

## Patterns of Magicity A Review of *Defining Magic: A Reader*\*

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**Magic, n.** An art of converting superstition into coin. There are other arts serving the same high purpose, but the discreet lexicographer does not name them.

Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*.

Ambrose Bierce's satirical quip on magic did not make it through editorial selection for this anthology of perspectives on how to define the problematic term. Nevertheless, Bierce targets a revealing detail in a deliciously subversive way: Definitions of "magic" are often woefully underdetermined by historical and ethnographic data, and the use of the category thus typically relies on the (often ideological or theological) discretion and sensibilities of the lexicographer rather than on whether or not the features the term picks out belong exclusively to certain clearly defined phenomena. Distinctions between "magic" and "religion" tend to conceal the fact that the practices and beliefs thus labelled overlap significantly on the ground. Why is praying for the defeat of a military foe part of "religion," but casting spells on the same enemy

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“magic”? Can we uphold distinctions like these without recourse to theology?

This and many other problems in the study of magic are outlined and documented in *Defining Magic: A Reader*. Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg have created a reader of generally influential texts on magic, spanning from antiquity to the present, with a focus on classics in the academic struggles to define the concept for the sake of historical and ethnographic analysis. In addition to reprinting twenty previously published texts, the editors have also commissioned five new articles from contemporary scholars known for their theoretical contributions to the study of magic. The result is a valuable, although not flawless, collection that serves as a useful roadmap to novices in the study of magic. To more established scholars it may serve as a crucial reminder of the confusing state this concept has gotten us into. But it also suggests some interesting new pathways to escape that precarious situation.

## 1. The selection

The composition of *Defining Magic* is notable for an unconventional choice of starting with ten texts labelled “historical sources,” spanning from Plato and Plotinus to Diderot and Blavatsky, before continuing to theoretical texts from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. There is a good point to doing this, which becomes clear by reading the useful editorial material in the book and paying attention especially to the most recent theoretical contributions. Several patterns of meanings connected to “magic” and its cognates start taking shape in the earlier, mostly Greek, source texts. These patterns trickle through the middle ages and eventually feed into the derisive statements on magic in the Enlightenment, before getting picked up again in occultist understandings in the nineteenth century.

Eventually, the various permutations of these words and meanings create a broad semantic field which later scholarly attempts to define “magic” draw upon. Reconstructing some of this development through a broader combination of texts is thus a major asset. It encourages a parallel reading of texts that automatically historicises the concept.

That is not to say that the particular selection of texts is beyond reproach. For the earlier period, critical eyes will not fail to notice a bias towards Greek and Latin sources, to the neglect of Egyptian, Hebrew, and Arabic material. Moreover, there is a predominance of texts where “magic” and cognates are used derogatorily, with the omission of “pro-magic” authors and theurgists such as Iamblichus, Proclus, the hermetic texts or the *Chaldean Oracles*. This

focus on “magic” as a negative label applied to others is entirely in tune with some currently dominant theoretical positions, but it might obscure a more complicated history of use.

One notable exception is that the editors include two very interesting definitions from the *Suda* (ca. 970 CE) – the most comprehensive and influential surviving encyclopaedic work from the Byzantine Empire. In sharp contrast to developments in the Latin west, the *Suda* distinguishes clearly between *mageia*, *goeteia* and *pharmakeia*, and attributes different values to them. While *goeteia* (“sorcery”) and *pharmakeia* (“witchcraft”) were considered bad and depraved practices, *mageia* (“magic”) was wholly positive: “It is the invocation of beneficent spirits for the production of something good; like the oracles of Apollonius of Tyana.” (47) This understanding appears more in line with the neoplatonic theurgists. It would in fact resurface in the west, too, during the Renaissance rehabilitation of magic, especially in Agrippa von Nettesheim – although in a different text of Agrippa’s than the one reproduced in this volume. The apparent continuity of this line of thinking about magic in the Byzantine world raises the question of a strikingly different and completely underexplored trajectory in the conceptual history of magic. As the editors ask: “was the term *mageia* generally used in a positive sense in medieval Constantinople?” (46) This appears to require further research.

The neglect of the renaissance revival of magic is another notable omission in the source material, as is the complete absence of medieval pro-magic texts culled from the grimoire tradition. Between Aquinas and Agrippa (both included) there is much else that must be explored for a sufficient picture of medieval and Renaissance conceptions of magic to emerge – from *Liber Iuratus* to Ficino, Pico, Lazzarelli, or Dee.<sup>1</sup> Finally, to use one minor text by Blavatsky as the sole representative of post-1800 source texts on magic seems thin. After all, people have never written more about magic as a positive form of practice than during this period, stretching roughly from the mid nineteenth century until today, nor has the practitioner’s literature on magic been more diverse.<sup>2</sup> The poor selection of modern and contemporary magical texts reinforces an unfortunate impression that magic belongs to the past, whereas in fact “it” has

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<sup>1</sup> For some of the complexity of understandings of magic in this period, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Sympathy or the Devil: Renaissance Magic and the Ambivalence of Idols,” *Esoterica* 2 (2000): 1–44; Frank Klaassen, *The Transformations of Magic: Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Egil Asprem, *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

never been more vital than during modernity.

Moving on to the part of the volume that seems more central to the aim of the book (i.e. to provide readings of attempts to define the concept for *academic work*), critics may notice other curious omissions. Seminal texts by E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, Mauss and Hubert, and Emile Durkheim fill the section on “Foundational Works of the Academic Debate.” The list of notable absentees, however, includes Freud and Weber, who have inspired entire schools of later theorizing. Part three on “Mid-Twentieth Century Approaches” includes seminal texts by van der Leeuw, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, Horton, Tambiah and Leach, but it also omits influential contributions by people such as Lévy-Bruhl, de Martino, Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, or Rodney Stark. Indeed, it seems possible to create an entirely parallel anthology with a completely different set of authors and texts.

While some of these omissions are indeed problematic, I do not think they undermine the project too much. The editors Otto and Stausberg are in fact very clear on what is missing, and provide helpful and rich discussions of the broader literature in their editorial introductions to the four main parts, and to each individual text. This material is extremely helpful, and effectively embeds the selected texts in a broader context. Readers who wish to extend their view can easily use this as a road map and pursue the references on their own.

One other aspect of the selection process deserves to be mentioned. In the case of this book, it is clear that the editors are in fact *not* to blame for the omissions. Copyright structures and commercial aspects of the academic publishing industry have clearly put unwanted and artificial restrictions on their work. The editors discreetly vent their frustration in the introduction: “in several cases there was an unfortunate mismatch between the royalties requested by some publishers and the budget at our disposal, so that we were unable to reprint some texts we would otherwise have wished to include.” (13) It is unfortunate that some publishers have discovered the use of royalties as an extra revenue stream when selling academic work back to the academy that produced it. The result is that a well-conceived resource planned by two leading specialists is prevented from reaching its full potential. The dissemination structures that are supposed to further the academic community instead become an impediment and an obstacle to the effective development and communication of knowledge. In the face of such commercial obstacles, however, the editors have done a formidable job in making use of the material available to them and presenting it in a form that takes maximal advantage of each text.

## 2. The introduction

Stausberg and Otto's introduction to the volume is an excellent example of this productive work. More than just an introduction to the various texts of the book, this piece is itself an original contribution to the ongoing discussion about what to do with the troubling term "magic." This contribution consists, to begin with, of an effort to systematise the definitions that are out there. For example, Otto and Stausberg present a catalogue of frequent denotations of the term "magic" as encountered in both practical and scholarly literature, consisting of thirty-five bullet points (9–10). Magic is said to be coercive, manipulative, immune to falsification, a non-legitimate way of dealing with the supernatural, egocentric and antisocial, lacking institutional structures, a label for marginalizing outsiders, an illocutionary or performative speech act, or an art of creating illusions – to name but a few of the examples.

What to do with this bewildering set of features? It is of course possible to divide and classify them in various ways, propose a loosely defined polythetic family-resemblance definition, or try to force some key features into an ideal or prototypical structure in order to reconstruct an etic category of "magic." There are serious problems with all of these approaches, however, and the sheer breadth of the semantic field of magic is only the first and most practical challenge. If we factor in the various ideological, ethnocentric and theological implications involved with most available previous definitions, there is little wonder why an increasing number of scholars over the past few decades have opted for eliminating the category altogether: "magic" does not exist as a stable phenomenon in the world, and should therefore not exist as a category either.

Stausberg and Otto do not settle for anything quite so simple. Their suggestion is in fact rather novel:

Instead of instinctively interpreting the occurrence of a limited number of features from our catalogue as evidence for the existence of a family-like concept, we suggest splitting the extended tribal family into a number of nuclear families. Instead of instances of "magic", we suggest speaking of *patterns of magicity* (10; my emphasis).

What does this shift imply? Essentially, it is a shift away from the endeavour of producing a new definition that would add to the dozens of existing ones, towards a systematic effort of classifying what various people writing about magic have in fact been interested in when using this concept. This seems to me a much needed effort that may provide a better ground for

future discussions. More importantly, it may solve the problematic disconnect between those eliminativists coming at “magic” from a discursive perspective interested in plays of power and authority, and those historians, ethnographers and comparativists who wish to employ the term to study specific features of human behaviour. In the words of the editors:

One might argue that abandoning the term “magic” only risks silencing us by depriving scholars of ways of addressing these persistent observations; after all, amulets, curses, healing procedures and other such things exist and it is easy enough to find practices that can be characterized as manipulative or that are typically performed on critical occasions ... In other words, should we stop speaking of “magic” even when we cannot help observing perceived evidence for it? (10–11)

There is “something there,” but is “magic,” given its troubled history and semantic fuzziness, the best way to categorize it? Otto and Stausberg think not, and this is precisely where “patterns of magicity” come in as an alternative way to construe the debate:

Our point is that even if such phenomena impose themselves on observers ..., as scholars we should, indeed, stop treating these observations as evidence for “MAGIC”. Instead, we should either just speak of amulets, curses, etc., or of private rites (rather than intuitively and unreflectingly allocate them to a single overarching macro-category). ... “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. “Magicity” acknowledges the fact that they were traditionally assigned to the overall category “MAGIC” in which we have stopped believing. As we see it, based on a meta-analysis of definitions and theories of “magic”, and the catalogue of objects to which that category is applied, future work should seek to model such patterns. (11)

For now, Otto and Stausberg propose coding and classifying different senses of “magic,” using short-hand subscripts to distinguish, for example, the concept of magic as “word efficacy” ( $M_{\text{WOR}}$ ) from “magic as signs” ( $M_{\text{SIG}}$ ) and “magic as harmful rituals” ( $M_{\text{HAR}}$ ). The idea is that with such coding one could identify basic ascriptions and look at their combinations in various real-life constellations as well as in scholar definitions. I see significant overlaps here with the “building-block approach” that Ann Taves has recently been developing for tackling complex cultural concepts in general and for “religion” in particular.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of*

### 3. Contemporary voices

That we need a systematic approach along the lines of what Stausberg and Otto suggest is in my view confirmed by looking at the five contemporary pieces representing the current state of the debate. The five authors represent anything but a consensus. However, through a broader framework of “patterns of magicity” we might be able to at least put them in a fruitful dialogue.

Susan Greenwood’s chapter on what she calls “magical consciousness” stands out the most from the rest. Drawing on her experience as both an anthropologist and a contemporary practitioner of magic, Greenwood offers a view on magic as a mode of consciousness, a “specific and intrinsic mode of mind” that is universally human (198) and allows one to communicate with spirits (208–10). Connecting “magical thinking” to imagination and defining it as “creative thinking that goes beyond the immediately apparent” she seems to have an extremely broad definition, with some nods to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of “participation.” Ultimately, however, the view is derived straight from some contemporary magicians’ self-understanding of what magic is and how it works. Unfortunately, Greenwood also borrows the scientifically unsupported notion that the two hemispheres of the brain are connected with two distinct styles of thought (203-04, 209-10) – apparently nailing “magical consciousness” to the right hemisphere. This pop-psychological view is not uncommon among contemporary pagans, but it harmonizes badly with current science of the mind/brain.<sup>4</sup> In the end, Greenwood’s essay moves from defining and theorising “magic” to showing how magic is, in her words, a “legitimate source of knowledge.”(208) After an obligatory overview of the bad “Cartesian” dualistic split that we supposedly still suffer from, she draws on Gregory Bateson to make a (considering the circumstances, suspiciously

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*Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009); Taves, “Reverse Engineering Complex Concepts: Identifying Building Blocks of ‘Religion,’” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 15.1–2 (2015): 191–216. See also Egil Asprem, “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion.” *Religion*, online 22 Sept. 2015, DOI: 10.1080/0048721X.2015.1072589.

<sup>4</sup> Greenwood seeks support for some of her claims in the book by psychiatrist Ian McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), which attempts to revive the notion that hemispheric differentiation underpins vast cultural differences. For a short critical review, see Owen Flanagan, “The Vast Left-brain Conspiracy,” *CultureLab*, 21 December 2009 (URL: <https://www.newscientist.com/blogs/culturelab/2009/12/the-left-brain-plot-for-world-domination.php?DCMP=OTC-rss&nsref=online-news>).

dualistic) point about how “spirits are real” when you are in right-brained magical consciousness, even though they are not when you use your left-brained analytical thinking. Two separate worlds, accessible through separate forms of consciousness.

If we follow the patterns of magicity approach, Greenwood’s views on magic appear much more closely related to those of (some) contemporary Wiccans than those of her colleagues. I say this with some reservation, however, for Greenwood is not alone in deriving her framework from contemporary magicians: rather, she represents a small subculture of scholars of magic that openly advocate the integration of scholarship and (magical) practice, often under the banner of “pagan studies.”<sup>5</sup> The fact that this text could just as well have been included in the contemporary *sources* of “magic” rather than “contemporary approaches” shows just how difficult it is to separate emic from etic, insider from outsider in the academic study of magic.

Christopher I. Leirich, known for his work on Renaissance magic in books such as *The Language of Demons and Angels* (2003) and *The Occult Mind* (2007), takes us back into the thicket of theoretical problems involved with establishing sound definitions in the academic study of anything. While no definition of magic emerges from his discussion, the key point is that we have to continue trying. The definitional pursuit is a process, and challenges do not mean we should stop. Thus, borrowing the format of Clifford Geertz’ influential definition of religion, Leirich points rather to five criteria that should, in his opinion, be fulfilled for definitions of magic. Perhaps the most valuable among these is the point that the conflict over whether magic is particular or universal is misguided: instead, definitions of magic should aim to be *generalizable*, which Leirich rightly notes is not the same thing as universality. Generalizability requires working inductively on some level, but it also appears that it can only be achieved against the backdrop of a theoretical framework that directs the empirical effort according to set methodological principles. If not, the endeavour becomes a game of unfixed associations and correspondences – much like what some would call magical thinking. This tendency was also a central focus in Leirich’s *Occult Mind*.

Kimberly B. Stratton is known for her deconstructionist and largely gender-focused research on discourses on magic and witchcraft in antiquity.<sup>6</sup> In keeping

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<sup>5</sup> On this, see Markus Altena Davidsen, “What Is Wrong With Pagan Studies?” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24 (2012): 183–99.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Kimberly B. Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).



with this previous work, Stratton is primarily interested in *labelling practices* as they take shape in discursive formations that create structures of alterity with real-life social implications. Magic for her has nothing to do with practices, rituals, ways of thinking, special objects, special powers, or anything of the sort. At best, it is a social discourse *about* such practices. “Magic” denotes “culturally specific ideas about illegitimate and dangerous access to numinous powers.” (245) This quotation, however, introduces a notable ambiguity about the relation between discourse and objects of discourse: are we talking about discourses fixed by a notion of “illegitimate and dangerous access to numinous power”? Or should we listen to the more radical proposal on the following page: “What gets labelled magic is *arbitrary* and depends upon the society in question”? (246; my emphasis) These two claims appear to be at odds with each other, for if it is about discourses on access to “numinous power,” then the application of “magic” is not strictly speaking arbitrary, but rather contingent on what is considered “numinous” and “powerful.”

The source of this ambiguity is, perhaps, found in Stratton’s aim to strike a balance between two dominant present-day approaches to magic: those who want to ditch the overarching second-order concept while focusing solely on emic categories, and those who wish to create a better category that can be employed for useful comparative research. This agenda is entirely in keeping with the aims of this volume at large. In practice, however, Stratton leans closer to the first of these two trends. One could, for example, conceivably use this framework to do comparisons that focus on discursive formations of alterity across different cultures and historical periods, but even this will need further calibration before offering a manageable research program. As Stratton writes, after emphasising the particularity of the Western, European (or Mediterranean?) discourse on magic:

This is not to say that non-European cultures do not have similar discourses of alterity which resemble magic; but it is important to clarify that those discursive formations have their own history, social dynamics and local variations that are essential to comprehending them as cultural products. (248)

Instead of comparative research on “magic,” we could envision parallel histories of alterity across cultures, where “magic” would be one such discourse in “the West.”

Interestingly, it becomes clear at the end of Stratton’s article that she cannot do without a consideration of “what people actually did” in order to make her most important point: that the discursive formation of “magic” in antiquity

shifted considerably, whereas the *practices* remained stable:

In all these cases, from curses to amulets, *the practice of magic* ... was amazingly consistent across the Mediterranean world ... Significantly, despite this *consistency in the material remains of magic, representations of magic* from different times and places diverge in an extraordinary way from the material record ... (254; my emphasis)

In other words, the argument rests on an operative distinction between the practice of magic and its material remains on the one hand, and *representations of magic* on the other.

Randall Styers' contribution continues the focus from Stratton's article. Styers is well known for his 2004 book *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*. It made a persuasive and influential argument that the category "magic" reflects the struggle of moderns to purify the concepts with which they describe themselves (e.g. "science," "reason," "religion"). Thus magic is inseparably connected to Reformation, Enlightenment, imperialist, and colonialist projects of identity formation and ultimately of domination. Styers' essay in the present collection is a crash-course in this by now rather familiar view. Styers is the most direct eliminativist among the theoreticians sampled in this volume, and as such it may be valuable to quote one passage that again highlights the tension between eliminativism and those who seek to do something new with the term. Styers writes:

[I]t appears that there is little value in attempting to formulate a definition of magic as some type of *stable object of study*. The term is too amorphous and shape shifting – and its deployment too polemical – ever to offer up any meaningful conceptual clarity, particularly in any type of trans-cultural or trans-historical fashion. (258; emphasis added)

The key here, I suggest, is "stable object of study." We have to agree with Styers that the concept of "magic" taken on face value is useless for comparative research. We also agree that it is *inappropriate*, if not impossible from a logical point of view, to try and stabilise it through stipulated definition. In other words, if we insist on seeing all usages of the term throughout history together, there is no doubt that the word is amorphous and shape-shifting (few terms wouldn't be). But *singular* uses of the term within this broad semantic field may very well point to stable objects of study. This is precisely what the "patterns of magicity" approach would seem to suggest. We could, for example, argue that "manipulative ritual practices" constitute a stable object, analytically construed,

that can be studied cross-culturally and cross-historically. Whether or not we want to call such rituals “magic,” of course, is another question.

On this note, it seems appropriate to end with some reflections on the one essay that does argue for a new, stable definition of the concept that enables broad-scale comparisons. Jesper Sørensen is notable for the book *A Cognitive Theory of Magic* (2007), based on his doctoral dissertation, and for his involvement with a number of recent studies applying neurocognitive and experimental approaches to ritual action.<sup>7</sup> Sørensen’s contribution to *Defining Magic* recapitulates the key points of that work, updated with some new experimental results and conceptual developments.

Sørensen provides a useful contrast to both Stratton and Styers: while their focus was on discourses that construe certain practices (of others), Sørensen’s is on how to theorize certain stable, pan-human features of ritual behaviour. Thus we have moved from the “representations of magic” to the “practices of magic,” to use Stratton’s perhaps unintentional, but nevertheless apt, distinction.

Sørensen approaches ritual by drawing on tools from the cognitive sciences, especially theories on metaphors and conceptual blending coming out of cognitive linguistics. He attempts to refine what he considers to be the prototype of “magic” (that is, its most central features and examples), identify cognitive elements required for its operation and thus turn the category into a set of experimentally testable propositions about ritual actions and agent-level interpretations of ritual efficacy. On these grounds he is able to make distinctions between different types of rituals, and even make some predictions about the relation between ritual form and notions of efficacy (235–39). This work should be seen in the context of the long-standing endeavour within the cognitive science of religion to theorise ritual forms.<sup>8</sup>

While I am sympathetic to the general thrust of this approach, there are also problems here. First of all: why continue insisting on a difference between *religious* and *magical* rituals? Would it not be less confusing to treat “ritual” on its own (or better yet: ritualized action), and delineate various types based on fine-grained analysis of bottom-up cognitive processes that account for

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. the overview in Uffe Schjoedt et al., “Cognitive Resource Depletion in Religious Interactions,” *Religion, Brain, & Behavior* 3.1(2013): 29–86.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Oxford: Altamira Press, 2004).

universal differences, without invoking these higher-level concepts when classifying them? Sørensen clearly recognizes the problem, and spends the last few pages of the essay in an apologetic mode (239–41). His proposed solution is to abandon classification of rituals *as* magical or religious, in favour of a focus on magic as “an *interpretive strategy* towards ritual actions utilized by individuals in particular situations.” (240) But does this resolve the problem? Indeed, does Sørensen even *need* the term “magic” to do the work that he does so well? Doesn’t the labelling and juxtaposition of these two interpretive strategies to rituals just perpetuate unnecessary semantic confusion and even false disagreement with the important discourse-oriented analyses that occupy scholars such as Stratton and Styers? It seems we could avoid some equivocation issues by dropping the terminology and use other, more descriptive, terms.

This is precisely the sort of problem that Stausberg and Otto’s “patterns of magicity” approach – and, I would suggest, the related building-block approach – might help us resolve. Sørensen’s cognitive theory could, for example, be construed as being specifically about ritual efficacy ( $M_{\text{EFF}}$ ) rather than “MAGIC” as such. This, it seems to me, would enable us to do several forms of important and complementary work in parallel, without getting into fruitless disputes over who has figured out “the right way” to circumscribe “MAGIC.” Providing a framework that enables future students and scholars to see the compatibility of different approaches to “magic,” and a language in which they can specify the level they are working on, is *Defining Magic*’s greatest achievement.

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