

Defining Magic: A Reader, by Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg. Equinox, 2012. 281pp., pb. £16.99, ISBN-13: 9781908049797; hb. £59.50, ISBN-13: 9781908049803.

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Like the *Corvus* on its cover, *Defining Magic: A Reader* is a strange bird. The book obviously seeks to be a reader on the history of defining magic on the one hand, yet on the other hand a commentary on the art of trying to create such definitions. The editors, Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, have done an exceptionally good job finding the essential chapters of each classical author they present, and they provide introductions that make the volume both a potential course book for students as well as a convenient citation source for academics. Therefore, on the likes of Plato, Plotinus, Augustine and Agrippa, the volume is able to provide very solid, illustrative and extremely well-contextualized samples.

As the editors themselves admit, however, due to various reasons the collection is more eclectic than it should be. This means that up to a certain point, key texts are included, but the closer the work comes to the present day, the more it disperses into what has apparently been available. This means that, for example, Helena Blavatsky gets a chapter but Aleister Crowley or Austin Osman Spare, both of whom have had a huge influence on defining magic after her, do not. Likewise, both Wiccan and chaos magic practices have been omitted. Nevertheless, the editors display a remarkable ability to recognize their work's problems, and of their own initiative reminds the readers of what is not included.

A second challenge is presented by the final section, in which five well-established expert authors describe their own viewpoints on the issue, summarizing the contents of the earlier chapters. As the editors note, these modern voices are not really in dialogue, neither in this volume nor in their own, earlier books. The situation is exemplified by Susan Greenwood, whose flow-of-thought article on magical consciousness is practically screaming for a cognitive-study-of-religion contextualization, yet is never given one. Jesper Sørensen's chapter remains a light introduction to the cognitive theory of magic he presented in his own book (2007)—useful, but mostly built upon classic examples and quite problematic in the case of post-modern magical practices.

Kimberly B. Stratton effectively continues the editors' work on contextual-

ization: by describing magical discourses in the ancient world, she provides an extra level of impact and further explanations for the early chapters of the book and the logic by which it flows from one to the next. The second very valuable new contribution is by Christopher I. Leirich, who by thoroughly presenting his own definition of magic also analyzes those of others and the contents of the book. Leirich is a rather opaque writer, whose work is heavy reading even for professionals of the field, but he is at his most accessible here. While he too does not mention any potential CSR aspects of the phenomena he discusses, Leirich's approach is completely compatible with CSR. Of particular value to studies at large is his critique of traditional comparisons of magic and science, based on the idea that while natural sciences may be very distinct from magic, perhaps a much closer relationship, one worth further exploration, could be found with the human sciences. The volume ends with the most critical piece, possibly just due to the new chapters being in an alphabetical order: Randall Styers argues that trying to define magic is too problematic, yet aspects of it can be found in various parts of human culture and societies.

From a CSR perspective, *Defining Magic* comes across as a selection of texts aware of its limits but not really of its full potential. The classics are significant and influential documents, but they are more often value judgments rather than contributions to systematic knowledge. To engage them in a discourse with CSR concepts requires significant personal expertise from the reader, as what Sørensen presents in the volume does not provide the reader with enough background information to contextualize the whole book. The incompleteness of the historical selections makes the book less than optimal as a university course book, at least without being accompanied by a volume that deals with the subjects that were left out (personally, I would suggest Evans' *The History of British Magic after Crowley*, 2007, as that companion). Likewise, with some more editorial work, the final section could have been turned into a dialogue of modern ideas, instead of a set of individual opinions. Then again, perhaps this is, in a way, much more appropriate: as this book shows exceptionally well, the history of defining magic is, more than anything, a history of individual opinions that are not in true dialogue with each other. Through such a collection, Otto and Stausberg convey the CSR-oriented reader with boundless inspiration for analysis, instead of any ready answers—especially at the points where the authors claim they hold those answers.