Discourses on Magic in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Magic is a notoriously difficult subject to delimit and define, not only from a scholarly perspective (Otto & Stausberg 2013), but also from an emic or insiders’ perspective. In the present chapter, we have tried to limit the discussion to types of magic that can be linked to the wider scholarly concept of Western esotericism (Bogdan 2010), which in the case of early modern Sweden primarily concerns “learned” types of magic associated with the grimoire tradition of continental Europe (Owen 2009: 6–43). Although it is difficult to separate learned magic from “folk” or “popular” magic (as will be discussed below), this chapter does not discuss Swedish popular forms of magic, such as trolldom and signerier, which somewhat loosely can be described as acts of magic associated with cunning men and women, and priests and monks, respectively. Nor do we discuss allegations of magic associated with the witchcraft trials in Sweden, which culminated in 1668–1676, 1720–1724, and 1757–1763.

Overt references to the practise of learned magic in the Middle Ages, as well as during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, are virtually impossible to find, which is not surprising given the fact that both the ecclesiastical and the judicial authorities fiercely condemned any form of magic as the work of Satan. A telling example of the condemnation of magic can be found in the important and highly influential work by bishop Laurentius Paulinus Gothus, Ethicae christianae, which in the second edition (1633) included a substantial chapter on magic, “Om magia illicita eller widskepelse uthi gemen” (On Illicit Magic and Superstition in General). The punishments imposed on those who were found guilty of practicing magic during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were severe, and sometimes even resulted in being condemned to death. Even though magic was still considered to constitute a crime during the eighteenth century, the actual punishments were, however, gradually relaxed over the century. Linda Oja has argued that while there was an agreement on the condemnation of malevolent magic between the ecclesiastical and judicial authorities on the one hand, and the people in general on the other, it was another matter with benevolent forms of magic. Here, people in general tended
to have a more positive attitude towards magic, whereas the ecclesiastical and judicial authorities vehemently diabolised benevolent magic as they saw this form of magic as a more potent threat towards the Church. Or to put it in Oja’s words: ‘Benevolent magic constituted the worst threat against official religion, which is probably why the authorities particularly disliked it. Ritual actions with the aim of healing, regaining lost goods or making livestock stronger could easily be interpreted as good and useful. [...] Consequently, benevolent magic was closely related to official religion but without being controlled by the clergy’ (Oja 1999: 300–301).

It is therefore understandable that people interested in magic had to keep it secret or veil it in obscure terminology, which makes it difficult for current scholarship to identify the practice of learned magic in Sweden prior to the eighteenth century. An illustrative example is the Swedish esotericist Johannes Bureus (1568–1652), who was deeply occupied with kabbalistic ideas concerning the role of the Hebrew alphabet. It has been argued that at the core of his aim to devise a structurally similar system to that of Kabbalah which assigned occult qualities to the Nordic rune alphabet (especially the glyph called *Adulruna* which appears to have been inspired by John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*), was a form of magic or theurgy that was inspired by practitioners of magic such as Cornelius Agrippa and John Dee (see the chapter on Kabbalah in Sweden in the present volume), although his discussion is so obscure that it is difficult to say anything definite about his system in relation to magic.

Metatron

The eighteenth-century esoteric milieu in Sweden was characterised by an increasing institutionalisation in the form of a wide range of secret societies and initiatic orders, especially from the 1750s and onwards. Chief among these was of course the Order of Freemasons, which was introduced in Sweden as early as 1735. As will be discussed presently, it was in particular in masonic circles connected to the court that learned magic was practised, but there also existed competing secret societies, separate from the world of Freemasonry, that focused on magic. The most significant example of this type of organisation is the mysterious and highly secretive Metatron, of which relatively little is known. Metatron first came to the public attention when it published an open letter (*Avertissement af sällskapet Metatron*) in the Stockholm daily paper *Dagligt Allehanda, Dagliga Tidningar*, on 27 April 1781: