

## Unmasking Halloween

*by Anna Howington*

Halloween is a unique festival on the modern American calendar. Widely celebrated and widely marketed, we see Halloween tableaux begin popping up as early as September each year, yet the day goes unrecognized as a national holiday. There are no days off school, no traveling across the country to see loved ones. Is it a holiday for children? For partiers? For evil? That all depends on whom you ask. Today it functions as a highly commercialized, primarily North American holiday. And one that also holds the distinction of being the most vilified holiday in our society.

Many cite the early Celtic festival of Samhain as the origin of Halloween's traditions, but a lack of historical evidence makes this connection a tenuous one. While Halloween's roots can be traced back over a millennium to this earlier agrarian festival, most of its traditions come from the Catholic celebrations surrounding All Hallows and All Saint's Day. It was Catholic customs, which had developed around courtship, communication with the supernatural, and the reversal of class paradigms, which sowed the seeds of modern Halloween traditions. However, due to Halloween's association with the supernatural and our society's muddled view of what paganism is and was (with many people conflating Satanism with paganism), the idea that Halloween has kept its pagan traditions over the centuries is broadly accepted despite limited evidence supporting this claim.

When the holiday immigrated to North America with the Scotts-Irish in the nineteenth century its traditions lost much of their Christian religious meaning. Later, during the twentieth century, the holiday was demonized by far-right evangelical groups, falsely claiming Halloween traditions were rooted in pagan rituals, when in fact, nearly all of them can be traced back to Christian origins and were developed in highly Christianized societies. Even the name “Halloween” is Christian in its etymology (being derivative of All Hallow Even, the day before All Saints Day and All Hallows Day). These twentieth-century evangelical groups went on to appropriate Halloween traditions, renaming and rebranding them, the very process they had condemned and claimed happened when All Saints Day and All Souls Day supplanted the earlier Celtic holiday of Samhain.

### The Celtic Festival of Samhain: What We Know and What We Don’t Know

Samhain, roughly translated to mean “Summer’s End,” was an agrarian festival celebrated by the Celtic people during the Iron Age.<sup>1</sup> While this festival is seen as the origin of Halloween, there are few (if any) Samhain traditions that we can point to as being a part of the holiday we know today. This may be due in large part to the fact that Druids, the religious leaders of the Celts who oversaw the rites of Samhain, left no written records of their practices.

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (S.I.: Duke Classics, 2020). 263.

Druids passed down their knowledge through a strictly oral tradition.<sup>2</sup> The few contemporary writings we have describing Celtic beliefs and rites come from early Roman writers who also expressed an obvious disdain for what they considered the barbaric culture of the Celtic people.<sup>3</sup>

We do have later descriptions of the holiday appearing in some early Irish sagas, though it is important to note, these were written after the Christianization of Europe. In one Irish text from the tenth century, *Tochmarc Emire*, or "The Wooing of Emer," Samhain is referred to as the first day of the new year in the Irish calendar when "the summer goes to rest."<sup>4</sup> It is the festival opposite the celebration of Beltane, which was associated with the life-giving power of the sun and springtime. Samhain, in contrast, was associated with the long nights of winter and supernatural forces escaping from the low hills, mounds, and barrows in the countryside, also known as the *sidh*.<sup>5</sup> In an effort to ward off the spirits from the *sidh*, the Celts built enormous bonfires. It was here that they sacrificed animals and, according to some claims, even humans, though the latter is not confirmed by any contemporary sources outside the writings of a few (likely biased) early Roman historians who had traveled into Celtic lands, such as Pliny the Elder, Strabo of Amasia, and Diodorus of Sicily, nor is there sufficient archaeological evidence to support this claim.<sup>6</sup>

As far as the contemporary sources are concerned, an account by Pliny the Elder, written sometime between 23-70 BCE, describes in detail the Druids overseeing the animal sacrifice of

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Ross, *Folklore of the Scottish Highlands*, (Totowa, N.J: Rowman and Littlefield, 1976). 13.

<sup>3</sup> MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 263.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2011). 361.

<sup>5</sup> MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 263.

<sup>6</sup> MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 264.

two white bulls in a fertility rite.<sup>7</sup> However, it was the writings of Strabo and Diodorus which made claims of human sacrifice. Diodorus was especially vivid in his descriptions of the Druids performing a human sacrifice, writing that after the victim was stabbed and fell to the ground, the Druids would divine the future based on “the manner of his fall and twitching of his limbs.”<sup>8</sup> Strabo made similar claims regarding the telling of the future from a slain’s death struggle though he described the victim as succumbing to death from an arrow wound, even though arrows were not commonly used by the Celtic people.<sup>9</sup> Roman historian, Tacitus describes the Celts as made up of savage cults who covered their alters with human blood and read the future in the entrails of their victims.<sup>10</sup> Julius Caesar wrote of the Druids overseeing the construction of a large structure in the shape of a man made out of branches and twigs into which they would force a human victim before setting fire to the wood and burning the victim alive in sacrifice to their gods.<sup>11</sup>

While Pliny, Strabo, Diodorus, and Caesar did not mention Samhain specifically in their writings, considering the Druids oversaw the rites performed at these festivals, the idea that ritual sacrifices were a part of Samhain was assumed.<sup>12</sup> Much later, when Halloween became associated in a negatively with the Celtic holiday of Samhain after the Reformation (due in large part to a Protestant distaste for Catholic holidays) and then again in America alongside the rise of the Satanic Panic in the 1980 and 90s, claims of human sacrifices were erroneously attributed to

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Rogers, *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). 14.

<sup>8</sup> Diodorus et al., *Diodorus of Sicily* Vol. 3, Book 5. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933). 179.

<sup>9</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 15.

Samhain rites, and the idea became an integral part of protestant and evangelical cases against the holiday.

Consider also that there are few mentions of human sacrifices in later recordings of ancient Irish Sagas, and that these tellings were likely influenced by their Christian recorders with a vested interest in eliminating any remaining pagan practices from Ireland.<sup>13</sup> An example of this can be found in *Dindshenchas*, a twelfth-century collection of Irish poems and folklore which tells of children being sacrificed on Samhain to the Celtic god, *Cromm Cruaich*.<sup>14</sup>

Accusations of human sacrifice are nothing new. Throughout the centuries, they have been commonly made against any group seen as “other.” The Christians were accused of such deeds by the Romans in the first century.<sup>15</sup> Later, in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries Catholics would go on to accuse the Jews of these blood libels as well sects such as the Cathars and the Waldiseans.<sup>16</sup> Even today, we see claims made by Q-Anon followers against elite democratic politicians, such as Hilary Clinton, who sacrificed babies to drink their blood.<sup>17</sup>

As for the claims of human sacrifice by the Druids and Celtic people on Samhain, there is not sufficient physical evidence to support the claim, though there is evidence of animal sacrifice as part of the festival’s rites. The Hill of Ward, once known as Tlachtga, is believed to be the site at which the ancient Celts practiced their rites of Samhain.<sup>18</sup> It is located thirty miles north of

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<sup>13</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993). 8.

<sup>16</sup> Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 51, 77.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Roose, “How ‘Save the Children’ Is Keeping QAnon Alive,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Erin Mullally. “Samhain Revival.” *Archaeology* 69, no. 6. 2016, 35.

Dublin in the Boyne Valley and is marked by four concentric circles surrounding an area of roughly 18 acres.<sup>19</sup> The construction of the site took place over many centuries beginning in the Bronze Age and continuing through the Iron Age.<sup>20</sup> Excavations there in 2014 discovered evidence of large-scale burnings and a considerable number of animal bones.<sup>21</sup> There was no evidence of residential dwellings or day-to-day activities, bolstering the idea that it was a site used only for ritualistic rites and celebrations.<sup>22</sup> While a few human remains were found at the site dating to the Bronze Age, along with one set of remains, those of a small child who had been buried with care, dating to around 450 CE, well after the arrival of Christianity to the region, these findings in no way told a story of ritual human sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> The arrangement of the Bronze Age remains mirrored that of a “passage tomb,” narrow galleries with burial chambers on either side, which were common to the area.<sup>24</sup>

Much of the lore surrounding Samhain comes from later writings. The documenting of Irish folklore during the medieval periods paints a rich picture of the holiday and its supposed ancient rites and traditions. By the time of these writings, Ireland had been Christianized, calling into question the motive of the authors. However, many of the themes seen in these stories were woven into the traditions of Halloween over time and, because of this, can be viewed as an important part of the holiday’s evolution.

By the time Samhain’s lore was recorded in early Irish sagas, it was centuries after the Druids held sway over the Celtic people. The Christianization of the region was already in full

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<sup>19</sup> Mullally, “Samhain Revival,” 34.

<sup>20</sup> Mullally, “Samhain Revival,” 34.

<sup>21</sup> Mullally, “Samhain Revival,” 35.

<sup>22</sup> Mullally, “Samhain Revival,” 35.

<sup>23</sup> Mullally, “Samhain Revival,” 35.

<sup>24</sup> Mullally, “Samhain Revival,” 35.

swing, and these writings, which were part of a long-held oral storytelling tradition of ancient lore, may offer clues to the past but cannot be considered historically accurate. According to these sagas, Samhain was a time for gathering one's goods and taking stock before the long winter.<sup>25</sup> It was also a time when the *sidh* would reveal themselves and the palaces of the gods.<sup>26</sup>

The idea that Samhain was a holiday for the dead was popularized in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Sir James Frazer in his controversial work, *The Golden Bough*, in which he likely confused the rites and traditions of All Souls Day with those of Samhain.<sup>27</sup> *The Golden Bough*, while inspiring many literary works after its publication, was full of speculative theories and lacking in genuine scholarship. Yet, while Frazer's understanding of the holiday was unreliable, his work was so influential that his ideas about Samhain became widely accepted and are still believed by many today.

It is understandable that Frazer would conflate Samhain as a holiday celebrating the dead, as there were countless stories and lore surrounding All Saints Day and All Souls Day to this effect in the centuries prior. Once such telling warned mortals to stay inside on this night or else the spirits of the dead coming back to earth would lure them to a party on that "one night of all the year when the dead can leave their graves and dance in the moonlight on the hill."<sup>28</sup> It was said that if you joined them in their dancing, your arms would become black with death wherever

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<sup>25</sup> MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 264.

<sup>26</sup> Rogers, *Halloween*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Rogers, *Halloween*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1900). 631.

they touched you.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that Irish folklore was rife with stories of ghosts and fairies, most of which had nothing to do with this particular time of year.

### All Saints Day and All Souls Day: Traditions and Rites

Now that we have examined what we know and don't know about Samhain, we must ask the question, how did Halloween come to be associated with the Celtic celebration? This was due mostly to the date on which All Saints Day and All Souls Day were celebrated. While the Catholic Church did not outright claim to merge Samhain and these two Catholic holidays for reasons of assimilating the Celtic population into the religion, one could easily assume the dates for these All Saints Day and All Souls Day were chosen to supplant Samhain in an effort to offer an alternative reason for celebration.

While All Saints Day was originally celebrated in May and confined mostly to Rome, Pope Gregory IV ordered the universal celebration of the holiday to take place on November 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>30</sup> The church added All Souls Day to the ecclesiastical calendar in the early 10th century as a day to pray for the souls in purgatory after Odilon, the Bishop of Cluny, was told of an island where the souls in purgatory could be heard screaming in agony from

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<sup>29</sup> William Robert Wilde. *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland, with Sketches of the Irish Past*. (Galway, Ire: O'Gorman, 1971.) 77.

<sup>30</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 17.



the mouth of a cave on this day.<sup>31</sup> By the end of the twelfth century, the two holidays were linked together as a liturgical time of year, referred to as *Hallowtide* in the British Isles.<sup>32</sup>

Hallowtide was of much significance during the late Middle Ages. The religious masses and rites associated with the religious holidays were seen as insurance against any ghosts who had gone to the other side with grudges against the living.<sup>33</sup> While the church masses and religious rites were part of the celebrations of Hallowtide, other traditions, many of superstitious nature, were added over time. Large processions past graveyards to honor the dead and the laying out of food and drink for one's dead relatives were common practices, the latter being kin to the traditions we see practiced today in Mexico and Texas during *Dios De los Muertos*, another holiday closely associated with Halloween.<sup>34</sup> The building of large bonfires to ward off the begrudged spirits was common and the only tradition one can arguably tie back to Samhain.<sup>35</sup>

Another custom that developed during this time was for wealthier parishioners to hand out food to the less fortunate in exchange for prayers for their deceased loved ones. Shakespeare comments on this practice in his comedy, *Two Gentle Men of Verona*, when one character accuses another of whining "like a beggar at Hallowmas"<sup>36</sup> Hallowmas was derived from Middle English's *Alholowmesse*, which came from the Old English *ealra*

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<sup>31</sup> Alban Butler, *The People's Pictorial Lives of the Saints ... Abridged, for the Most Part, from Those of the Late Rev. Alban Butler* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1870). 55.

<sup>32</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>34</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> William Shakespeare. *Two Gentle Men of Verona*, act II, scene I.

*halgena mæsse*, which translates literally to, all saints' mass.<sup>37</sup> This custom soon became known as “souling” in which households would bake dozens of “soul-cakes,” small cakes decorated with crosses to give out to the unfortunate who would go door to door and accept the cakes in exchange for prayers for the inhabitant's deceased loved ones.<sup>38</sup> This practice of going door to door for sweets greatly resembles current trick-or-treating customs. It also is interesting to note that these “soulers” made their way from house to house carrying hollowed-out turnips with light candles inside, which represented souls trapped in purgatory, similar to the jack-o-lanterns of today.<sup>39</sup>

Mummers was a common tradition associated with winter holidays during the early modern period in which groups of masked peasants paraded through streets and visited the houses of the wealthy. During this season of misrule, role inversions were a central theme. Peasants would imitate Lords, and parishioners would become priests.<sup>40</sup> Historian, Stephen Nissenbaum argues these role inversions worked to solidify class hierarchies by giving lower classes a controlled outlet to express their class resentments.<sup>41</sup> It was much like the trick-or-treating we see today when children are permitted to demand from adult neighbors a treat under the threat of mischievous acts if denied. Hallowtide was seen as the begging of this season of misrule when social norms became inverted. As the English poet Richard Crashaw wrote, “How fit our well-rank'd Feasts do follow/ All mischief comes after All Hallow.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “Allhallowmas.”

<sup>38</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Crashaw, *The Poems*, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford: Carendon Press, 1957), 185.

Scottish poet Robert Fergusson's 1772 poem, "Hallow-Fair," depicts the annual unruly Hallowmas celebration of Edinburgh. Fergusson describes all the various types of people attending the fair, vendors, farmers, and con men alike, and the danger and chaos that came with large crowds of people drinking and carrying on. He also notes the Highland soldiers charged with keeping the peace through violent measures.<sup>43</sup> The poem captures much of the atmosphere and issues that came along with Hallowmas celebrations of sixteenth-century Scotland, where drinking and chaos were common, as seen in the excerpt below:

“At Hallowmas, whan nights grow lang,  
And starnies shine fu' clear,  
Whan fock, the nippin cauld to bang,  
Their winter hapwarms wear;  
Near Edinburgh a fair there hads,  
I wat there's nane whase name is,  
For strappin dames and sturdy lads,  
And cap and stoup, mair famous  
Than it that day....  
Here chapmen billies tak their stand,  
An' shaw their bonny wallies;  
Wow, but they lie fu' gleg aff hand  
To trick the silly fallows;  
Heh, Sirs! what cairds and tinklers come,

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Fergusson. "Hallow-Fair" *Scots Poems*, ed. Alexander Law, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1947), 37.

An' ne'er-do-weel horse coupers,  
An' spae-wives fenzying to be dumb,  
Wi' a siclike landloupers,  
To thrive that day.”

Other early celebrations, traditions, rites, and games associated specifically with All Hallows Eve varied from region to region throughout the British Isles. In the Scottish Highlands, for instance, bonfires left over from the traditions of Samhain, remained an important part of the holiday celebrations, continuing well after the Christianization of Europe. It was common practice for members of the community to take fire from these bonfires back to their homes to relight their hearths as a way to protect inhabitants from evil spirits.<sup>44</sup> In Fortingall, Scotland revelers would clasp hands with one another, dancing clockwise and then counterclockwise around the flames, a tradition which reportedly lasted until the 1920s though the exact symbolism of this rite has been lost to time.<sup>45</sup>

In England, candles were carried about the countryside in the hours preceding midnight to ward off witches and protect crops.<sup>46</sup> If these candles remained lit until after midnight, the carrier was ensured protection from witches and bad luck for an entire year.<sup>47</sup> Apple bobbing, known as “snap-apple,” was a way to use up the excess apples from the year’s harvest.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ross, *Folklore of the Scottish Highlands*, 152.

<sup>45</sup> Ross, *Folklore of the Scottish Highlands*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> K.M Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folktales in the English Language: Incorporating the F.J. Norton Collection*, Part B, vol.1 (Bloomington, IN: University Press, 1970). 613.

<sup>47</sup> T. F. Thiselton-Dyer, *British Popular Customs: Present and Past: Illustrating the Social and Domestic Manners of the People: Arranged According to the Calendar of the Year* (London: G. Bell, 1911). 395.

<sup>48</sup> Thiselton-Dyer, *British Popular Customs*, 395.

Divination games were also a large part of celebrations.<sup>49</sup> One such divination practice involved each member of a household marking a small stone and then tossing it into a fire.<sup>50</sup> In the morning, participants dug through the ashes to find their stones. If one was missing, it was believed that person would be dead within a year.<sup>51</sup> Death could also be predicted if, after dropping an egg white into a glass of water, the figure of a shroud appeared.<sup>52</sup>

Welsh All Hallows Eve practices included a ritual called the “church porch,” during which the curious and brave would stand by a church window on All Hallows Eve night where they believed they would witness a sermon given by the devil himself, who would reveal the names of those who would die in the next year.<sup>53</sup>

After the decline of medieval plagues and during the subsequent increase of population in the early modern period, All Hallows Eve became a holiday on which young people attempted to secure courtships and marriages, as was the case with other similar holidays during that time, such as Valentine’s Day, May Day, and David’s Day.<sup>54</sup> While death divinations were still performed on All Hallows Eve, the majority of fortune-telling began to revolve around marriage predictions. One such practice by young women in Derbyshire involved placing sprigs of rosemary under their pillows, believing their dreams that night would reveal their future

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<sup>49</sup> Rogers, *Halloween*, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Thiselton-Dyer, *British Popular Customs*, 395.

<sup>51</sup> Thiselton-Dyer, *British Popular Customs*, 395.

<sup>52</sup> Thiselton-Dyer, *British Popular Customs*, 395.

<sup>53</sup> Anne Beale, *Traits and Stories of the Welsh Peasantry* (London: George Routledge & Co., 1849), 94.

<sup>54</sup> Rogers, *Halloween*, 44.

husbands.<sup>55</sup> In Cornwall, a young woman would find out the profession of their future husband by placing molten lead in cold water and reading its shape.<sup>56</sup>

### Puritanical Views on Halloween

Let us now examine the first time we see a concerted effort by a religious movement to stamp out the holiday. Early European and American Puritans were certainly not fans of Halloween, or Christmas, for that matter. Almost no one celebrated Christmas or Halloween in America prior to the 1830s. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was Thanksgiving, a providential holiday, that held the role of the most prominent celebration of the fall and winter seasons.<sup>57</sup>

To understand the puritanical distaste for Halloween, Christmas, as well as other ecclesiastical holidays, we have to go back to the English Reformation. Medieval Christendom had established an extensive number of holidays over the centuries. Before the Reformation, a total of 147 religious holidays dotted the ecclesiastical calendar.<sup>58</sup> No work was permitted on these days. Celebrations were also expensive, requiring food, drink, and decorations, burdening the poorer and middle-class members of the community. Puritans demanded the eradication of

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<sup>55</sup> A.R. Wright, *British Calendar Customs: England*, e.d. T. E. Jones (London: Folklore Society 1936-40) vol.2, 111.

<sup>56</sup> Wright, *British Calendar Customs: England*, 117.

<sup>57</sup> James W. Baker, *Thanksgiving the Biography of an American Holiday* (Hanover: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010), 37.

<sup>58</sup> Baker. *Thanksgiving*, 17.

these ecclesiastical holidays both to free up time for work and eliminate any lingering traces of Catholicism from the Anglican calendar. Instead, they chose only to celebrate “providential” holidays, i.e., fasts and thanksgivings.<sup>59</sup> The idea of God’s providence, which was central to their belief systems, positioned God not only as the creator of the universe but also as the active micromanager of every current event on the planet. Thus, only major events, whether blessings or calamities, required recognition.

It is no surprise that by 1687, a Puritan clergyman in New England and the president of Harvard, Increase Mather, rebuked Halloween as a concession to the Antichrist.<sup>60</sup> This is one of the first examples of a religious leader demonizing the holiday. Increase Mather’s son, Cotton Mather, who would later become an influential figure in the Salem Witch Trials, shared his father’s views on the matter.<sup>61</sup> Halloween would not become a popular holiday on the American calendar until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Halloween Comes to America

Now that we have examined the seeds of puritanical distaste for Halloween, it is important to look at when and how Halloween established itself in America during later

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<sup>59</sup> Baker. *Thanksgiving*, 20.

<sup>60</sup> Increase Mather, *A Testimony Against Several Profane and Superstitious Customs Now Practiced in New England*. (London, 1687), 19, 41.

<sup>61</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 49.

centuries. The acceptance of the holiday in America was due in large part to the Scotts-Irish immigration of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The Irish Potato Famine beginning in 1845, led to mass immigration from Ireland to the United States. Over a million Irish and over half a million Scottish migrants settled in America between 1845 to 1852.<sup>62</sup> They brought with them Halloween traditions and practices not commonly seen in the States prior to their arrival.

We began to see these annual celebrations gain steam in the late nineteenth century. The reign of Queen Victoria had brought England into a prosperous period, and many Americans were eager to imitate Britain's successes. It was widely reported that the Queen had spent Halloween in 1869 at Balmoral Castle in Scotland. These accounts described the Queen witnessing locals dancing around an enormous Halloween bonfire on the castle grounds with great interest.<sup>63</sup> Mentions of Halloween celebrations start to appear in American publications shortly after this event. The first is a short story about an English Halloween party for children published in the popular magazine *Godey's Lady's Book* in October of 1870. It detailed Halloween party customs such as jumping over a broom placed at the door to keep out witches, several divination games that involved burning nuts in a fire and laying out cards, and the making of "fate cakes," which were to be placed under a pillow at night to summon dreams. In publications during this time, Halloween is portrayed as an English holiday, making it more palatable to the growing middle class in America eager to imitate English traditions and distance themselves from the Irish Catholics pouring into the country.

The Scottish and Irish continued to celebrate Halloween following their immigration to America. In New York, the first Halloween Ball was arranged by the National Irish League,

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<sup>62</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 49.

<sup>63</sup> "Halloween at Balmoral Castle," *The Times*, November 4, 1869.



taking place on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1893, at the Lexington Avenue Opera House.<sup>64</sup> In Philadelphia during the 1860s Mrs. Drew's New Arch Theatre hosted storyteller Barney Williams on Halloween to regale audiences with "legendary dreams of Old Ireland."<sup>65</sup>

Halloween took hold in North America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in 1886, the upper echelons of New York Society held a yearly Halloween Ball at Tuxedo Park.<sup>66</sup> By the turn of the century, the holiday had an established place on the Washington elite's social calendar.<sup>67</sup> Advertisements for costume masks are seen in Kingston, Ontario, as early as 1874.<sup>68</sup> The *Herald* noted on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1878, that "if any failed to see dancing fairies and witches last night, innumerable last evening, it was because he did not make a tour of the parlours of his acquaintances."<sup>69</sup>

From its arrival in America, Halloween was seen as a night full of childhood mischief. On November 2, 1862, the *Peoria Morning Mail* in Peoria, Illinois, reported, "This old-time anniversary which took place on Friday evening, was made the excuse by some of our wild boys for throwing unsavory missiles, putrid vegetables; taking gates off of the hinges, and sundry other pranks. This was probably good [fun] to the boys, but for those thus attacked, it was not so desirable."<sup>70</sup> A stern warning to the citizens of Washington D.C. regarding young carousers was issued by *Evening Star* in 1897 for every household "to see that his front gate is chained" and to "exercise no haste in answering the front door," for "there is no telling what the ubiquitous small

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<sup>64</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 50.

<sup>65</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 50.

<sup>66</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 67.

<sup>67</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 67.

<sup>68</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 53.

<sup>69</sup> *New York Herald*, 1 Nov. 1878

<sup>70</sup> *Peoria Morning Mail* 1 Nov. 1878.

boy will resort to when he is out with all the glory and license of Halloween.”<sup>71</sup> The article also claims Halloween to be a “relic of the semi-barbaric period.”

As with all evolutions of traditions, some aspects were kept, some were left behind, and some were invented. The Americanization of Halloween at the turn of the century meant moving away from many of the divination practices associated with the Scottish and Irish celebrations. These games had traditionally centered around foretelling love connections and future marriages. Community-regulated courtship practices associated with the holiday fell to the side as Halloween celebrations moved into the streets, especially in larger cities.<sup>72</sup> Changing attitudes towards courtships, the result of young people moving into more unsupervised environments than previous generations such as apprenticeships and industrial wage-labor positions, also contributed to the decline of these divination games.<sup>73</sup> While they were still practiced to some degree, they were not taken as seriously and ended in mock marriages rather than real ones as they might have in Old Scotland.<sup>74</sup>

Halloween divinations regarding marriage and courtship would also become common in America by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In North Carolina, on Halloween night, young girls would place cornmeal next to their beds where ghosts would write the name of the man they were destined to marry.<sup>75</sup> One could also try walking down a set of dark steps backward on Halloween night carrying a mirror in order to view the face of their future spouse in the reflection.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Evening Star*, 1 Nov. 1897.

<sup>72</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 54.

<sup>73</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 55.

<sup>74</sup> Rogers. *Halloween*, 55.

<sup>75</sup> Wayland Debs Hand, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Pr., 1964). 589.

<sup>76</sup> Hand, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, 599.

While Jack-O-Lanterns were not American in origin, the use of the pumpkin and its association with Halloween was a part of the holiday's Americanization. In Ireland and Scotland, Jack-O-Lanterns were made of turnips or mangelwurzels (a variety of beet), and carved with grotesque faces, a tradition that we can trace back to mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Europe.<sup>77</sup> The folklore tale of Jack and his lantern had many versions, but the running theme was that Jack, a man of questionable morals, tricked the devil and captured him, only letting him free once the devil promised never to claim Jack's soul. After a life of sin, drinking, and dishonesty, Jack is refused entry to heaven, and the devil, keeping his word, does not allow Jack into hell either. Instead, he throws a burning lump of coal at Jack. Jack is then forced to roam the earth with a turnip lantern lit from the inside with the fire of hell.<sup>78</sup>

In America, pumpkins took the place of turnips, as they were larger and easier to carve. One of the first mentions of a Pumpkin Jack-O-Lantern shows up in Washington Irving's classic short story, *The Headless Horseman*. However, Irving's story makes no mention of Halloween. We do not see the Jack-O-Lantern associated with Halloween in America until the 1830s.<sup>79</sup>

While the roots of trick-or-treating can be traced back to the practice of "souling," the term "trick-or-treating" is decidedly American. We do not see the first mention of "trick-or-treating" until 1939.<sup>80</sup> The term came from the practice of giving children candy, or "treats," in the form of money or sweets in order to quell the mischief threatened by roaming bands of

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<sup>77</sup> Blane Bachelor. "The Twisted Transatlantic Tale of American Jack-o'-Lantern,." *National Geographic*, Oct 27, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> E. W., "Jack o' the Lantern," *The Dublin Penny Journal*, vol. 4, no. 185, 1836. 229–32.

<sup>79</sup> Bachelor, "The Twisted Transatlantic Tale."

<sup>80</sup> "Trick-or-Treat," *Hammond Times*, Oct 31, 1938.

children on Halloween.<sup>81</sup> "Trick" implies a "threat" to perform mischief on the homeowner's property if no treat is given.

The damaging of property by children was a reoccurring problem on Halloween leading up to and during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1923 in Omaha, Nebraska, after years of neighborhoods being terrorized by gangs of roaming children, the police commissioner chose five hundred of the "worst boys" to serve as a special police force on Halloween and gave them badges and instructions to rat on their peers.<sup>82</sup> Surprisingly, the strategy worked, and the mayhem was subdued.

In Toronto in 1945, a group of teenagers started several bonfires on a main thoroughfare.<sup>83</sup> When Mounted police attempted to break up the group, the youngsters fought back, throwing rocks and constructing barricades to prevent firetrucks from getting through. After thirteen of them were finally arrested, a mob of seven thousand teenagers and children marched to central booking to demand their release.<sup>84</sup> It took tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowd.<sup>85</sup>

In July of 1950, the US House Judiciary Committee called for President Truman to name Halloween "National Youth Honor Day," in an effort to bolster attempts to direct the activities of young people on Halloween night away from destruction and focus instead on serving their communities.<sup>86</sup> Their plan included giving public school student pledge cards urging them to

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<sup>81</sup> Emily Chertoff, "A Sinister History of Halloween Pranks." *The Atlantic*, Oct. 31, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Hugh Fullerton, "Curing Bad Boys by Making Them Cops," *Liberty Magazine*, Nov. 1923.

<sup>83</sup> Chertoff, "A Sinister History of Halloween Pranks."

<sup>84</sup> "7000 Join in East End Riot Cities Rowdiest," *Toronto Star*, Nov 1, 1945.

<sup>85</sup> Chertoff, "A Sinister History of Halloween Pranks."

<sup>86</sup> Rodgers, Halloween, 85.

remain respectful of both public and private property. Students who signed the pledge would receive a ticket to a school dance to be held the night of Halloween. The motion to rename the holiday failed to pass as the House of Representatives' focus shifted to the Korean War.<sup>87</sup>

During the Second World War, trick-or-treating was halted due to sugar rationing.<sup>88</sup> Following the war, the tradition picked up again, gaining more traction than ever before, fueled by expanding suburbs and the baby boom. In 1950 a group of children from the Philadelphia area decided to collect donations to UNICEF while out trick-or-treating, sending the organization \$17.<sup>89</sup> This inspired UNICEF to launch the campaign “Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF” the following year, where children all across the country would ask for donations on behalf of the organization while trick-or-treating.<sup>90</sup> By 1965, the same year UNICEF won the Nobel Peace Prize, the campaign had become an enormous success. Over 3.5 million children raised over 5.5 million dollars for the organization that Halloween.<sup>91</sup> The campaign integrated trick-or-treating even further into an accepted American tradition, giving the practice a better reputation than it had in the decades before.

However, a fear of Halloween treats themselves also became a common theme during these years. In the first of these scares, a dentist in Centerville, California, gave laxatives to sixteen children who came trick-or-treating to his home on Halloween 1959.<sup>92</sup> The first death of a child attributed to Halloween candy came in 1970 when a five-year-old child reportedly

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<sup>87</sup> Santino, *Halloween*, 88.

<sup>88</sup> Rogers, *Halloween*, 85.

<sup>89</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 90.

<sup>90</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 90.

<sup>91</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 90.

<sup>92</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Nov. 1959.

ingested heroin-laced candy.<sup>93</sup> It was later concluded that the child likely found the drugs at his uncle's home and not in his Halloween candy.<sup>94</sup> Regardless, after this incident, stories of contaminated Halloween candy were rampant and reached a fever pitch in 1974 with news of a second death, that of eight-year-old Timothy O'Brien, in Texas, who had been given a cyanide-laced pixie stick.<sup>95</sup> It was later revealed by Texas prosecutors that it was, in fact, O'Brien's father who had planted the pixie stick in his son's Halloween candy in a scheme to claim the boy's life insurance policy.<sup>96</sup>

In late September of 1982, seven people died in the Chicago area after unknowingly taking Tylenol, which had been laced with cyanide.<sup>97</sup> The entire country watched as authorities scrambled to find the culprit in the two weeks leading up to Halloween, increasing the nation's anxiety over poisoned goods. While largely exaggerated, rumors of tampered candy continued to grow throughout the 1980s. Towns across America were issuing curfew hours and age restrictions and, in many cases, banning the practice altogether.<sup>98</sup> Urban legends began to emerge regarding Halloween sadism. One of the most common, the idea that razor blades were being put in apples and handed out on Halloween night, was never verified by any major publication or police report at the time.<sup>99</sup> Only two deaths, as previously noted, were associated with the holiday, and both were likely the result of actions by family members. However, the media continued to stoke fears, and a more sinister view of Halloween began to take shape. It would be

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<sup>93</sup> Joel Best and Gerald T. Horiuchi, "The Razor Blade in the Apple: The Social Construction of Urban Legends," *Social Problems* 32 (1985), 488.

<sup>94</sup> Best and Horiuchi, "The Razor Blade in the Apple," 488.

<sup>95</sup> Best and Horiuchi, "The Razor Blade in the Apple," 489.

<sup>96</sup> Best and Horiuchi, "The Razor Blade in the Apple," 490.

<sup>97</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 91.

<sup>98</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 92.

<sup>99</sup> Joel Best and Gerald T. Horiuchi, "The Razor Blade in the Apple," 489.

easy to assume the press was entirely responsible for changing views about the holiday, but there were other factors at play as well.

### The Demonization of Halloween

Outside of fears regarding candy and the safety of children, religious movements against the holiday called for an end to Halloween. Evangelical Christianity, which grew rapidly during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, began to paint Halloween as a pagan intrusion into an otherwise devout and Christian America beginning in the 1970s. And the Satanic Panic of the late 1980s and early 90s only served to heighten their fears surrounding the holiday. These religious groups claimed it was not a holiday for children and costumed revelers, but instead a holy day for sadists and Satanists.<sup>100</sup> As the highly influential televangelist Rev. Pat Robertson declared in 1982, celebrating the holiday was akin to performing a “Satanist Ritual” and stating that "Halloween is a festival for demonic spirits. The whole idea of trick o’ treating ... the Druids would go to somebody's house and ask for money, and if they didn't get any money, they would kill their sheep. That was the trick ... and it was serious stuff. All this business about goblins and jack-o'-lanterns all comes out of demonic rituals of the Druids and the people who lived in England at that particular time. I think churches can have Halloween parties. You can bob for apples ... and

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<sup>100</sup> Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 131.

turn it into a Christian festival, and that's what we ought to do. We need to redeem these days, but that day was given over to Satanic things."<sup>101</sup>

The turn against Halloween by American Evangelicals was largely based on the idea that Halloween was a pagan holiday and inconsistent with Christian beliefs. The fact that most modern Halloween traditions, such as trick or treating and apple bobbing, had developed during the early modern period in highly Christianized societies, not pagan ones, was entirely lost on these evangelical groups. Ironically, their opinion regarding the original sin of the holiday, that it took pagan traditions and incorporated them into Christian celebrations is essentially what they proceeded to do in the latter half of the twentieth century.

One of the first examples of their efforts to remake Halloween was the appropriation of Haunted Houses, which by the 1970s had become a common form of Halloween entertainment. Their version of these productions, often called "Hell Houses" or "Judgement Houses," were specifically designed to scare children in teenagers into accepting Christ through depictions of eternal damnation.<sup>102</sup> Scholar Robyn Lee-Horn, who has done extensive research on the phenomenon, states, "As a genre, hell houses are part haunted house, part B-movie slasher flick, and part medieval morality play."<sup>103</sup>

The first Haunted Houses, which began to crop up in the 1950s in America, were typically fundraising events sponsored by local charities.<sup>104</sup> Vacant buildings would be

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<sup>101</sup> "The 700 Club," *The 700 Club* (Christian Broadcast Network, September 26, 2016).

<sup>102</sup> Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 132.

<sup>103</sup> Robyn Lee-Horn, "American Hells," in *Theatre and the Macabre*. 1st ed. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2022, 240.

<sup>104</sup> Sylvia Ann Grider, "Haunted Houses," in *Haunting Experiences Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2007), 165.



transformed to display a tableau of familiar scenes associated with the macabre filled with characters such as witches, werewolves, mad scientists, and vampires. These early versions of haunted houses tended toward DIY kid-friendly exhibits, often blindfolding participants and placing their hands in bowls of peeled grapes, claiming they were human eyeballs, or cooked spaghetti, which was meant to imamate brains.<sup>105</sup> Unlike the haunted houses in storybooks and films, these fundraising and later commercial ventures paid little attention to the exterior of the venues placing all decorations and actors inside mostly warehouse-like structures.<sup>106</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century, these venues have largely become commercial ventures, with companies rather than charities profiting off the ticket sales, making them an essential part of the Halloween economy.

Contrary to the fantastical nature of a typical Halloween Haunted House, Hell Houses eschewed the supernatural and macabre in favor of hyper-realistic depictions of car wrecks, abortions, and drug overdoses in an effort to terrorize and disgust the audience.<sup>107</sup> At the center of these performances are the abortion scenes which serve as the ultimate example of slaughtered purity.<sup>108</sup> Final scenes of the unrighteous burning in hell are followed by a concluding depiction of Jesus in heaven, with some of the actors ending up in the latter and others the former based on whether or not they had turned away from their sinful paths throughout the course of the immersive play.<sup>109</sup> After these events, participants are met by church officials eager to convert any “unsaved” in the audience.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Grider, “Haunted Houses,” in *Haunting Experiences*, 166.

<sup>106</sup> Grider, “Haunted Houses,” in *Haunting Experiences*, 166.

<sup>107</sup> Grider, “Haunted Houses,” in *Haunting Experiences*, 167.

<sup>108</sup> Robyn Lee-Horn, “American Hells,” in *Theatre and the Macabre*, 241.

<sup>109</sup> Grider, “Haunted Houses,” in *Haunting Experiences*, 167.

<sup>110</sup> Grider, “Haunted Houses,” in *Haunting Experiences*, 167.

The first of these Christian adaptations came from the prominent evangelical leader, Reverend Jerry Falwell. As the founder of Liberty University, pastor of the Lynchburg's Thomas Road Baptist Church, and president of the political action group the Moral Majority, Falwell was known for his aggressive proselytizing and pro-life stance.<sup>111</sup> While searching for new youth outreach campaigns in 1972, Falwell reimagined the idea of a Haunted House by creating *Scarmore*, a dramatic immersive play meant to illustrate the consequences of sin.<sup>112</sup> This early iteration of a Hell House paled in comparison to later productions, which only ramped up the gore and fear tactics, but the central message has remained the same: conventional celebrations of Halloween were evil in nature, and the only path to overcoming evil in the world was through an evangelical brand of Christianity.<sup>113</sup> Just as Halloween had served as a depository for the terrifying aspects of the Catholic religion, such as the fate of souls in purgatory, the devil, and foretelling of death, Evangelicals used the holiday to discuss taboo subjects like eternal damnation and the wages of sin.

Hell Houses were not the only way evangelical groups fought back against the perceived evilness of Halloween. Evangelical Christian households began handing out religious tracks to trick-or-treats in lieu of candy beginning in the 1970s.<sup>114</sup> The widely distributed "Chick Tracts," small pocket-sized leaflets passed en masse by the majority of evangelical churches during the latter half of the twentieth century, featured an extreme distaste for Halloween.<sup>115</sup> Using blunt language and pulpy cartoons, the tracts claimed Halloween was the most solemn of holidays for

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<sup>111</sup> Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 132.

<sup>112</sup> Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 132.

<sup>113</sup> Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>114</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 161.

<sup>115</sup> Danny Lewis, "Five Things to Know About Evangelical Cartoonist Jack Chick" *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 28, 2019.

both Satanists and occultists and warned of the holiday's Pagan roots.<sup>116</sup> As we have already laid out, this conflation of Satanism and Paganism was a common theme in Christian Right's rhetoric regarding Halloween. Another such example can be seen in the evangelical opposition to Harry Potter beginning in the early 2000s, which claimed the books were luring children into the occult and teaching them how to cast satanic/pagan spells.<sup>117</sup>

Churches began offering alternative options to trick-or-treating, staging events called "Harvest Festivals."<sup>118</sup> These events included many activities similar to those seen at traditional Halloween celebrations. Parishioners gave away candy from the trunks of their cars, renaming the practice "trunk-or-treating," and banned children from wearing scary costumes, encouraging them to dress up as biblical characters instead.<sup>119</sup> Other churches decided to rename the holiday "Holy-ween," and for at least one church in Calgary, Alberta, the more unfortunate choice of "Jesus-ween."<sup>120</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>116</sup> "Chick.com: Chick Cartoon Gospel Tracts Make Witnessing so Easy!," Chick.com: Chick Cartoon Gospel Tracts Make Witnessing So Easy!, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.chick.com/>.

<sup>117</sup> Marcy Halford, "Harry Potter and Religion." *The New Yorker*, November 4, 2010.

<sup>118</sup> Lisa Fernandez, "Harvest Fest, Not Halloween." *The Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1997.

<sup>119</sup> Rodgers, *Halloween*, 162

<sup>120</sup> Mark Hanrahan, "Jesus Ween': Christian Group Promotes Godly Alternative To Halloween," *Huffington Post*, October 10, 2011.

Interestingly, the practice of celebrating Samhain in conjunction with Halloween has recently become a trend we see today.<sup>121</sup> As more and more young Americans reject the evangelical milieu they were brought up in and turn to other spiritual ideologies, Samhain offers an appealing alternative to the more traditional notion of Halloween.<sup>122</sup> It is important to note, however, that these new movements have developed in opposition to modern Christianity rather than being holdovers from ancient traditions.<sup>123</sup> Much of these current pagan iterations base their beliefs on shaky ideas that were purported by the discredited historian Margaret Murray and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.<sup>124</sup>

While many will still claim that a restricting of the Celtic religion led to ancient traditions of Samhain being interwoven into early celebrations of All Hallows Eve, we lack the historical evidence needed to make this case. Ironically, this idea, which was both the Puritanical and evangelical's argument against Halloween, that is, that it took pagan traditions and incorporated them into Christian celebrations, is essentially what evangelicals are doing today with the renaming of Halloween and appropriation of its traditions. In short, participating in the same behaviors they deemed so egregious.

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<sup>121</sup> Mullally, "Samhain Revival," 34.

<sup>122</sup> Deena Yellin, "We're in the middle of a witch moment': Hip witchcraft is on the rise in the US." *USA Today*, October 31, 2021.

<sup>123</sup> Christopher Caldwell, "Is the West Becoming Pagan Again?" *The New York Times*, Dec. 29, 2021.

<sup>124</sup> Nancy Ramsey, "The Myth of Historical Narrative: Margaret Murray's *The God of the Witches*," *The Pomegranate*, 3 (1998): 4.