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Edward Bever and Randall Styers, eds., *Magic in the Modern World: Strategies of Repression and Legitimization* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), vi + 208 pp., $74.95 (cloth).

This book addresses two notions well-known to any student of magic in the modern Western world: that disenchantment is a cornerstone of Western modernity, and that magic is alive and well in spite of this fact. The editors aim to give equal attention to both sides of that equation, which they say has rarely been done in academic studies. Hence the volume is divided into two balanced halves of four essays each. The first addresses the "repression" part of the subtitle, examining how, over the course of several centuries, Western elites downgraded magic from a terrifying demonic threat to a matter of silly superstition. The second half explores some of the strategies by which modern devotees of magic have sought to legitimize their practices within a broader cultural context that derides them. There is more cohesion to the first half, since the effort to repress magic was, or at least became, fairly focused and coherent. On the other hand, diverse communities of modern magical practitioners have pursued widely separate "strategies of legitimization." Nevertheless, one finds interesting and innovative perspectives throughout the book.

In the first half, two essays offer wide-ranging analysis. Styers traces how superstition was progressively downgraded from a terrible religious error to a psychological problem—a failure of reason or of proper perception. He moves from sixteenth-century witchcraft-skeptics like Reginald Scot and Johann Weyer through the Enlightenment to twentieth-century psychological studies. Adam Jortner focuses exclusively on the Enlightenment (which is also at the core of Styers's analysis), to show how magic was derided as fraudulent deceit in the early American republic. In between, Bever offers a close reading of a critical moment at the birth of Western modernity: René Descartes's decision to interpret a series of dreams and related experiences in the late-night hours of November 10, 1619, in a "modern" and "rational" way, instead of interpreting them as denoting the presence of an evil spirit. As he has done in his studies of early modern witchcraft, Bever marshals recent discoveries in neuropsychology to show that what might be called the modern,

disenchanted state of perception is biologically conditioned and manipulable. The result is necessarily speculative but intriguing. Benedek Láng also offers a slightly incongruous study of why one strategy to repress magic failed, namely, "Why Magic Cannot be Falsified by Experiments."

The final four essays address ways in which modern practitioners have situated and sought to legitimate different kinds of magic within putatively disenchanted modernity. Egil Asprem's contribution has the broadest scope. He traces how modern practitioners of Enochian angel magic have reinterpreted and reimagined John Dee's original rituals so that, in his judgement, any equation of modern Enochian rites to Dee's is "grossly anachronistic" (91). Erik Davis then examines how Jack Parsons, ritual magician and rocket-scientist in early-twentieth-century southern California, negotiated the gap between those two halves of his life. Megan Goodwin tackles a different problem when she studies how male practitioners of Nordic *seiðr* handle the tension between their gender identities and this traditionally (in the premodern Nordic world and among more conservative Nordic Pagans today) female and feminizing practice. Dan Harms closes out the volume with a very different study of how the 1977 *Necronomicon*, a paperback bestseller, sought to legitimatize its smorgasbord of practices, but how these strategies ultimately failed, in the sense that they did not prove highly influential on modern occultism or Paganism broadly speaking, despite the tremendous pop-culture success of the book itself.

The two halves of this book have quite different feels to them. As I have already indicated, the first half is fairly unified in addressing the well-known rationalizing tendencies of scientific and Enlightenment thought—Styers and Jortner approach these issues head-on while Bever and Láng offer interesting new perspectives. There is, however, no doubt about what constitutes the central impulse behind magic's "repression" as Western Europe and North America moved toward modernity. The second half necessarily presents a more fractured picture, as different kinds of magicians negotiate the tensions both between their practices and the larger disenchanted culture of modernity in which they find themselves and with the historical traditions that they claim for their practices. The inclusion of the study of the *Necronomicon* also highlights the sometimes-blurred line between modern magical practices of various traditions and the representations and mutations to which those traditions are subjected in popular culture. Scholarship in these areas is still too new

to allow much synthesis, in stark contrast to the relatively agreed-upon grand narrative of magic's repression. A good deal more academic spade-work will be required before these two halves to the story of "magic in the modern world" can be set fully in conjunction with one another, but this volume is a valuable start.

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