

Book Reviews

Kennet Granholm. *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. xi+226 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-27486-0. \$133.00

Dark Enlightenment should be seen as an important touchstone in the next generation of works coming from the primarily European and specifically Continental schools of Western esotericism research. Until recently, the field of Western esotericism has struggled with the problems and boundaries of ethnography, and how to navigate the sometimes murky spaces of practice and scholarship. While Wouter Hanegraaff has argued that scholars in this field need to be more open to and embrace ethnographic approaches,¹ the reality is that the historical emphasis on text, and the history of intellectual currents within the field has, in practice, caused a somewhat strained relationship with practitioners.² In *Dark Enlightenment*, Granholm addresses this situation through not only his own ethnographic practice, but also by presenting challenges and areas of expansion to the emerging field of Western esoteric studies.

The title of the book does cover more ground than the content. The book is centered on a single magical order, the Stockholm based Dragon Rouge of which Granholm is a member and initiate, and which also formed the basis of Granholm's doctoral research. Within the study of Western esotericism, this type of practitioner ethnography is quite rare, although the treatment is more

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism, and the Limits of Discourse," *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 252–73.

² Amy Hale, "Navigating Praxis: Pagan Studies vs. Esoteric Studies," *The Pomegranate* 15, no. 1–2 (2013) 151–63.

common in allied fields such as Pagan Studies. Pagan Studies ethnographies, however, frequently focus tightly on the methods of reflexive ethnography, so much so that the reader may get the sense that this is primarily a tactic to legitimize the study, in addition to being sound ethnographic practice. While certainly reflexive, Granholm's work seems to make no apology for either the legitimacy of his subject matter or his approach, which is quite refreshing.

Dark Enlightenment starts by presenting a summary of approaches to Western esotericism. In this section Granholm centers in on discourse analysis, an approach also favored by Kocku von Stuckrad,³ which takes as its central method the ways in which knowledge, history, identities and relationships are constructed and influenced by social relations and conditions of power. While this approach is not novel, its explicit adoption in the study of Western esotericism is a useful counterpoint to historically based studies which are promoting truth claims, thus characterizing what has been termed by Hanegraaff and others a "religionist" approach to esotericism.⁴

The second section of *Dark Enlightenment* is a quick historical overview of what Granholm terms "Post Enlightenment," mostly nineteenth and twentieth century esoteric groups and ideas which provided the primary inspiration and context for Dragon Rouge. It includes short sections on Theosophy, the "Occult Revival" of nineteenth century Britain and France, the *Ordo Templi Orientis* and the impact of Aleister Crowley, the rise of Neopaganism, contemporary Satanism, and the New Age movement of the 1960s. The purpose of this wide ranging section is to establish certain historical, symbolic and ritual threads, and to identify the centrality of the discourses which impacted Dragon Rouge, not to provide a comprehensive account of any of these groups or movements. While the knowledgeable reader might like to see a bit more usage of primary source material in this section, it is also evident that this overview needed to be kept concise.

In the third, fourth and fifth sections of the book, Granholm presents his ethnographic work with Dragon Rouge, and explores the ways in which certain practices and motivations of the order are shaped by broader discourses within contemporary and historical Western esotericism. Granholm's depiction of Dragon Rouge is of a very different type of order than highly structured

³ Kocku von Stuckrad, "Discursive Transfers and Reconfigurations: Tracing the Religious and the Esoteric in Secular Culture," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 226–43.

⁴ Wouter Hanegraaff, "Teaching Experiential Dimensions of Esotericism," in *Teaching Mysticism*, ed. William B. Parsons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 154–70.

groups like the Golden Dawn or the O.T.O., with a curriculum designed for individuation rather than strict adherence to a “current” or ritual structure. Granholm does a fine job of characterizing the ways in which Dragon Rouge intersects with and departs from the influences and practices of what we can consider the contemporary Western ritual magic traditions that emerge from Freemasonry, although I am not convinced that Dragon Rouge is as antinomian as Granholm argues. However, this is how Dragon Rouge practitioners characterize themselves, and as such there is useful and interesting discussion in these sections of the book about the relationship of the discourses of tradition and authenticity to efficacy and personal growth within this framework. In any case, this part of the book really stands apart in its beautiful, rich description of some of the moments in Granholm’s own journey with Dragon Rouge.

Dark Enlightenment, however, does suffer from a traditional problem that plagues a number of ethnographic studies: a lack of emphasis on historicity and historical currents, particularly in places that would have benefitted from some theoretical development. Historical context is essential to providing the necessary background for the discourses and social constructions under consideration. For instance, the Dragon Rouge approach to and construction of “nature” and the “natural world” need some expansion. This topic has relevance not only for the study of contemporary and modern Paganisms, but also for understanding anyone who is trying to impact their sense of agency through the manipulation of the “natural” world, which may be the driving impulse behind both high ritual and folk magic. A closer examination of the position of the Dragon Rouge magician in relationship to historical ideas about nature and the natural would have provided some useful context for this central point of Dragon Rouge practice and worldview, and would have supported the wider discourse analytical framework. Furthermore, the general discussion of modern Western “Left Hand Path” traditions could have benefitted from a short contextualizing section on the impact of Tantra in the history of modern occultism.

A wider consideration of historical Tantra, in addition to an exploration, however brief, of the history of the divine feminine and magical revolutionary ideologies, might also have helped to flesh out the sections on gender and feminism in this study. From Granholm’s reporting, the role of the divine feminine is key to understanding the theoretical underpinnings of Dragon Rouge’s “dark magic.” Yet, the construction of “the feminine” in this context and its impact on both the women and men of the order seems under-problematized. Striking a balance between taking respondents’ understanding

of their experience at face value, while also unpacking the wider historical and cultural context which shapes and informs those experiences, is the tricky pivot point on which the ethnographer sits. I feel as though the respondents' conclusions about gender and transgression here, especially when some of the portrayals of gender in Dragon Rouge settings can be read as quite normative, might have benefitted from some challenges from the ethnographer. To be fair, Granholm notes this in an afterword as an area which could have been expanded, and also comments on the overall need to address gender issues in the field of Western esotericism.

It is in the final chapter regarding modernity that *Dark Enlightenment* shows its real strength. Here, Granholm provides some fine critique of the central tropes of disenchantment, modernity and secularization that have become the cornerstones of much of the theoretical academic production in Western esoteric studies, and instead suggests that the territory of these spaces is far murkier than previous analysis suggests. Granholm argues that contemporary Western esotericism is not characterized as much by secularization and a response to disenchantment, but rather the relationship of the individual to religious institutions and orthodoxy, and argues that the hallmark of modern esotericism is eclecticism. It is worth noting, though, that while the Golden Dawn and Theosophy may through our modern lenses look highly eclectic, they themselves saw the drawing together of disparate symbols and traditions as evidence of their perennialism and their connection with a genuine, universal and enduring "Tradition." What to us today looks like creative *bricolage* was to practitioners of Theosophy and the Golden Dawn the discovery of a coherent and revealed universal wisdom tradition, the construction of which was deeply informed by discourses of colonialism. What Granholm accomplishes in this section is a challenge to any attempts to reduce or define the essential condition of esotericism in the West as many scholars have attempted to do. He reminds us that the contexts and meanings of esoteric texts and practices are ever shifting, and perhaps it is ethnography that best uncomfortably exposes those gray areas.

Dark Enlightenment brings a lot to the table. I want to applaud Granholm's openness and approach, but I think that it is also worth appreciating the openness of Thomas Karlsson (the group's founder) and other Dragon Rouge members in working with Granholm and letting him publish about the order with such rich and compelling description. Granholm's own beautifully candid responses to his experiences were also a breath of fresh air from a field that frequently prides itself on keeping a safe distance from the subject, and there

is hope that this may pave the way for more in-depth studies. Much of the reticence about dealing with occult practitioners stems from a combination of fear, secrecy and even a level of scholarly ridicule of Western esoteric and occult practices. It can also be difficult to gain access to contemporary practitioners as many of them have taken oaths of secrecy. Practitioner scholars are rightfully concerned about the professional impact of their own experiences and involvement, which in my view has led to a lack of reflexivity and honesty in many studies of modern occult groups and movements. Additionally, the amount of correspondence and notes held by private collectors in personal archives greatly restricts access to important texts which could provide deeper insight into the nature and context of many modern esoteric practices. Hopefully *Dark Enlightenment* will help pave the way for better research conditions and help to secure the legitimacy of these studies and bring Western esoteric practices and practitioners ever so slightly more into the light.

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