

## Introduction: Paganism, Initiation, and Ritual

In the epilogue to his *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (1958) Mircea Eliade lamented the fact, as he saw it, that “modern man no longer has any initiation of the traditional type.” Modern forms of initiation, perhaps with the exception of those of Freemasonry, employed by “occult sects, secret societies, pseudo-initiatory groups, hermeticistic [*sic*] or neo-spiritualistic movements and others,” were dismissed by Eliade as meaningless, shallow, and ineffective: “These so-called initiation rites frequently betoken a deplorable spiritual poverty. The fact that those who practice them can regard them as infallible means of attaining to supreme gnosis shows to what degree modern man has lost all sense of traditional initiation.”<sup>1</sup> To Eliade, genuine or “traditional” initiation leads to a transformation of the candidate, he or she becomes *another*, whereas modern forms of initiation are sterile and thus unable to cause this change. While much has been written on the topic of initiation and rituals since Eliade’s book, and his understanding of the difference between “primitive” or “traditional” initiation, and those employed by the “modern man,” his ideas can be easily criticised, as they indeed rightfully have been.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in his epilogue Eliade points to an important question: what function does initiation and rituals have in modern western society?

This special issue of *The Pomegranate* addresses this question in relation to the field of Pagan studies. Arguably, initiation and ritual are in many ways central for the understanding of most of the currents studied under the umbrella term Paganism—one need only mention the importance placed on rituals of initiation in the modern Witchcraft movement from the 1950s onwards, or the rituals performed in connection with the seasonal festivals of the year encountered in most forms of Paganism.<sup>3</sup> The articles contained in this issue

1. Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1994 [1958]), 132–36.

2. See, *inter alia*, Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Bryan S. Rennie, ed, *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

3. The literature on initiation and rituals is vast. For the best overview to the

deal with five different examples of Pagan uses of rituals and initiation, examined from different perspectives. In the first chapter “How to Become a Mage (or Fairy): Joséphin Péladan’s Initiation for the Masses,” Sasha Chaitow analyses the notion of self-initiation in the works of the French novelist and occultist Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), in particular his two books *Comment on Devient Mage* and *Comment on Devient Fée*, written for the perusal of men and women, respectively. Chaitow argues that Péladan, in his cycle of novels *La Décadence Latine*, created characters who represented archetypal ideals facing ontological and metaphysical dilemmas against a background of a dying, corrupt, Western culture, and, further, that each of his works was tuned to inspiring his readers to seek a more ideal existence through a form of self-initiation that he dubbed *kalo-prosopia*, an art of transformation of personality through a life lived as a work of art. The use of literature as a means of initiation is also explored by Christian Giudice in the next article, “Pagan Rome was Rebuilt in a Play: Roggero Musmeci Ferrari Bravo and the Representation of *Rumon*.” In this article, Giudice focuses on the theme of a Pagan new beginning for the newly reunited Italy by first sketching a historical portrayal of the influence the idea of ancient Rome had on both artists and occultists, then by discussing the poet and playwright Roggero Musmeci Ferrari Bravo (1868–1937) and his tragedy on the birth of Rome, *Rumon, Sacrae Romae Origines* (1929). Giudice argues that the play was an attempt to mass-initiate the audience to the alleged paligenetic virtues of Roman traditionalism, in view of a new Italian renaissance.

While both Chaitow and Giudice focuses on literary means of initiation, Léon A. van Gulik draws on a theoretical sample from his on-going fieldwork on religious creativity in order to offer a psychological perspective on the issue of secrecy in contemporary initiatory Wicca. In his chapter, entitled “Cleanliness is Next to Godliness, But Oaths are for Horses: Antecedents and Consequences of the Institutionalization of Secrecy in Initiatory Wicca,” van Gulik analyzes secrecy in relation to Wiccan initiation by first discussing the various etic narratives of secrecy successively relating the topic to mythistory,

field, see Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg, eds., *Theorizing Rituals*. 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2007). On Paganism and rituals of initiation, see Nikki Bado-Fralick, *Coming to the Edge of the Circle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Joanne Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic* (London: Routledge, 2007). See also Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

oath keeping, magical practice, and mysteries. Second, by moving from the manifest level to the latent level of these narratives, van Gulik then offers an explanation and interpretation of the functions of secrecy in terms of the maintenance of ownership, appeal, and association. The last is explained as ritual hygiene and shown to be the functional opposite of secrecy. In the fourth chapter "Meeting Freya and the Cailleich, Celebrating Life and Death: Rites of Passage in the Dutch Pagan Community," Hanneke Minkjan takes us from rituals of initiation to rites of passage performed in connection with the Wheel of the Year, where the perennial seasonal changes in nature are connected with changes in a human life. The consecutive phases of a human lifetime, from birth to death, are incorporated in the symbology of the Pagan Wheel and therefore celebrated each season. Minkjan argues that due to secularization processes, the traditionally religious oriented rites of passage, which were organized by Jewish and Christian institutions, have generally lost much of its influence on modern Dutch society. In this article Minkjan seeks to illustrate in which ways different contemporary Pagan currents have influenced modern Dutch civil society in finding new expressions of some of the most crucial rites of passage. Finally, in the fifth and last article, "The Law of the Jungle: Self and Community in the Online Therianthropy Movement," Venetia Robertson deals with the loosely formed Therianthropy movement, in which individuals identify as non-human animals. The Therianthropy movement exists almost solely online, and it is closely connected to the Pagan online milieu. In her chapter, Robertson considers how notions of insider/outsider identities, knowledge, and authority are constructed and maintained in a specific community, and she offers insight into how researchers can navigate the oft-murky waters of Internet discourse.

The selected articles for this issue cover not only a wide range of topics, directly or indirectly connected to rituals and initiation, such as secrecy, authority and the construct of identity, but also a wide historical spectrum, from early twentieth century literary circles in France and Italy, to contemporary online groups and movements. Hopefully, this will not only challenge the often-narrow understanding of Paganism as a field, but will also go to show that Eliade's fear that modern man no longer has any meaningful means of initiation was, apparently, ill-founded.

Henrik Bogdan and Christian Guidice  
Göteborg, October 2013