A year after the election of Donald Trump, a session of the Contemporary Pagan Studies unit of the American Academy of Religion was devoted to “Magic in the Time of the Tower: Witchcraft, Activism, and Political Resistance.” Papers discussed magical workings against the Trump Administration—workings that had been written up in books, blogs, newspapers, and social media. One presenter educated the academic audience about 4chan, Kek, and online chaos magic. But John Michael Greer—prolific author, former archdruid (Ancient Order of Druids in America), and maverick intellectual—does that and more in *The King in Orange: The Magical and Occult Roots of Political Power*.

But first the title. Readers of classic horror will recognize the homage to Robert W. Chambers’ story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895). Suffice it to say that both chronologically and in his themes, Chambers falls between Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft. “The King in Yellow,” described as a play script, the mere reading of which drives people mad, is what screenwriters call a “MacGuffin,” a device to motivate the plot, like the falcon statuette in *The Maltese Falcon*. Greer heads each chapter with a quote from Chambers’ stories.

Before he can discuss occult roots of political power, however, Greer has to talk about social class. There used to be a group of people called “Marxists” who talked about social class quite a lot. Today’s Marxists prefer to discuss pronouns and identity politics, so it is up to Druids to pick up the torch. The first half of the book is Greer’s analysis of the winners and losers in American society and the reasons therefore.

The 2016 presidential campaign began as a sort of set-piece battle between presumed nominees Jeb Bush (R) and Hillary Clinton (D). “That sort of content-free campaign is what got George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama onto the list of U.S. presidents” (22), Greer comments. He views Donald Trump’s out-of-nowhere victory through the lens of the German philosopher of
history Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), who predicted that “a democracy in its terminal years . . . devolves into a broken society from which only the narrowing circle of the privileged derive any benefit. In due time, those excluded from that circle look elsewhere for leadership” (27), a phenomenon that Spengler called “Caesarism.”

That is where Donald Trump came in. . . . How many people remember today that [Julius] Caesar, rich as he was, was immensely popular with ordinary Romans, precisely because he spoke to them and for them against the interest of the immensely rich senatorial class that dominated the Roman Republic in its last century? (28, 31)

Greer’s second chapter, “Lengthening Shadows: Magic and the American Class System,” discusses that class system in comprehensible terms. If you ask Americans where they get their income, he declares, they fall into four categories: an investment class, a salary class, a wage class, and a welfare class. “Even the once-mighty profit class, the people who get income from the profit they make on their own business activities, is small enough these days that it lacks a significant collective presence and thus any kind of political clout at the national level” (36).

Over the past fifty years, he argues, the investment class has had ups and downs but fared well enough. The salary class “has maintained its familiar privileges and perks through a half century of convulsive change. . . . And the wage class? Over the half century leading up to 2016, the American wage class has been destroyed” (36). The causes? The usual suspects: off-shoring of American industry, “the tacit encouragement of illegal immigration” to keep wages down, and government regulation that favored large corporations over small businesses (37–38). This decline was seen as inevitable and was propped-up by the narrative of journalists, educators, bureaucrats, and the like. “Go to college—you will earn more money,” they said. “Take out a student loan, it’s easy.”

In Greer’s words, “The talking heads insisted that if working-class people went to college at their own expense and got retrained in new skills, that would bring jobs back to American communities; universities and banks profited mightily but the jobs never showed up, leaving millions of people so deeply in debt that most of them will never recover financially” (52). This disillusionment in turn “turned into a major barrier to Hillary Clinton’s presidential ambitions. . . . the wage-class voters that Clinton needed to win over assumed as a matter of course that she and the media were lying to them” (55).
Sitting in Boston in November 2017, listening to papers on “Resistance” magic, I wondered what happened to the fourth side of Éliphas Lévi’s Magician’s Pyramid—the four admonitions taught in almost every magical group, the last of which is “Keep silent.” Greer deals with that eventually, but first he paints in broader strokes: “Magic . . . becomes the local fallback option for those who are denied any other way of pursuing their goals or seeking redress for their grievances” (93). Among those he counts people who fall off the ladder of success (or never fully grasp it) as part of the “overproduction of elites”—university graduates who outnumber the potential job slots, who are “shoved aside in the stampede for positions of wealth and influence.” This subculture is one he knows, Greer writes, “not least because I belong to it; a great many occultists these days do” (94).

This subculture features in Chapter 4, “The Orange Sign: The Coming of the Kek Wars.” With detours into Traditionalism and Neoreaction, Greer takes readers into the online worlds of ironically described “losers” of the alt-right, warning that “the corporate media’s loud insistence that the alt-right is all about racism is straightforward disinformation, meant to cover up the far more threatening challenge the alt-right poses to the pallid mask that covers the ascendence of the salary class” (97). He speculates just where a collection of disgruntled online “excluded” might wander next. Quite possibly, into magic, specifically the freewheeling world of chaos magic, whose elements “mesh well with certain aspects of today’s online outsider culture” (100).

In essence, he suggests that Trump’s 2016 win was propelled by a sort of beginner’s luck, when “thousands of young and angry outcasts . . . took up the intensive study and practice of basic magical workings without any sense of how to manage interactions with nonphysical beings” (101). Following several pages of the interesting synchronicities that popped around the cartoon character Pepe the Frog, he concludes that although “it is unacceptable to consider this in most corners of today’s industrial culture, but it’s worth considering the possibility that the efforts of [the online forum] /pols/’s chaos mages might have had something to do with the unexpected outcome of the 2016 elections” (106). In other words, they succeed in changing (voters’) consciousness in accordance with will.

At the same time, Greer notes, Trump’s opponents “were so much better prepared to use magic than his supporters . . . . the most popular alternative spiritualities from Theosophy to Wicca have
close and long-standing ties with liberal political beliefs” (108–109). The only reason that followers of Wicca (broadly defined), Goddess Spirituality, and similar traditions did not work magically for their candidate, he suggests, is that they assumed a Clinton victory was foreordained. When the initial shock of loss had passed, the Magical Resistance was born: “the first magical workings to unseat him and frustrate his agenda got under way” (110).

Greer faults their technique: “Where the chaos mages of the alt-right planned their workings on obscure message boards on the fringes of the internet, or took things entirely private, the Magic Resistance splashed theirs over high-traffic websites such as Medium.com, blogged about them incessantly, and filled several books with detailed accounts of the workings they were using” (110). Such openness made research easier for sympathetic scholars of contemporary Paganism; only a few were aware of the depth of the chaos-magic worked on the pro-Trump side.

The Resistance’s greatest push—its Gettysburg, in Greer’s metaphor—was its effort in 2018 to stop the confirmation of Judge Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court. “The day after the Magic Resistance working was splashed over the internet—again, it appeared on Medium.com—the senatorial resistance to Kavanaugh’s candidacy suddenly collapsed, and he was confirmed and sworn in without further incident” (110).

Here he reverts partly to his earlier class-based analysis. Magical practice may better suit underdogs; the “magic of the privileged”—he cites yoga and mindfulness meditation among these—can be “very effective at convincing you that everything is wonderful,” in this instance, that your candidate has the votes (115).

In his archetypal reading of American politics, Greer sees the working of the Changer, a being who in various Native American mythic cycles changed the world so that people could live in it. “I don’t know of a Native American myth in which the Changer’s role is played by a frog with magic powers or for that matter by a King in Orange, but those images do seem to describe the situation we’re in” (134).

The final chapter returns to Splengerian broad-brush predictions that both major US political parties will shift dramatically (184), that myths of perpetual progress and complete social equality will falter and die, and that America soon simply will be unable afford foreign military commitments on the scale of the last sixty years. There will be great changes— that is always a safe prediction. Meantime, for a
practicing magician’s thoughts on the occult currents behind the last decade’s political shifts, *The King in Orange* is worth reading.

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