

# A Critical Framework for Masculinities, Sexualities and Esotericism

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Gender as an analytical lens has been deployed productively to the study of esoterism for over three decades. Important initial foci of scholarship included women's roles and sexual politics within the spiritualist, theosophical and occult movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Critical attention has expanded more recently to other aspects across the modern period, with ground-breaking studies on nineteenth-century feminist counter-readings of Satan, the influence of second-wave feminism on British Wicca and Paganism, and representations of the goddess Babalon in Aleister Crowley's religion of Thelema.<sup>2</sup> Sexualities have also constituted a rich field of inquiry, with research encompassing the history of European and North American sexual magic and mysticism, along with the negotiation of sexuality within numerous esoteric currents, from Hermetic and Gnostic thought in Late Antiquity to the New Religious Movements of late modernity.<sup>3</sup> The scholarship on gender and sexuality has originated from a variety of disciplines, including gender history,

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1. Burfield, "Theosophy and Feminism"; Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Braude, *Radical Spirits*; Basham, *The Trial of Woman*; Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn*; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*; Dixon, *Divine Feminine*; Kontou, *Women and the Victorian Occult*.

2. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*; Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues in British Paganism*; Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*.

3. For an introduction to sexual magic and sexual mysticism, see: Urban, *Magia Sexualis*; Hanegraff and Kripal, *Hidden Intercourse*. For a selection of work on the broader intersection of sexuality and esoteric movements, see Dixon, "Sexology and the Occult"; Dixon, *The Place of Enchantment*; Hanegraff and Kripal, *Hidden Intercourse*; Bogdan and Lewis, *Sexuality and New Religious Movements*.

the history of sexuality, religious studies, and literary and cultural studies. It is often richly theorised, studies drawing in innovative ways on conceptual and methodological approaches from feminist and queer studies. In a period in which the field of esotericism studies is undergoing a significant phase of expansion and diversification, and looking to revise long-standing disciplinary assumptions and facilitate dialogue with researchers in different fields, scholarship on gender, sexuality and esotericism exemplifies the benefits of a cross-disciplinary, theoretically-informed approach.<sup>4</sup>

The current special issue of *Correspondences* seeks to further nuance and deepen this expansive historiography by adding a critical focus on men and masculinities. The emphasis of gendered analyses to date has been primarily on the practices and writings of cis women;<sup>5</sup> by extending this purview to include male and nonbinary subjects and by considering representations of masculinities and transness, we can expand and enrich our understanding of the historical interconnections which bind esotericism, gender and sexuality, as well as interrogate with more acuity their complex relations with other social domains, such as race and class.

### **Gendering the Male Subject: Hegemonic Masculinity and Beyond**

The salience of a critical perspective on men and manhood has been recognised within social science and humanities disciplines since the advent of feminist studies in the 1970s, with historian Natalie Zemon Davis commenting in 1976:

it seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus entirely on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past. Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or to promote its change.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Asprem and Strube, "Esotericism's Expanding Horizon."

5. Exceptions include Moore, *Masonic Temples*; Timbers, *Magic and Masculinity*; Luckhurst, "The Ghost Club."

6. Zemon Davis, "Women's History in Transition," 90.

By the early 1990s, sociological, historical and ethnographic research on masculinities had consolidated into a burgeoning, interdisciplinary sub-field of feminist, gender and women's studies. The new critical men's studies recognised that, like whiteness, patriarchy had rendered masculinity universal and therefore invisible.<sup>7</sup> This meant that despite an abundance of scholarship focused on the actions of men, their particularity as male subjects and their actions in upholding unequal relations of gender and sexuality were obscured. It is this occlusion which continues to result in survey texts and edited collections containing an individual chapter and index entries on "women," with no comparable entry for "men"; as historian of masculinities John Tosh stated in 1994, "in the historical record it is as though masculinity is everywhere and nowhere."<sup>8</sup> An early objective of men's studies was therefore to undo these "ruses of masculine privilege."<sup>9</sup>

A structuring theoretical framework for understanding masculinity and its relation to power came in 1987 and 1995 with the publication of sociologist R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>10</sup> Informed by an awareness of the violence and discrimination experienced by gay men, as well as by Antonio Gramsci's understanding of power constituted through bourgeois knowledge production, it proposed the existence of a hierarchy of masculine practices.<sup>11</sup> At its pinnacle was the ideal, hegemonic form, performed and defended by educated, elite men whom Gramsci termed the "weavers of the fabric of hegemony," a category arguably occupied by several of the esoteric practitioners featured in this special issue, including English occultist Aleister Crowley and the "father of witchcraft" Gerald Gardner. Within Connell's model, the practice of hegemonic masculinity legitimated patriarchal power

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7. Ditz, "The New Men's History," 1.

8. Tosh, "What Should Historians do with Masculinity?," 180.

9. Ditz, "Review: What's Love Got to Do with It?," 168.

10. Connell, *Gender and Power, Masculinities*.

11. Connell and Messerschmidt, 830-32.

and operated in relation to “emphasised” or subordinated femininity, and to a range of masculinities of lesser status, including that practiced by gay, black and working-class men. Also present within the hierarchy were a large body of men who did not meet the masculine ideal but who were nonetheless complicit in upholding the hegemonic norm, thereby reaping the patriarchal dividend of greater relative wealth, power and status.<sup>12</sup> Patriarchal dominance within society was sustained not through force but rather the techniques of hegemony, “discursive persuasion,” in James Messerschmidt’s words, encouraging “all to consent to, coalesce around, and embody such unequal gender relations” as “collective orchestrators” of the hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> Critically, hegemonic masculinity was not conceptualised as fixed and immutable but rather mobile and subject to challenge from within and outwith the gender system. Connell defined it as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the *currently accepted* answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy,” a practice requiring continual modification and reworking to retain its cultural authority.<sup>14</sup>

Undoubtedly influential, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has informed a profusion of empirical studies within disciplines including history, literary studies, sociology, anthropology and feminist studies, with the existence of differentiated masculine identities traced in manifold cultures across the globe from the prehistoric era to today.<sup>15</sup> This work has been accompanied by scholarship on the rhetorical and ideological work done by constructions of masculinity in broader social processes, such as modernity, revolution, imperialism, war, industrialisation and nationalism, research which asks questions including what ideas about manhood are invoked or denigrated in political struggles, and what relations of power are established or destabilised in the process.<sup>16</sup>

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12. Connell, *Masculinities*, 76–81.

13. Messerschmidt, “The Saliency of ‘Hegemonic Masculinity,’” 86–87.

14. Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

15. See, for example, Skogstrand, “Prehistoric Hegemonic Masculinity.”

16. Dudink and Hagemann, “Masculinity in Politics and War,” 6.

The six paired articles presented in this special issue contribute to this rich body of scholarship, adding a range of incisive case studies of normative and queer masculinities produced within occult and spiritualist subcultures, and which detail the influence of esoteric ideas on constructions of manhood in other social domains, such as art, music and politics. The authors have drawn on Connell's original formulation of hegemonic masculinity, while also moving beyond it, engaging with important critiques and revisions of the theory as well as with concepts from feminist, queer and trans studies, where necessary adapting them to better serve their evidence base and research agendas.<sup>17</sup> For example, in her study of the ritual sex magic of Aleister Crowley, Joy Dixon examines Crowley's claims to scientific and religious masculine authority in light of Ben Griffin's call for a shift of focus away from hegemonic masculinity and its associated qualities and instead to "*the historically specific opportunities, mechanisms or techniques that enabled individuals to identify themselves with these normative models.*"<sup>18</sup> In doing so, Dixon is able to read Crowley's "carnavalesque deflation" of works by sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing as a strategic device to "clear a space" for his own idiosyncratic model of manhood, one based in part on comparable qualities of reason and rationality. Yet Dixon also argues that Crowley's model is "queer," not only in its unsettling sexual and scatological practices but also in a broader, cultural sense in its refusal of the categories of the gender and sexual regimes of modernity, and "also even of those very regimes themselves." In such ways then, the articles demonstrate the potential of gender studies' suite of conceptual tools to generate new, illuminating interpretations of familiar esoteric protagonists while also enabling deeper and more precise understandings of relations between esoteric movements and other social phenomena.

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17. For surveys of these revisions and critiques, see Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept"; Tosh, "Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender"; Griffin, "Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem."

18. Griffin, "Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem," 388. Italics in the original.

## **Writing Esoteric Masculinity into Modernity: An Introduction to the Case Studies**

The period of modernity has understandably formed the focus of the majority of scholarship to date on gender, sexuality and esotericism. The resurgence of an intense and widespread interest in spiritualist and occult beliefs and practices during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries occurred simultaneously with the advent of a feminist discourse and politics, alongside new medical and scientific understandings of the sexed body and sexual behaviour. Yet as Anne Phillips notes, gender and sexual equality should not be construed as part of the “inner logic” of modernity, with post-Enlightenment constructions of gender intensifying rather than diminishing inequitable gender relations.<sup>19</sup> Scholars of esoteric milieu have subjected modernity’s ambiguous and non-linear relationship with gender equality to scrutiny, examining how movements including occultism, spiritualism, theosophy and Paganism have functioned to both help and hinder female agency and feminist politics, research concentrating in the main on the actions of female protagonists. Yet in many ways this tells only half the story. To understand fully the nature of esotericism’s role in the multiple and complex mechanisms and transformations of gender and sexual modernity, it is necessary to also examine the part played by men and nonbinary subjects, as well as normative and queer constructions of masculinities, in maintaining or destabilising hegemonies and hierarchies of power, within and beyond the gender system.

In this special issue, six case studies on contrasting esoteric movements and discourses across the modern period provide a multi-perspectival view of the complex entanglements of masculinities, sexualities and modernity. The articles are clustered in pairs, each addressing themes that correspond to major lines of inquiry in the interdisciplinary field of men’s studies. It is hoped that structuring the collection in this way will heighten the opportunities for the cross-disciplinary dialogue which is key to esotericism studies’ current agenda of expansion, while also providing incisive critical frameworks for interpreting diverse and sometimes contradictory material from differing temporal and regional locales.

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19. Phillips, “Gender and Modernity.”

The first theme is “binaries and embodiment” and includes articles by Joy Dixon and Bob Cluness. The gender binary has been thoroughly historicised by three decades of historical and ethnographical scholarship, and it is now understood as only one way in which societies have organised and regulated sexed bodies. In addition, the increasing use of “trans” as a category of analysis has demonstrated the value and importance of including the perspectives of those whom Kate Bornstein has termed “gender outlaws,” individuals with intimate knowledge of regulatory gender regimes and their violent and embodied effects.<sup>20</sup> Collectively, this scholarship reminds us of the need to remain continually attuned to what Matt Houlbrook has termed “the fictive and illusory nature of sexual and social categorisation,” ensuring our reading of sources is not overdetermined by mapping contemporary understandings of the gender binary or cisnormativity onto the past.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars of esoteric subjects have already begun to delineate the roles played by occult and spiritualist organisations, beliefs and practices in supporting or destabilising the gender binary in specific historical contexts. For example, research by Dixon on late-Victorian and Edwardian theosophy has suggested that beliefs in reincarnation simultaneously strengthened and subverted binary oppositions of male and female, with stories of gender crossings in past lives providing theosophical men and women with “an opportunity to imagine oneself outside one’s (current) sex, or for an exploration of unorthodox sexual feeling.”<sup>22</sup> A similarly complex picture emerges from Shai Feraro’s work on the influence of North American Dianic and spiritualist feminism on British Wiccans and Wiccan-derived Pagans, with Feraro tracing how, during the 1970s and ‘80s, goddess spirituality and matriarchy study groups embraced gender polarity and sex segregation in their ritual practices within a broader agenda

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20. Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*.

21. Houlbrook, “Thinking Queer,” 137.

22. Dixon, “Sexology and the Occult,” 427.

of challenging patriarchal structures.<sup>23</sup> The articles included here extend and nuance this historiography, providing valuable new evidence on the roles played by queer masculinities and trans identities in upholding, undoing and embodying binary formations in two contrasting esoteric contexts.

In the first article, “Sex Magic as Sacramental Sexology: Aleister Crowley’s Queer Masculinity,” Dixon examines how Crowley’s queering of scientific and religious manhood relied upon binary notions of gender, his ritual sex magic replicating the familiar dichotomies of male and female bodies as active/passive, divine/material and creative/receptive. However, as with the practice of reincarnation in theosophy, some of his magical operations allowed opportunities for gender inversion as well as female agency, such as in a “Secret Instruction” of the Ninth degree of the O.T.O. in which the sacrament described as “One and not Two; neither male nor female, neither solid nor liquid. It will contain all possibilities and without it no possibility could be.” Similarly, Crowley in his *Confessions* referenced the superior levels of insight afforded by his own bodily and mental “hermaphroditism,” while his teachings on the Thelemic goddess “Babalon” provided an alternative model of femininity to the passive, asexual norm, celebrating instead the transgressive potential of unbounded female sexuality. Crowley’s followers were encouraged to embody his ideas on gender polarity and inversion in a very literal sense, through sexual acts such as the symbolic heterosexual intercourse between the priest and priestess in his “Gnostic Mass” and the production and consumption of an “elixir” of male and female sexual fluids.

Gender binaries are destabilised and embodied in a very different way in the second paper of the collection. Bob Cluness examines the messianic system of esoteric Christianity created by the queer trans woman Hunter Hunt-Hendrix from the US black metal band Liturgy. Since its advent in the 1980s as a sub-genre of heavy metal music, black metal has drawn on the iconography and mythology of satanism and heathenism to champion an aggressively phallogocentric and

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23. Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues*.



patriarchal masculine ideal. This ideal is based on the valorisation of the “Viking” warrior mentality, a desire for individualism and authenticity, and a rejection of the values of Christianity, egalitarianism, and modernity, with any attempts to “feminise” its discourse robustly policed. Cluness denotes the ways in which Hunt-Hendrix’s alternative project of transcendental black metal and its concept of “renihilation” has constituted a provocation towards black metal orthodoxy, upending several of its ideological and spiritual tenets. Simultaneously, her “coming out” as a queer trans woman has created a space within the scene not only for spiritual matters and cultural experimentation, but for explorations of gender and cultural values that move away from essentialist ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

The second theme of this special issue is “gendered power” and pairs articles by Tanya Cheadle and Shai Feraro. The varying ways in which esoteric cultures have fostered or frustrated more equitable gender relations have been a significant focus of scholarship since Owen and Dixon’s pioneering texts on Victorian and Edwardian spiritualism, occultism and theosophy, published between 1989 and 2004.<sup>24</sup> Since then, an understanding of the séance, occult temple and theosophical lodge as conducive sites for—albeit circumscribed—female agency, has been nuanced by important empirical studies on the sexual politics of key, twentieth-century Anglo-American esoteric movements, by Feraro on British Wicca and Paganism, and by Manon Hedenborg White on Crowley’s religion of Thelema.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, a recent collection of essays edited by Amy Hale on women in Western esotericism has shone a light on the global exchange of feminist ideas on eugenics, imperialism, sexuality, maternity and gender, juxtaposing new readings of familiar female protagonists such as occultists Florence Farr and Dion Fortune, with studies of more marginal figures, including the Russian Satanic feminist Maria de Naglowska and English theosophist Frances Swiney.<sup>26</sup>

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24. Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Dixon, *Divine Feminine*; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*.

25. Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues*; Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*.

26. Hale, *Essays on Women in Western Esotericism*.

This scholarship on female agency and feminist activism is extended in the special issue to encompass the part played by men and masculinities in sustaining or subverting unequal power relations. In the third article in the collection, and the first addressing the theme of “gendered power,” Cheadle examines the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor or “H. B. of L.,” a short-lived yet influential occult organisation co-founded in 1884 in northeast Scotland by Peter Davidson. The organisation was responsible for importing to Britain the teachings on sex magic of the Black American spiritualist, Paschal Beverley Randolph, disseminating them by correspondence to the society’s international network of disciples in France, America and beyond. Cheadle finds that while Davidson attempted to shore up occult masculinity by reconfiguring it as progressive, co-opting feminist ideas such as the importance of female sexual pleasure and access to divorce, ultimately the H. B. of L.’s teachings failed to fundamentally challenge hierarchies of gender, class, race and sexuality. As such, she argues, the occult masculinity disseminated by Davidson can be considered an example of what Demetrakis Demetrious termed “hybridisation,” sustaining rather than disrupting patriarchal power.<sup>27</sup>

A more positive narrative regarding gendered power relations emerges from the fourth paper in this collection, in which Feraro analyses the impact of the Women’s Liberation Movement on masculinities within British Wicca and Paganism. Feraro considers how radical feminist theory and feminist forms of Witchcraft and Goddess Spirituality from America sparked highly charged debates among male priests and practitioners, influencing their visioning of Wicca’s male deity, the Horned God, and prompting some to set up separate homosocial spaces. While “Men Mysteries” groups were derided by female and male feminists within the movement as an attempt to maintain hegemonic masculinity in a difference guise, a new, more progressive model of masculinity also emerged based on the qualities of vulnerability, connectedness and bisexuality. Feraro therefore demonstrates the

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27. Demetrious, “Connell’s Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity.”

potential for an esoteric milieu to harbour spaces for the formulation of a more progressive form of gendered power, one based not on “relations of opposition or domination” but on “equality, empathy and respect.”<sup>28</sup>

The final two articles in our issue relate to the theme of “masculinity, esotericism and the nation.” The significant role played by occultism in movements of cultural nationalism has been acknowledged and explored in recent scholarship including on the poet William Yeats’s shifting political allegiance from Irish nationalism to European fascism; on Annie Besant and the Theosophical Society’s involvement in the campaign for Indian home rule; and on the relationship between occultism and the Third Reich.<sup>29</sup> The articles presented here extend the geographical purview to include a focus on Sweden and Austria, examining the role of occulted manhood in advancing or critiquing expressions of national identity.

In the fifth paper of this collection, Fredrik Gregorius examines the Manhem Society, an initiatory and educational organisation spearheaded by the author Carl Jonas Love Almqvist, and active in Sweden between 1815–1823. Part of a wider movement of Swedish nationalism termed Göthicism, the organisation formed during a period of anxiety around the nation’s declining military and political position in Europe, in which it increasingly looked inwards to develop a distinctive national character. As Gregorius details, a key aspect of this resurgent nationalism was a focus on the nation’s male youth, with the Society part of a broader impulse to instil bourgeois gender ideals of “manly character.” The Society did this through initiatory rituals and physical exercises housed within a nine-degree structure, the first five drawing upon Old Norse Mythology, including a reimagining of Viking and Heathen Gods, and the last four on Almqvist’s own Christian Swedenborgianism. However, Almqvist increasingly moved away from middle-class gender ideals, his later novels causing scandal through their depictions of gender fluidity and demands for female autonomy.

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28. Duncanson, “Hegemonic Masculinity and the Possibility of Change,” 233, 242.

29. Nally, *Envisioning Ireland*; Bevir, “Theosophy, Cultural Nationalism, and Home Rule”; Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*.

In the sixth and final paper of the collection by Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir, nationalism provokes a very different reaction among its historical actors, no longer a cause to be buttressed by a masculine ideal, but rather an impulse to be critiqued through bodily transgressions and the motif of male reproduction. The focus of the article is Actionism, an Austrian neo-avant-garde movement active during 1962–1973. Notorious for their transgressive art practice, the Activists critiqued the social amnesia enforced by the state after the Second World War in relation to the crimes and complicity of its Nazi past. Guðmundsdóttir’s analysis foregrounds the presentation of male reproduction in Günter Brus’s action, *Der Helle Wahnsinn – Die Architektur des hellen Wahnsinns* (1968); as she relates, the work presented a contradictory dialogue regarding masculinity, placing subversive positioning such as gender play and transvestism alongside a more traditional expression of masculine powers. The impact of esotericism on these concepts of masculinity is also considered and how they manifest in the historical and neo-avant garde, be it as instruments for destabilising traditional ideas of gender or as visions of masculine virility.

The themes pursued in this special edition—“binaries and embodiment,” “gendered power” and “masculinity, esotericism and the nation”—constitute just some of the ways in which masculinity can be applied as a critical lens to the field of esotericism. The scope to expand the field of inquiry is vast, and it is hoped the range of incisive critical frameworks and rich empirical studies presented here, will inspire new and trenchant research on the manifold historical associations between masculinities, sexualities and esotericism, enriching the fields of gender history and esotericism studies in the process.

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