

Book Reviews

VII: *Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center*, Vol. 36 (2019)

Aren Roukema, *Esotericism and Narrative: The Occult Fiction of Charles Williams*. Aries Book Series, Volume 24 (Brill, 2018). \$228 (hardback and ebook), xii + 318 pp.

Thanks to R.A. Gilbert, we have known since 1983 that Charles Williams was a member of A.E. Waite's Fellowship of the Rosy Cross (FRC) for eleven years. Those who have benefited from Gilbert's work since then include Grevel Lindop's benchmark biography of Williams (2015), and the Bibliotheca Philosophia Hermetica in Amsterdam (Gilbert gave a mass of Waite materials to their care, including copies of the Masonic-style progressive graded rituals of the FRC). However, Aren Roukema is the first Williams scholar to make extensive use of this FRC material.

Roukema's groundbreaking work on William began as a 50-page article, published in the *Journal of Inklings Studies* (vol. 5, no. 1, April 2015). A 'must read' for anyone studying Williams, *Esotericism and Narrative* thus expands upon this earlier research. It offers vivid glimpses of the grades through which Williams passed—and in which he officiated—revealing in detail their relations to both Waite's voluminous published works as well as their antecedents and parallels in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (GD).

This work expands upon Roukema's thesis that Williams's fiction reflects his duties as member of the FRC 'Adeptus Exaltatus' grade: "to turn outward and accept a new task: to give back to the narratives and traditions that had contributed to their successful moment of attainment" (106). Indeed, he suggests that the "narrative flexibility of fiction allowed Williams to satisfy his Fourth Order responsibilities as a mystic leader and teacher without eliding the esoteric requirement to communicate Secret Tradition knowledge through veils of symbolism" (108). He also greatly expands his proposals, demonstrating how different aspects of this are exemplified in various novels. While 285 pages sounds quite lengthy, I am probably not alone in wishing it were lengthened further by including examples of readings in Williams's Arthurian poetry, which he was writing at the same time as his fiction.

Roukema is bold, not only in his case for there being an enduring continuity between Williams and Waite's FRC (and thought more generally), but also in his case for continuity between Waite and various antecedents and contemporaries as well. Part of making this case involves evaluating the "numerous close relations between the modern occult network and Waite's philosophy and actual practice" (20). Nuances notwithstanding, Roukema's

bold claim can be seen in his rejection of “efforts on the part of both scholars and Waite himself to distance him from the occultist milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” as well as his assertion that in “some areas, such as the theory and practice of magic, Williams developed his occult ideas independent of Waite, but the latter’s influence, both textual and experiential, clearly defined his occult outlook” (284).

One may heartily agree with Roukema when he commends the combination of “historical research methods with complementary literary analysis.” These research methods, he believes will be “particularly helpful in addressing the difficult question of the balance Williams struck between occult and Christian elements” (277-78). Yet, he is the first to admit that—drawing on my own words from a 2008 review—“that we are ‘still closer to the beginning ...’ (17), even when his substantial contributions in *Esotericism and Narrative* are taken into account. What a wealth of food for thought and content for discussion his informed considerations of Williams’s novels provide! In this context, however, I may not be the only reader tempted to apply C.S. Lewis’s description of Owen Barfield as the type of the Second Friend, “who disagrees with you about everything.” Happily, though, Roukema’s rich footnote documentation (as far as I have tested it) easily allows one to try his conclusions. One minor exception to this rule involves my article in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Vol. 153), which while it is correctly noted in his 2015 essay, is curiously subsumed to my edition of Williams’s Arthurian poetry throughout the book (e.g., p. 29n7).

I am grateful that the FRC rituals are now accessible in a library, yet Roukema tantalizingly offers only a few brief quotations from them. One must travel to Amsterdam to see them in context (in contrast to the published GD rituals)—to see everything Williams would have said in his eleven years as postulant or Temple officer. This is all the more tantalizing as vital conclusions drawn by the author about Waite’s understanding of God and man, and Williams’s in consequence, seem to depend on the evidence of the rituals.

In *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1947), C.S. Lewis considered (vi) “the root principle of all his work” to be the “belief that the most serious and ecstatic experiences” have “theological implications, and that they can be healthy and fruitful only if the implications are diligently thought out and severely lived.” Accordingly, Roukema writes “it is hard to see how we can any longer identify him as anything but both a devout Christian and an enthusiastic occultist” (75). He further suggests that Williams “occupied a similar position” to Anna Kingford, Éliphas Lévi, and Annie Besant “between the artificial binaries of orthodox Christianity and occult thought” (74). Given that theology is a plural term,—as Plato was first to note (in the plural: *Republic* 379a)—we can conclude that the “root principle” of theology includes the call to diligently think out and apply these experiences to any and everyone. Roukema’s reading (207) of Considine in *Shadows of Ecstasy*

might be seen as an 'intra-magical' example of this: "Considine seeks *apotheosis* without actual *theos*, the establishment of the self as a god rather than discovery of the higher self that is God." However, Roukema's reading of this might have profitably been accompanied with an alternate reading and application based on orthodox Christian theology. Examples could be multiplied, suggesting a too-ready characterization of such binaries as artificial.

One fears the equally high price of this book in both formats will limit its readership to those with access to academic or other great libraries, and even prevent various of those institutions from acquiring a copy. I suspect readers will more readily find libraries which subscribe to the *Journal of Inklings Studies*, and so can benefit from his 2015 article. Happily, though, the author has provided a taste online to all who have access to Academia.edu. Hopefully, this will spur researchers to engage Roukema's ground-breaking work on the connection between Williams, Waite, and the occult.

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