
Reviewed by Shai Feraro, University of Haifa and the Open University of Israel, shaiferaro@gmail.com

In recent decades, the study of new religious movements and contemporary forms of esotericism evolved to become an important aspect within the study of religion.¹ This is all the more true when we add gender to the mix. Indeed, as argued by Ursula King, “without the incisive, critical application of the category of gender it is no longer possible to accurately describe, analyze or explain any religion” (King 2005 [2004], 8). The consideration of gender as an aspect of occult discourse and practice is gaining recognition in recent years as “an essential, if complex” (Johnston 2015: 681; Johnston 2013) part of the study of contemporary occultism, and in 2019, the Esotericism, Gender, and Sexuality Network (ESOGEN) was founded as a thematic network under the umbrella of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) in order “to foster dialogue on issues of gender and sexuality in Western esotericism.”²

ESOGEN’s Co-Director, Manon Hedenborg White, is part of a young cohort of scholars exploring new avenues of research in twentieth-century and contemporary Western esotericism. Presently based at Malmö University, Hedenborg White’s recent and current work analyzes constructions of femininity and feminine sexuality in modern occultism, with a specific focus on Thelema and its development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Eloquent Blood, published in 2020 as part of the Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism series and based on her PhD dissertation, highlights the importance of gender as a critical aspect of occult discourse and practice.

The establishment of Thelema during the early decades of the twentieth century by British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) was shaped to a considerable degree by the changing attitudes toward women and

¹. For an overview see Lewis and Tøllefsen (2016); Asprem and Granholm (2013).
². See ESOGEN’s website, available at: https://esogennetwork.wixsite.com/home.
gender issues in this era. This was also the case when considering the reorganization of the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), which was carried out by Crowley in order to advance the propagation of this new religion. *The Eloquent Blood* centers on the various interpretations of the goddess Babalon, a key figure in the Thelemic pantheon usually considered to be the “earthly, sexual manifestation of [the goddess] Nuit” as well as “a magical office or title” assumed by several of Crowley’s lovers over years, who were also known as ‘Scarlet Women’. Their sex magical encounters with Crowley were considered in Thelema as sacramental acts confirming his “role as Lord of the New Aeon” (Drury 2012, 85).

To make sense of the articulation of femininities in what she terms as “the Babalon discourse”, Hedenborg White extends the discussion beyond Crowley and his Scarlet Women to later figures such as Jack Parsons (1914–1952) and Kenneth Grant (1924–2011), before dedicating the final sections of the book to its shaping in more recent decades by contemporary Thelemites and OTO initiates. All this is done while providing a strong theoretical basis, grounded in the works of feminist scholars such as Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, and Luce Irigaray, “who have sought to understand femininities as positionalities that are essentially linked neither to women nor to heterosexuality and that are both implicated in the existing gender system and contain the possibility for disrupting it” (18). This tension—specifically as it relates to Babalon—is indeed brought to the fore and analyzed in a compelling manner throughout the work. Hedenborg White’s sources consist of a combination of published and unpublished historical writings (some of which include descriptions and scripts for rituals that incorporate or center on Babalon), semi-structured interviews carried out with eighteen occult practitioners and ethnographic fieldwork carried out for five months as an outsider among American Thelemites, mostly in northern California. Importantly, she recognizes that “an alternate geocultural focus...[or a focus] on another Thelemic goddess would likely highlight different issues and tensions” (11).

As a scholar working in the fields of Goddess Feminism and ecofeminism, this reviewer did come to notice that the sole example provided by Hedenborg White for general secondary literature in these fields (see endnote 5 in Chapter 2) is a work written in Swedish. It might have been

---

3. See Bogdan (2015: 297). While Babalon did not feature in *The Book of the Law* many of the key doctrines related to Her can be found in *The Vision and the Voice*, which is based on visions obtained by Crowley in Mexico in 1900 and in Algeria in 1909.
more prudent to include (perhaps in tandem) at least one such work written in English for the benefit of her non-Swedish speaking readers. Furthermore, when reading Hedenborg White’s reference (198, 201 n. 23) to the gender distribution encountered in contemporary American OTO conferences and events by researcher Vere Chappell and herself—in which women numbered but thirty-six to forty-two per cent of the participants), this reader felt that an attempt at explaining the situation was wanting, as one possible (albeit partial) reason for the gap could be the result of women’s relative lower salaries and lack of funds necessary for participating in regional or national level gatherings in a country as vast as the United States.

These minor points of criticism, however, pale in comparison with the overall clarity of Hedenborg White’s narrative, her mastery in the use of relevant sources and data, and her ability to combine these with a sound theoretical basis. *The Eloquent Blood*, therefore, is certain to be recognized as one of the most important contributions to the field of contemporary occultism and alternative spiritualities in recent years, as well as to the intersections between gender and contemporary forms of religion more broadly. To that should be added the overall beauty of Hedenborg White’s writing as reflected both throughout the book and particularly in its final passage (342), making *The Eloquent Blood* true to its title.

References

Asprem, Egil and Kennet Granholm, eds.

Bogdan, Henrik.

Drury, Nevill.

Lewis, James R. and Inga B. Tollefsen, eds.

Johnston, Jay.

King, Ursula.