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But what does esotericism have to do with sex?

Marco Pasi

Quite a few things, in fact. Sex has always been an important component of Western esotericism, even if not necessarily the most conspicuous one.¹ But what do we mean by it? Sex is, of course, a very generic term, which can refer to different aspects in what is a broad area of human experience. First of all, it can relate to the concept of “eros” as a universal law of attraction (which usually implies also the opposite balancing force of repulsion). Starting especially with Plato, love understood in this general sense has often been perceived as a key factor not only in human relations, but also in the structure of the universe as a whole. In this sense, the universe is believed to function according to the same basic principles of attraction and repulsion that regulate human life, even if they are applied to a loftier level of reality. It is easy to find developments of this basic idea in important authors of the Renaissance, such as Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), for whom the erotic principles of attraction, the occult powers of magic, and the dynamic structure of the universe, are all part of a single continuum.² Similarly, the myth of the primordial androgyne, which in Western culture also has its roots partly in Plato and partly in the Biblical narration of Genesis, would be used to explain the origin of erotic attraction between men and women and the polarised nature of sexuality and even of the universe as a whole.³

Another important aspect is the use of sexual symbolism in esoteric literature and visual culture. This may or may not imply a sexualised vision of the universe as I have just described. To give just one example, alchemical literature is replete with images that have an erotic connotation, such as the union of female and male principles represented by an androgynous figure or the depiction of actual sexual intercourse. These images can be

1 Essential reading for the relationship of Western esotericism and sexuality is the collection of essays edited by Hanegraaff and Kripal, *Hidden Intercourse*. Also useful for its broad, general scope is Versluis, *Secret History*.

2 See Hanegraaff, “Under the Mantle of Love.”

3 On the concept of androgyny in Western esotericism see Faivre and Tristan, *L'Androgyne*; and Faivre, *L'Androgyne dans la littérature*. About the notion of the androgyne in Kabbalah, see Eliot R. Wolfson's essay in the present volume.

interpreted as referring to particular aspects of alchemical practice (for instance, the combination of chemical elements or metals).⁴

A third aspect of the presence of sex in Western esotericism concerns not so much sex as a subject, but rather as an object. This is relevant particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of forms of popular magic that claim to offer remedies to all problems related to the erotic sphere, such as unrequited loves, difficult pregnancies, or insufficient sexual potency.⁵

In the first two cases, sex is used as a framework of reference in order to explain or illustrate aspects of reality, but this does not necessarily imply the actual use of sexual intercourse as a meaningful esoteric practice. In the third case, on the other hand, the presence of sex in a magical context is certainly more embodied and physical than in the first two, but this presence usually concerns more the intended goal of the magical practice, rather than its means, and this goal is quite specifically related to bodily functions rather than spiritual progress. In order to see the development of an explicit, self-conscious, formalised use of sexual acts in an esoteric context in the West, we have to wait until the mid-nineteenth century. So we get to the fourth aspect of the relationship between Western esotericism and sex, usually referred to as “sexual magic.” It is on this one that I am going to focus especially here.⁶ In fact, this development has been one of the most remarkable innovations of modern Western esotericism, and has a number of implications that it is crucial to discuss when addressing the general question asked in the title of this essay.

First of all, we may ask ourselves why sex should get mixed with esoteric or magical practices in the first place. One easy answer might be that sex relates to a deep aspect of human existence, based on the universal impulse of reproduction, and that it would have been strange if esotericism, with its holistic approach to reality, would not include it sooner or later as a part of its experiential dimension. But there are probably also other aspects that should be taken into account. Sexual orgasm appears to be one of the easiest, most immediate ways of obtaining an intense altered state of consciousness, one that is potentially available to anyone without the use of exotic drugs or complicated bodily techniques. As is the case with other forms of alteration of consciousness, depending also on the social and

4 See Principe, “Revealing Analogies.”

5 For a useful overview of what is notoriously a very broad subject, see Alexandrian, *La magie sexuelle*, chs. 1 and 7.

6 The only comprehensive scholarly study of sexual magic is Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, to which we could add the already mentioned, but less scholarly, Alexandrian, *La magie sexuelle*. Important essays on the subject can also be found in Hanegraaff and Kripal, *Hidden Intercourse*.

cultural context, this peak experience can be perceived to have religious, mystical, or magical connotations.⁷

If this is so, then one might ask why the use of sexual intercourse for magical or esoteric purposes was not much more common before the nineteenth century. The answer is quite obvious, and has to do with the strict policing of sexual behaviour in a traditional, mainstream Christian context. Sex has usually been understood here to be exclusively functional to reproduction, and frowned upon when practised outside the tight boundaries of this function. Therefore, it would have been difficult to even conceive of sexual practices for religious or magical purposes in a Christian context. When considering the fact that a new interest in sex emerged in esoteric movements during the second half of the nineteenth century, one should take various factors into account.

On the one hand, it is interesting to note that this new development started out in the Victorian period, during which all expressions of sexuality were subjected to heavy censorship and social control; not so much by religious institutions, as may have been the case in earlier historical periods, but by a generalised feeling of public decency that was widespread also in secular institutions. We know that Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, has famously criticised a simplistic, stereotypical image of sexual repression, which he called the “repressive hypothesis.”⁸ But it remains true that for many people who had a direct experience of it, the subjective feeling of living in a period that had a negative obsession about sexuality was very real, and could become even more vivid when some of these persons lived long enough to see the end of it and then, with hindsight, compared it to the more relaxed atmosphere of the post-WWI period. Many examples could be given. Here, for instance, is what the famous Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) remembered, in his *World of Yesterday* (1942), about the attitude towards sexuality that was predominant in his youth:

Our century ... looked upon sexuality as an anarchical and therefore disturbing element, which had no place in its ethics and which was not allowed to see the light of day, because every form of extra-marital love was in opposition to middle-class “decency.” ... School and church, salon and courts, newspapers and books, modes and manners, in principle avoided every mention of the problem, and even science, whose real

7 For a cultural history of orgasm in the West, see Muchembled, *L'Orgasme et l'Occident*.

8 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, pt. 1 and 2.

task would have been to approach all problems impartially, shamefully subscribed to the *naturalia sunt turpia*.⁹

It is certainly noteworthy that the emergence of sexual magic took place in a historical context where sexuality was so severely repressed and censored by mainstream culture, both in its religious and secular spheres. We might therefore see it as a form of antinomianism, as if a radicalisation of an anti-sex attitude from the top down would have produced, or at least stimulated, a reaction of sexual curiosity and experimentation from the bottom up, similar for instance to pornography or libertinism. But this probably is only one aspect of the story. Another aspect is the deep cultural change that begins to take place during the second half of the nineteenth century, and which becomes particularly evident in the early years of the twentieth century. As a result of processes of social transformation often subsumed under the generic label of secularisation, it is the whole relationship that people have with their body that begins to change.¹⁰ The body becomes the focus of renewed, positive attention, with the underlying idea that a good life implies its sustained cultivation and care. It is in fact in this period that we see the emergence of sport as a regular practice, not just as a pastime, but also as a way to keep one's body healthy and fit. Fashion also changes, making it easier to expose the body to fresh air and sunlight, and an interest in naturism, vegetarianism, and physical activity in natural environments (all practices that in the German-speaking countries were part of the so-called *Lebensreform* movement) begins to make itself visible. Persons who shared these new concerns about bodily health often had an interest in alternative spirituality and esoteric ideas as well, as was the case in the early years of the twentieth century in the famous community of Monte Verità, close to Ascona, Switzerland, and in countless others in Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

But what is sexual magic? Most forms of it are based on the idea that certain bodily fluids (understood as being not purely physical, but also with "subtle" or "spiritual" qualities) possess a particular power, and that this power can be manipulated and made effective through the use of sex as a catalyst. This is supposed to happen during sexual intercourse, in

9 Zweig, *World of Yesterday*, 62. Zweig's poignant recollections can be compared to the virulent, uncompromising indictment of Victorian morality put forward by the occultist Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) in the preface to his anti-Christian poetic drama *The World's Tragedy*.

10 For a broad, comprehensive perspective on the changing attitudes towards the body in that period, see Corbin, Courtine and Vigarello, *Histoire du corps*, esp. vol. 2, pt. 2 and 3; and vol. 3, pt. 2.

combination with particular bodily and/or mental techniques. According to certain doctrines of sexual magic, the bodily fluids that result from intercourse, or from other forms of sexual activity (e.g., masturbation), can be transmuted into “medicines” or “elixirs” that possess the power to heal, rejuvenate, or make people immortal and godlike.

Various scholars have suggested that there might be cases of sexual magic in Europe before the nineteenth century, for instance with important figures for the history of Western esotericism such as Giordano Bruno, Cagliostro (ps. of Giuseppe Balsamo, 1743-1795), or William Blake (1757-1827).¹¹ However, the evidence for a full-blown theoretical and practical system of sexual magic before the mid-nineteenth century is rather thin. The first author who clearly developed such a system was the American spiritualist and early occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875).

It would be impossible here to summarise the history of sexual magic in all its stages and developments, not only due to lack of space, but also because large portions of this story have not been properly investigated by scholars yet. At this moment, a comprehensive historical overview of the magical use of sex in modern Western esotericism is still lacking.¹² What I would like to do here instead is reflect on a number of aspects that I consider significant, particularly from a cultural and social point of view.

To begin with, from the broader perspective of the history of religions, sex has often been used to characterise and stigmatise groups of people that, for one reason or another, were considered to be threatening or dangerous. Sexual practices perceived as abnormal or illicit (such as orgiastic rites, sodomy, bestiality, or the supposed intercourse with demons and other non-human beings) were attributed to these communities and were thought to be a major component of their anti-social behaviour. When one has a look at the groups that were historically targeted with such accusations in Europe, one realises that this has been a recurring phenomenon in different cultural and geographical contexts.¹³ We find it in fact in relation to various religious groups, such as the Dionysiacs, some Gnostic sects, the Bogomils, the Cathars, the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, and the

11 Ioan P. Couliano draws a suggestive comparison of Bruno's theories on magic with Tantra in his *Eros and Magic*, 99-101. On Cagliostro and the possible sexual aspects of his tradition of Egyptian Freemasonry, see Introvigne, “Arcana Arcanorum.” On Blake, see Schuchard, *Why Mrs. Blake Cried*.

12 The already mentioned Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, is what comes closest to such an overview, but focuses mostly on the Anglo-American side of it, going less deep into sources from other linguistic areas (e.g., German, French, Italian).

13 For a general overview see Culianu and Hakl, “Sexuality.”

Khlysty.¹⁴ To these movements, which had real historical existence, we could also add movements that were largely the product of the imagination of the people who intended to persecute them, such as the witches during the so called “witch-craze” of the early modern period. In spite of all the significant differences between these groups, one pattern stands out, and it is precisely the accusation by their adversaries that they engage, among other things, in illicit sexual practices. From a historical point of view, in most cases it is unclear to what extent the sexual practices described in these accusations were real, rather than a mere fantastic projection by their adversaries. Nonetheless, whatever the actual reality of said practices, they produced a sulphurous reputation that stuck to these movements and became part of their image even long after they had ceased to exist. This is the reason why, when sexual magic made its appearance, some of its protagonists felt the need to reactivate what they thought was the continuing legacy of some of these groups. It is no wonder, therefore, to see practices of sexual magic making their appearance in occultist groups that would call themselves “Gnostic,” “Templar,” or “Rosicrucian.” This phenomenon would fit into a narrative that saw these groups as parts of a long countercultural tradition of the West, where true hidden wisdom related to sexuality would have been concealed.

A second point is that sexual magic is often seen as a European white male affair that is supposed to have emerged in the context of early twentieth-century occultism. Some of the early protagonists of this story, such as the German Theodor Reuss (1855-1923), the English Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), and the Italian Giuliano Kremmerz (pseud. of Ciro Formisano, 1861-1930) were in fact all European male occultists. However, a closer look yields a much more complex picture, which places the beginnings of sexual magic in North America further back in the 1860s and 1870s, through the pioneering work of a person of colour, the aforementioned P.B. Randolph. It also shows the crucial role of spiritualism and of women in these very early stages, with figures such as the American spiritualist and feminist agitator Victoria Claflin

14 Most of these movements were accused of improper or eccentric sexual behaviour by their adversaries. In the case of the Rosicrucians, the association was made particularly in one famous text, *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670) by Henri de Montfaucon de Villars (1638-1673). The text had a large fortune among later esotericists and influenced the occultist milieu in which sexual magic emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. There is enough evidence to believe that the author actually intended to write a parody of the occult sciences and their practitioners, rather than unveil their secrets, as many later esotericists believed. For a modern edition of the text, with a lengthy introduction by Didier Kahn that contextualises it historically, see Montfaucon de Villars, *Le Comte de Gabalis*.

Woodhull (1838-1927), the Anglo-Spanish spiritualist and early theosophist Maria Mariátegui Sinclair, also known as Lady Caithness (1830-1895), and the American esotericist and sexual activist Ida Craddock (1857-1902).¹⁵

From what we know, Woodhull and Caithness were not practising forms of sexual magic themselves, but in their works one can find the theoretical premises for such practices: namely, a positive appreciation of the body – especially the female body – as a tool for spiritual and magical experiences, and of sexual intercourse as a perfectly natural and enjoyable aspect of human life, irrespective of marriage and reproduction. This fact makes us perceive an interesting nuance into the almost universal anti-materialist attitude of spiritualists and occultists alike, because their openness towards the use of sex for spiritual or magical purposes is also based on a positive vision of the material world as a whole. In fact, when describing the anti-materialism of occultists and spiritualists one may be tempted to forget that it was not so much the material world as such that they were rejecting, but rather the idea of an unbridgeable divide between that world and the spiritual one, or the idea that all reality could be reduced to matter. A good example of this can be found in how two other occultists, Anna B. Kingsford (1846-1888) and Edward Maitland (1824-1897), compared the Hermetic tradition (as they understood it) to Christianity. For them, the Hermetic tradition displayed a much healthier attitude towards the human body and more generally towards nature as a whole:

The Hermetic system is distinguished from other schools of mysticism by its freedom from their gloomy and churlish manner of regarding nature, and their contempt and loathing for the body and its functions as inherently impure and vile; and so far from repudiating the relations of the sexes, it exalts them as symbolising the loftiest divine mysteries, and enjoins their exercise as a duty, the fulfilment of which, in some at least of his incarnations, is essential to the full perfectionment and initiation of the individual.¹⁶

A question that could be asked now is: why is it that the earliest traces of sexual magic are to be found in the United States and that American authors

¹⁵ There are several biographies of Woodhull, but none of them discusses her connection to the early development of sexual magic, which will be the focus of a forthcoming study of mine. On Lady Caithness, see Pasi, “Exégèse et sexualité.” On Craddock, see Schmidt, *Heaven's Bride*; and Chappell, *Sexual Outlaw*.

¹⁶ Maitland, “Hermetic System,” xvii. It is interesting to note that Kingsford and Maitland were also close friends and collaborators of Lady Caithness.

played such an important role at its beginning? The answer seems easy enough, and has to do with the fact that social and religious experimentation was much easier in the United States than in Europe. Due to the vastness of the territory – large portions of which were not controlled by a pervasive central administration – and the religious diversity which had always characterised the country since the time of the earliest European settlers, it was certainly possible to engage in alternative practices and ideas in the United States with relatively less fear of persecution or stigmatisation. For the same reason, it is in the United States that one can observe, in the same period or slightly earlier, the emergence of new religious movements engaging in alternative or non-mainstream sexual practices, such as the Mormons, the Shakers, or the Oneida community.¹⁷

A further point is what I would define as the “heterogenesis of ends” of modern Western esotericism. By this I mean that, in analysing modern Western esotericism, one soon realises that its cultural and social relevance may go beyond the explicit intentions of the esotericists themselves. It is in fact possible to see in this context the formation of progressive discourses and practices that anticipate later developments in mainstream culture, independently of whether the esotericists who proposed them had a conscious progressive agenda. This notion of an esoteric heterogenesis of ends relates closely to the problem of the “modernity of occultism,” which I have discussed elsewhere.¹⁸ I have suggested some explanations as to why such progressive elements could find a convenient breeding ground in modern Western esotericism. Sexuality is one of the aspects where this phenomenon manifests itself most clearly. In the literature related to sexual magic in the second half of the nineteenth century we find, for instance, discussions about reproduction, birth-control, free love, and female orgasm for which there was no significant room – at least in such progressive terms – in other social contexts at the time. Authors such as Randolph, Woodhull, Caithness and Craddock include these discussions in their publications, and in so doing they open up new perspectives about human sexuality. The importance attributed to female orgasm, together with practical instructions for men as to how they can help their partners to reach it, is a particularly interesting example, as it candidly tackles a subject that had not received so much attention yet even in the emerging sexological literature of the time.¹⁹

17 See Forster, *Religion and Sexuality*.

18 See Pasi, “The Modernity of Occultism.”

19 On the early history of sexology, or *scientia sexualis*, see Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom*; and Sigusch, *Geschichte der Sexualwissenschaft*.

The rationale for these discourses was spiritual, esoteric and magical in its original context – and that is why these authors have been mostly neglected by historians of sexuality – but its social and cultural significance becomes evident today to us, who look at this material with other eyes than those of the esotericists themselves. It is because of the difference of perspectives between the historians that we are today and the esotericists who lived then that we can interpret the progressive potential of their literature as a case of heterogenesis of ends.

These are some of the aspects that make the presence of sex in Western esotericism so important and worthy of further investigation. Far more could be added, such as the influence of Eastern traditions or the problem of gender roles in esoteric sexuality, but I shall have to save them for a future discussion.