

ESOTERICISM AND NARRATIVE: THE OCCULT FICTION OF CHARLES WILLIAM (2018) BY AREN ROUKEMA

Review by Georgia van Raalte

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Throughout this title Aren Roukema aims to fill a notable gap in the academic study of the work of Charles Williams; that of his involvement in practical occultism through the FRC (Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, an occult group founded by A. E. Waite in 1915). Roukema's methodology offers a new way of approaching occult fiction and occult authors more generally. Their key argument, developed across the book, is that it is of crucial importance to understand Williams' commitment to, collaboration with, and experiences through the FRC to fully understand both his motivation for writing and comprehend the theology of his novels themselves. Roukema's method is both innovative within the study of esotericism – for its use of textual analysis – and in the field of literature by seriously engaging with the magical milieu of which Williams was a part. Roukema recognises occultism as a valid knowledge tradition; they take seemingly fantastic elements in Williams' fiction and shows their source in real life practices and knowledge economies. They also skilfully explicate the polemics which have and indeed continue to flourish within esotericism and its academic field.

In the introduction to the book, "Through the Portal," Roukema demarcates the Occult Revival from previous iterations of esoteric thought. They describe the relationship between occultism, enlightenment, and modernity, avoiding anti-modern rhetoric in favour of describing "another modernity" (11). From the beginning Roukema emphasises the necessity of understanding the occult context of Williams' novels and specifically the author's first-hand experiences with practical forms of occultism. In so doing, Roukema shows how impossible it is to fully appreciate any occult fiction while consigning involvement in occult systems themselves to the realm of mythopoeia only. Roukema sets out (and develops throughout the text) a convincing but subtle argument for the validity of occultism as a belief system, refuting the oft-repeated distinction between practical and cultural esotericisms.

Chapter two, "The Fellowship of the Rosy Cross: A Modern Occult Experience," offers a fascinating account of Williams' ritual experiences in the FRC, drawing on primary FRC sources. Roukema explores questions of the FRC's relationship with the Golden Dawn at length, an interrogation which may be inaccessible to those without a prior understanding of the Occult Revival. Roukema also misses some key connections here, particularly those of the influence of

Martinism and the Cromlech Temple; however, the author does a commendable job overall for such occult genealogies are notoriously difficult to construct.

Chapter three, "Fiction and Experience," analyses the relationship between Williams's FRC experiences and the construction of his fiction, developing a theory of interchange between fictional occult narrative and the lived fantasy of esoteric practice. Roukema offers an explication of a number of concrete examples of FRC rituals evident in Williams' fiction. The importance of this section is in establishing unquestionably that Williams was involved in group occult ritual practice and in exploring precisely what form this took. What is fascinating about this material, however, is Roukema's explanation of how these ritual FRC experiences manifest in the novels. This is a truly fantastic and innovative section, and I would love to see similar accounts of other rituals and other novels.

Another compelling aspect of this chapter, and for me one of the most exciting aspects of the book as a whole, is Roukema's explication of how achieving the grade of Adeptus Exempus motivated Williams to write occult fiction – something which had previously not been recognised. It is also fascinating to consider whether other occult novelists of this period may have been motivated by a similar achievement and what this means for understanding the play of public and private, veiled and revealed, when it comes to occultism and cultural production. Discussion of occult narrative and the tension between ineffable experience and limits of human semiotics – along with the use of fiction in this regard – is an interesting topic, and I wish Roukema had gone a little deeper with their analysis in this respect, for this is some of the most innovative material in the book.

The fourth chapter, "Kabbalah: Charles Williams and the Middle Pillar," explores Williams' use of the Kabbalah in his novels in the context of Waite's adaptations of the Kabbalistic system, focusing on the tarot trumps and on the Shekinah, the immanent feminine aspect of God who was important within the FRC system. This section offers a useful account of Kabbalistic history, one which recognises the occult Kabbalah as a valid tradition and practice in itself. It is problematic, however, that Roukema does not discuss initiation within this section, as these Kabbalistic structures were the Golden Dawn's central utilisation of the system.

Further, I wish that Roukema had spent more time analysing the concept of Shekinah as it is found in Williams' work. They spend some time explaining the ethical impact of the doctrine of Shekinah within Jewish Kabbalah, but do not explain what the doctrine looked like in twentieth century occult Kabbalah. Considering Williams' questionable treatment of young women, I think it would have been valuable to explore how Williams' approach to women, and his use of power within his magical sexuality, interacted with this doctrine of Shekinah; some exploration of other contemporary iterations of the Kabbalistic divine feminine may have been useful in this context too.

The next chapter, "The High-Priestess: Charles Williams and Modern Magic," discusses Williams' approach to magic as a method of mystical attainment; Roukema then explores the manifestation of this approach within the FRC and across the occult milieu at large, focusing on

magic as a means of altering consciousness rather than the manifestation of physical change. This chapter in itself is very good, but I do think it would have been better placed earlier in the book, for if one was not aware of occult history (which the inclusion of this section suggests Roukema anticipates) then this gives valuable background without which one may struggle to make sense of the discussions of FRC and Golden Dawn earlier in the book. By the same token, another problem with this chapter is that it does not explicate Williams' relationship with the Occult Revival fully enough. The vision offered of Williams' contemporaries are too limited and one-dimensional; further, Williams is positioned as being somewhat of an outlier to the milieu, despite clearly having a serious involvement in ritual magic groups.

In Chapter Six, "A Magical Life in Fiction," Roukema explores Williams' unique approach to re-enchantment, reanimation, and magical ethics. Here Roukema also discusses Williams' use of ritual magic to elevate his libido for mystical purposes and considers the fictional portrayals of these practices. This exploration is fascinating, yet it is ultimately the weakest section in the book, for Roukema fails to connect these practices to any contemporary sexual magic currents. They claim that Williams' Romantic Theology, and his sadomasochistic practices, cannot be considered sexual magic because they do not follow the spermo-centric structure of Theodore Reuss' approach, nor the mutual-ecstatic one of Paschal Beverly Randolph. However, Williams' form of engagement with sexuality shows very clear connections with and parallels to the contemporary occult scene. Williams' approach to sexual sublimation appears to draw directly from the techniques laid out by Dion Fortune in *The Problem of Purity* (1928); at the very least the psychoanalytical milieu within which both authors operated had an undeniable effect on the development of this concept of sexual sublimation. Roukema also fails to mention Aleister Crowley, whose sadomasochistic magical work makes for a most interesting comparison with that of Williams. This is the only occult context which is lacking, but one of the most unfortunate, as the Romantic Theology of Williams that underpins all of his novels. This is probably the most glaring omission in an otherwise excellent book.

Chapter seven, "The Transmutation of Charles Williams: Spiritual and Literary Alchemy," sits slightly uncomfortably as the last full chapter in this book; it may have been more effective if placed earlier on, or combined with, other aspects of the occult context. However, it is fascinating and necessary material, examining as it does the importance of alchemical philosophy and symbolism in Williams' occult system. Roukema offers a historical account of alchemy which considers the Occult Revivals' spiritual alchemy controversy to be part of the body of alchemical tradition in itself. It also shows how the alchemical approach to self-transformation can underpin without being explicitly evident. This offers insight into how other contemporary texts can have an alchemical nature and influences without being explicitly alchemical, and reveals the changing meaning of alchemical symbols and narratives across the twentieth century.

My critiques come chiefly not from any real problems with the text, but my desire to see Roukema travel further down some of the avenues they opened up. Despite being called esotericism and narrative, there was very little directly on this topic – which is a shame, as this is theoretical work which is desperately needed in this field. In particular, I was disappointed Roukema did not pursue

the idea of textual initiation, as described by Arthur Versluis in *Restoring Paradise* (whose examples were Williams, Dion Fortune, and C.S. Lewis); I also wish they had spoken more about the occult imagination, in order to better uncover the relationship between fiction and ritual practice.

While this book does explore Williams' writing and experience alongside that of other occult authors, the focus tends to be on cultural purpose rather than a magical one; I would be fascinated to know which other occult authors had taken the Adeptus Exempus initiation, and felt a similar calling to disseminate the mysteries in fictional form. Dion Fortune can certainly be better understood in this context, and I would have been interested to know if there were any parallels in the work of Algernon Blackwood, J. Brodie-Innes, or Arthur Machen.

Overall this is an excellent book; it is well researched, well written, and exhibits Roukema's masterful grasp of the complex field of contemporary esoteric studies, avoiding polemical arguments and directly tackling historiographical issues. Roukema addresses and delineates complex occult topics in a clear way without oversimplifying - no mean feat when it comes to esotericism. Roukema displays a very skilful handling of the historic, symbolic, practical, and structural relationships between occultism and Christianity, both in this period, and in textual history more generally. This book presents a valuable contribution to the growing understanding of the relationship between occult practice and so-called Fantastic fiction in the first half of the twentieth century.

BIONOTE

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