



Issue 42

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## ***The Rhetoric of Chaos Magic***

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Magic is, in at least some modes, rhetorical. Practitioners may demand effects, sure, by coercing elemental spirits, lurking ghosts, or vain gods to do some task. But often magic is persuasive, making arguments to spirits, praising a god, or even convincing the magician's own subconscious to ferry an intention-packed sigil into the cosmic noise in such a way that reality rewrites itself to offer up a desired change with just the right synchronicity. Chaos magic uses any, and all, of the above.

I elaborate on this in my recent dissertation, *Authority, Information Organization, and Posthumanism in the Rhetoric of Chaos Magic*.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I wanted to know more about the relationship between authority and chaos magic. Chaos magic is that late 20th century response to formal systems of ceremonial magic that emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1970s. Colin Duggan summarizes its history and practices very succinctly in his chapter in *The Occult World* (2014). It is worth quoting him at length:

Chaos Magick is a development in twentieth-century occultism... [that] comprises a radically individualized discourse on magic and is therefore difficult to accurately define... It proves more useful to consider Chaos Magick as a set of discourses deploying conceptions of chaos where issues concerning magic, science, art, politics, and individual identity were negotiated and debated, primarily in the 1980s and 1990s. Chaos Magick not only provided a foil against which many individuals involved in more conventional forms of occultism in this period could develop their own ideas, but a space in which new ideas, not only concerning magic, but also sexuality and politics, were allowed to flourish.<sup>1</sup>

The *chaos* is of particular interest, as it points toward not only a radically individualistic form of magic, but also towards emerging complexity sciences such as chaos mathematics.

What I wanted to know is, given that chaos magic in particular is often understood as counter-cultural, individualistic, and anarchistic, what do chaos magicians' texts reveal about chaos magic's attitudes toward authority, and how do configurations of authority and ethos factor into chaos magic's defining claims and arguments? How anti-authoritarian is it, and how does it express positions against (or *occultly* for) authority?

I limited my project to the analysis of works by Peter J. Carroll and Phil Hine, but even then, it was nearly too much text to handle in the available time. Carroll and Hine are often understood as founders of chaos magic, along with Ray Sherwin, Lionell Snell, and others. They developed and expanded work on magical practices and attitudes, earlier versions of which we may find especially in Austin Osman Spare.

Using three interconnected methods, I looked for answers to my research questions in Carroll's *Psychonaut and Liber Null*, and in Hine's *Prime Chaos and Condensed Chaos*.<sup>2</sup> I first did a close reading of all four books, intending to code them by hand for instances of apparent appeals to authority. But of course, I found other things of interest, so I recalibrated to also code for instances of posthumanism and what I came to call "information organization". As a librarian, this last one really leaped out at me, but we will circle back to that below.

I next ran the texts through the *Voyant Tools* software to get hard data on term frequencies. What were the facts about the numbers and types of terms used to invoke authority, information, or posthumanism?

*Voyant* is a free, open-source, bibliometric tool. It was developed in the early 2000s by Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell to perform analytic operations on corpora of texts; it finds relationships and counts for terms, and can display results by frequency lists, collocations, and graphic displays of term locations in relationship to other terms and the text as a whole.

Finally, I asked the texts themselves what they had to say about these things. I didn't do that last bit alone but used a random number generator and an old deck of Tarot cards to support my bibliomancy. This is where the methods became non-traditional, even for the eclectic discipline of Rhetoric, and in some sense became posthuman.

Posthumanism is a broad and varied approach to understanding the human relationship to non-human persons. Detailing those relationships in order to create an atmosphere of greater respect for non-humans and the humans within those networks is important to me (in some ways this work on magic and rhetoric is hiding an ecological agenda). Posthumanism has become rather *big*, with a wide variety of approaches and tools ranging from things like transhumanism (roughly, the merging of our technology with our bodies, and the exploration of the social and political consequences of doing so) to anti-humanism (as Rosi Braidotti articulates it in a progressive response to limiting, gendered, and racist conceptions of humanism itself).<sup>3</sup> The communicative and persuasive powers of the other-than-humans have also been increasingly explored in the work of rhetoricians, such as Debra Hawhee, John Gray, and even George Kennedy. Posthuman positions allow an approach to some practices of chaos magic by examining the experiences of communication with non-human entities, such as spirits, gods, programmed sigil servitors, and even comic book superheroes.

Using bibliomancy, I took the texts and oracles seriously as interlocutors who had agency and could reveal relationships in unexpected ways. Tarot cards, of course, are typically randomized and laid out in sequences to reveal patterns relating to some question or concern. After working myself up to it for a few days, and adjusting my state of mind with plenty of hot pepper sauce, it was time to draw cards.

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(Fall 2024)

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Guest editor Raquel Romberg

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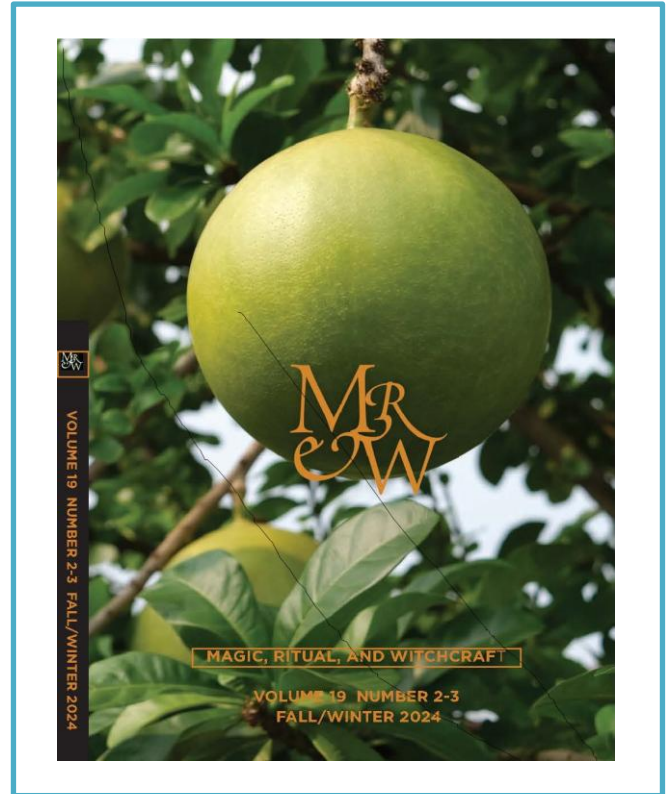
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Spirits' Embodiment, Speech, Discourse and  
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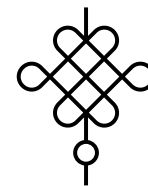
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Bengals  
Keith Cantú

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Spirit Communication  
Isabell Herrmans



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Raquel Romberg

Afterword: Spirit Presence in the World  
Paul Stoller



## Societas Magica Sessions

at the 60th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON MEDIEVAL STUDIES

May 8 - 10, 2025 | Kalamazoo, MI

### 17 Sangren Hall 3130 (hybrid) Thursday 10am

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Presider: Veronica Menaldi, Independent Scholar

Organizer: Mildred Budny, Research Group on Manuscript Evidence; Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, Research Group on Manuscript Evidence

*Incubation, Inspiration, Incantation, or Invention? The Imbas Forosnai Ritual in Sanas Cormaic as Dream Divinatory Operation* – Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, Research Group on Manuscript Evidence

“The very same ears were thrown away”: *Demons, Diagnostics, and Dream Interpretation in a Thirteenth-Century Miracle Story* – Leigh Ann Craig, Virginia Commonwealth University  
*Dream Anxieties, Magic, and Liturgical Healing in Armenian and Judeo-Arabic Cultures: The Examples of the Erazahan and the Sefer Pitron Halomot* – Meghri Doumanian, McGill University

### 118 Sangren Hall 4540 (in-person) Thursday 3:30pm

#### **Grimoires of the Greater West (1): Multicultural Solomonian Magic: The Case of the *Almandal***

Co-sponsors: Research Group on Manuscript Evidence

Presider: Matthew Melvin-Koushki, University of South Carolina – Columbia

Organizer: Matthew Melvin-Koushki, University of South Carolina – Columbia; Gal Sofer, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev; Vajra Regan, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto

*The Liber Almandal of Solomon and Its Christian Elaborations: New Evidence from the Manuscripts* – Vajra Regan, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto

*Al-mandal: Multicultural Magic and the Quest for an Urtext* – Gal Sofer, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Respondent: David Porreca, University of Waterloo

### 165 Sangren Hall 3130 (hybrid) Friday 10am

#### **Grimoires of the Greater West (2): From Arabic and Persian to Hebrew and Latin**

Co-sponsors: Research Group on Manuscript Evidence

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*The Hidden Secret of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī: Theurgy as Pre-Mongol Cosmocracy* – Michael Noble, Exeter University

*Interpreting Repetition and Variation in the Picatrix and the Lapidario* – Rosario Cornejo, University of Virginia

*Theosophical and Practical Knowledge in European Jewish Grimoires* – Agata Paluch, Freie University Berlin

*Occult Democracy in Persian Grimoires* - Matthew Melvin-Koushki, University of South Carolina – Columbia

**212 Sangren Hall 3130 (hybrid) Friday, May 9, 1:30pm**

**Magic Mirrors (1): Fairy Tales, Folklore, and the Esoteric**

Presider: Veronica Menaldi, Independent Scholar

Organizer: Samuel P. Gillis Hogan, University of King's College

*"A fitter spot for a tale of darkness": The Appropriation and Marketing of Early Modern Spirit Summoning, Folklore, and Local Landscape in Robert Cross Smith's Tales of the Horrible* – Daniel M. Harms, SUNY – Cortland

*The Extension of Amatory Magic from Fairy Land to Our Society* – Padmini Sukumaran, Kean University

*From Cosmology to World-Building: How the Fairy-Related Beings of Renaissance Occult Philosophy and Ritual Magic Became Inspirations for Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Fiction* – Samuel P. Gillis Hogan, University of King's College

**Student Center 3205 Friday, May 9, 12pm**

**Societas Magica Business Meeting**

**274 Sangren Hall 4540 Friday May 9, 3:30pm**

**Magic Mirrors (2): Post-Medieval Reflections of Medieval Magic**

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*A Mirror for Monsters: Frankenstein and the Medieval Generation of Artificial Life* – Alex Matthews, Divinity School, University of Chicago

*Into the Funhouse Mirror: Lurianic Kabbalah, Sabbatian Ritual, and the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Popular Imagination* – Marla Segol, University at Buffalo

*Reflections of the Past: Magic, Love, and Empowerment from al-Andalus to Latinx Brujeria* – Veronica Menaldi, Independent Scholar

**346 (Virtual) Saturday, May 10, 10am**

**Jinnitalia: Sex in the Spirit World**

Presider: Matthew Melvin-Koushki, University of South Carolina – Columbia

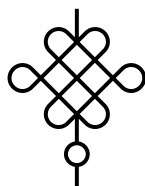
Organizer: Matthew Melvin-Koushki, University of South Carolina – Columbia

*Imaginal Sex in Medieval (Arabic) Magic* – Emily Jane Selove, University of Exeter

*Fatwas on Jinn Marriage* – Amina Inloes, The Islamic College

Respondent: Samuel P. Gillis Hogan, University of King's College

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I made four smaller sets out of the whole of my *Rider-Waite Tarot* deck and pulled a card from each of these sets. I placed one card in each of the four books (two for the single-volume of Carroll's works, and one each for each of Hine's). I then rested, closed my eyes, meditated, and mentally called on guidance for the eventual interpretation of the cards. I did not look at them yet, only drew the cards and tucked them into the books. Later that day, I checked the outcomes of the cards. Here is a report from one such card draw:

*According to the Rider-Waite deck's manual (that little white booklet that comes with the cards), Psychonaut's card, The Moon, may be understood to be about "hidden enemies, danger, calumny, darkness, terror, deception, error". This reading fits well with this passage from the manual:*

Leader-follower relationships also allow the leader to license followers to act without responsibility. The natural inhibitions to displays of violence, sexuality, and other emotionalities [sic] can easily be overridden if the leader tells followers to do these things. They will often give thanks for the permission to do what they have always had a desire to do.<sup>4</sup>

*The card shows lunar rays exciting dogs, and attracting a shellfish from beneath the water. Base powers are enlivened. Is the Moon (its fair face distressed in Rider's depiction, as if anguished by its inability to control its own influence) an authority? It does not appear to be so much making an argument or relaying some anecdote about its character as it does to be a victim of its own nature. And although there are dual sets (evoking information sets, distinctions, and classifications) in the symmetry of heavenly and earthly, air and water, and a path that divides the space between two towers, this card seems to best connect to the theme of posthumanism. Complex and powerful persons (the Moon) influencing the human (the towers) and non-human (dogs, lobsters, the Moon itself) affairs. In light of Carroll's text, it might act as a warning that leaders can abuse their positions of authority by letting the dogs loose. Sometimes it's fun to bay and rage, though that isn't usually a great way to build trust or team spirit. Not all persons – human or not – are sweet and careful at all times. Neither are all aspects of our own human subconsciousness looking for peace, quiet, or cozy evenings full of Netflix and chill.*

The close reading and coding, along with those bibliometric facts revealed by *Voyant's* term frequency analysis, brought together with the qualitative and card-guided framework in the divinatory process with Tarot, did reveal interesting relationships between magic and authority. The three methods were intertwined; the close reading and coding was foundational for the text analysis in *Voyant* and for interpreting the later results of the bibliomancy.

Indeed, a theme that developed quickly and with some force was that of information organization. Again and again, especially in Carroll's works, I found an assertion of a bootstrap ontology (which is to say, an *ad hoc* ordering of what exists in the imagination, produced within the texts) calling sets and subsets into existence in order to assert authority. To quote Alan Moore's praise of an imagined angel: "crushingly beautiful, and there because we say she is... she rises, lifts into the galaxy like the last notes of 'Telstar', all of Highbury's ghosts saved at her breast".<sup>5</sup> There *because we say she is*. That's magic. Carroll does the same, like a magician should: whether or not they are *real*, this set of mental states and subsets of attendant spirits *exist*. To play with and create patterns of information organization is to *author*: it is a way to write new realities into existence, perhaps sidestepping metaphysics by way of ontology.

Hine's works contain many instances of authority, but not in a way that I was expecting. Although both Hine and Carroll occasionally hiss at received tradition, dogmatism, and authority figures, I found in Hine a *use* of authority in service to magic that was quite humble and comfortingly banal. I will quote from my dissertation again:

Hine's concern with authority is also demonstrated both in the coding and in the term frequency results. The high frequency of the terms *group*, *ritual*, and *people* point toward Hine's concern, especially in *Prime Chaos*, for establishing trust, credibility, authority, leadership, character, and the management of conflict. Hine puts much attention on the details of facilitating group cohesion and good will, of socialization, and even on the particular tactical ins-and-outs of communication and renting spaces in which to do group magical work. He emphasizes the importance of even menial managerial tasks in establishing group cohesion and trust of any officers or leader figures.<sup>6</sup> Hine's texts do not exactly appeal to audience ethos, at least not consistently. But they do explicitly remind us that those qualities that may manifest as ethos emerge from dynamics related to authority and are of great importance when organizing people to do (even anarchistic and amoral) magical work.

Read this: speech acts also matter in magic. Speech acts, those functioning pieces of language and gesture that *do things*, as J.L. Austin (and later John Searle) detailed, may perhaps be understood as essentially magical, though that depends on how one defines magic.<sup>7</sup> My work makes no serious attempt to define magic, and I'm happy for now to leave that with the likes of Otto & Stausberg (2013), and their "patterns of magicity" approach.

Otto and Stausberg's classification system lists the kinds of things likely to be included in the "self evident category" of magic—many particular kinds of magics—and asks us to move away from the focus on the granular and towards sets of patterns of magicity.<sup>8</sup> So it may be less helpful, they suggest, to talk about consulting a particular tarot deck as magic, and more helpful to talk about an "M-div" designating a magicity of divination (in which the 41 *Rider-Waite* deck or Crowley's *Thoth* deck might conceptually live).

We all also benefit from Edward Schiappa's work on the rhetoric of definitions, which emphasizes the utility of contextual definitions for particular effects in argumentation. Schiappa's *Defining Reality* (2003) argues for the utility of treating definitions as tentative and conditional – that is, some term "A" means "XYZ" only in a particular framework of circumstances, not for all time in all places.<sup>9</sup> In any case, symbols in a given context or situation can *compel* action and create a new circumstance in our shared reality, like some forms of magic: I now pronounce you married; I hereby place you under arrest; pass the chutney.

Speech acts depend on authority that has to be negotiated beforehand, but if the author asks you to "read this" and you made it this far in the article after assenting to the command, *something* has worked out like it should. All that said, speech acts did not appear as often as I expected in the texts, though they made some appearances. Illocutionary speech acts figure heavily in other forms of magical texts (rather than these texts *about* magic), such as grimoires. As a kind of consensual compulsion, speech acts and any magic derived from their operations are perhaps less rhetorical than they are coercive.



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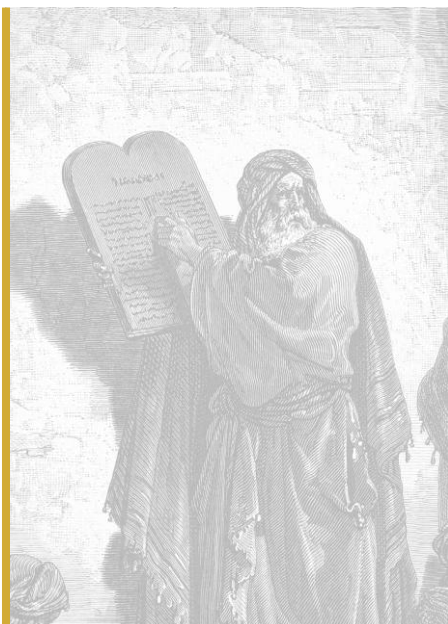
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All of this informs chaos magic. We find in it clear evidence of the use of information in the organizing utterance (speech act or no) of creative and destructive forces, working in a posthuman context of non-human actors persuading each other of their contextual and relative authorities. Future research could obviously examine more of Hine's and Carroll's texts, but also other authors and practitioner's texts, performances, workings, and artwork. The works of Ramsey Dukes (Lionel Snell) and Josephine McCarthy are of particular interest to me, and cover two generations of chaos magic and adjacent practices. McCarthy's *Quareia*, informed by the DIY and "do what works" spirit of chaos magic, comes back around into structure and ceremony by way of hard-won and skeptical experience.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, and to borrow from my abstract, I found that despite chaos magic's anti-authoritarian disposition, there is a complex acceptance of some aspects of authority and tradition within it. Its use of authority to persuade may also sometimes depend on information organization and appeals to non-human persons. Chaos magic, like magic generally, is a rhetorical activity. Much more remains to be done in mapping out their relationships.

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### Endnotes

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6. The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels, *The Angel Highbury: A Beat Séance* (RE, 2000, CD).
7. Phil Hine, *Prime Chaos: Adventures in Chaos Magic* (Tempe, Arizona: New Falcon Publications, 1999).
8. John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1962).
9. Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, *Defining Magic: A Reader* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014).
10. Edward Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).
11. Ramsey Dukes, *SSOTBME Revised: An Essay on Magic* (Surrey, UK: The Mouse That Spins, 2002); Josephine McCarthy, *Quareia: The Apprentice: Book One* (UK: Quareia Publishing, 2014).

# Societas Magica Newsletter

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