heard it was a part of the Goddess Song, I was floored again, both honored and a little puzzled.

It’s fundamental to my spiritual beliefs that women, men, and third gender people can all honor the Goddess and the

God. A transgender woman honoring the Goddess is a woman honoring the Goddess, no matter what her genitals look like or how much of her life she spent living as male.

I had no doubt that the Reclaiming community would support me in honoring the God or the Goddess as a man. So it wasn’t simply, for me, about making room for trans women to honor the Goddess — trans women should have just the same place of honor among Her Priestesses as non-trans women. It was about all of us, women and men and third-gender people, making space for the Faces of Mystery who don’t fit into Goddess or God. And putting the invocation of the Sacred Third into the Goddess invocation was not what I had intended.

People make our plans, but Spirit works. The invocation of the Sacred Third looked like an invasion into Goddess space. That’s no doubt what some people felt it was — one of my dancers got yelled at that year for being in the women’s restroom.

My original intention was to hold some space between the Goddess and the God invocations that was not either one or the other, but that was not in the cards for our first year. Instead, we came on during the verse of the Goddess invocation Star had written for us, and we danced, first making a tug of war with a rope and then opening it out into a balanced circle. (I have it on reliable authority that no one really “got it” — such is life! We are new, and we are learning.)

Regardless, I was elated. It was Mystery running through me, imperfect and weird — who could ask for anything more?

*Kerrick went to college in Florida for Classical Archaeology. He came to the Bay Area in 2005 to study museums and be queer. Since then he has learned to cook, take care of plants that take care of him, pray as a Jew, and run the Iron Pentacle, as well as design exhibitions and educational programming. His Homeric Greek is still appalling.*



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