Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg (eds.)


In modern academic debates, a clear and accepted definition of the term *magic* has proven to be, throughout the twentieth century, most problematic to ascertain: together with *science* and *religion*, the term *magic* itself has often been taken into account as a cog in the wheel in the rationality debate, and has been associated with religion, sometimes as complementary to it, most times as a distinct element of otherness. It is the authors’ theory that it is the very approach to the semantics and the very essence of the term *magic*, which are sorely in need of redefining.

*Defining Magic: a Reader* seeks to provide its audience with core primary sources, which have since granted the researcher with ever-changing definitions; twentieth-century debates on the nature of magic; and a selection of contemporary approaches to the subject. The text is divided into four broad categories. The first one includes definitions of magic taken from primary sources: Plato (428–348 BCE), Pliny the Elder (23–79) and Plotinus (205–270) provide the starting point for a list of sources which, through Agrippa von Nettesheim (1468–1535), conclude with eighteenth-century philosopher Denis Diderot (1713–1784) and nineteenth-century occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). The second section offers some excerpts from ‘foundational texts for the academic study of magic’ (12), with Edward Tylor (1832–1917) and James George Frazer representing British academics, and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) as their French counterparts. The third subdivision of this work analyses the writings of academics of the mid-twentieth century: the rise of phenomenology of religion is testified by Gerard van der Leeuw (1890–1950) and his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1956), while Edward E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1902–1973) excerpt testifies to what would in the 1960s and 1970s be termed ‘the rationality debate’ (141). The fourth and conclusive part of this oeuvre introduces writings by five contemporary academics, ranging from Susan Greenwood’s scholar/practitioner approach, to Randall Styers’s theories on modern scholarly discourses on the study of magic.

In the clear and well-argued preface, the authors propose their theory: four points are established before the main theoretical framework may be fleshed out: writing about magic within the study of religion constitutes a ‘legitimate discursive reality and subject of study’ (9); the study of religions obviously needs terms such as “magic” in order to allow for comparative research: the concept of magic must be stripped of its “secondary encrustations” in order to
provide an analytical and theoretical tool to analyse data; since magic appears not to be able to be defined specifically, we must settle with “prototypical examples” which allow us glimpses of its multiple facets. This leads to the theory put forth by Otto and Stausberg, which takes into account magic and its ‘semantic diversity; conceptual heterogeneity; ethnocentric bias; and undesirable ideological implications’ (10). The term patterns of magicity, in the editors’ opinion, should be preferred to the indefinable magic. Patterns of magicity do not automatically involve “MAGIC” (as the supreme meta-category), nor are they “magic” (as referring to ontological features), but they are a way of dealing with cross-culturally attested observations’ (11). By avoiding a novel categorization of magic, which would add little to the multitude of definitions provided before them, they propose to split the ‘extended tribal families [derived from the term magic] into a number of nuclear families. Instead of instances of “magic”, we suggest speaking of magicity’ (10). The use of the term magicity still suggests a link with what has traditionally been labelled under magic: ‘based on a meta-analysis of definitions and theories on “magic”, and the catalogue of objects to which that category is applied, future work should seek to model such patterns’ (11). The theory is engaging and well presented. Only future scholarship will allow reader to ultimately judge if it is a viable option, and if the question of the definition of magic may be put to rest by this ingenious shift in focus. The theory on patterns of magicity, though, is intriguing, and I am sure it will spark provocative debates in the broader field of religious studies.

But, as with every reader, the fundamental aspect of the text, which will ultimately declare its usefulness beyond the mere satisfaction of the curiosity of one entry or another, is the choice of texts, and the editors seem aware of their shortcomings, dedicating two pages of their general introduction to the explanation of their criteria for inclusion within the volume. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries emic definitions of magic are left out entirely from the volume, allowing more space for academic texts. As an editorial choice, it is perfectly understandable, although it should be pointed out that the discourse on what might be defined as magic among authors we could describe as emic has evolved, mutated and blossomed enormously in the past one hundred years. Another aspect, which must be addressed is the focus on Graeco-Roman sources for antiquity: if we make exception for the inclusion of the oft-neglected Bizantine Suda, all of the first section focuses on such sources, neglecting Islamic and Jewish additions, which would have greatly enriched the collection. Moreover, if the focus should be on the Western world as an editorial choice, then figures and works much more closely related to magic, such as Iamblichus (245–325), the Corpus Hermeticum (ii–iii century), Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875), should have been taken into account. This brings