

Scholarly Enchantment

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A ABOUT one hundred years ago, a humanities scholar might have opened a recently established periodical to read the following invitation:

THE QUEST welcomes contributions that exemplify the investigation and comparative study of religion, philosophy and science as complementary to one another in aiding the search for that reality which alone can give complete satisfaction. It desires to promote enquiry into the nature of religious and other supranormal experiences, and the means of testing their value, to strengthen that love of wisdom which stimulates all efforts to formulate a practical philosophy of life, and to emphasise the need of a vital science to crown and complete the discoveries of physical research. It also invites contributions that treat of the purpose of art and the expression of the ideal in forms of beauty; and in literature interests itself in works of inspiration and of the creative imagination. THE QUEST will endeavour, as far as possible, to avoid technicalities, so as to meet the requirements of the more general public seriously interested in such matters. Space will be given to suitable correspondence, queries, notes and discussions.¹

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¹ The Quest Society's mission statement can be found on the inside front cover of issues of *The Quest*. I have consulted *The Quest*, 2, no. 1 (1910–11). My thanks to Sean

This invitation was proffered by *The Quest*, a quarterly published by the London-based Quest Society from 1909 to 1931, which featured essays, reviews, fiction, and poetry by scholars from Europe, Asia, and North America and by writers including Mona Caird, Ezra Pound, Arthur Symons, Rabindranath Tagore, and W. B. Yeats. While the Quest Society disavowed any specific religious affiliation, its president was a former Theosophist, and its mission was shaped by Theosophy and late-Victorian occultism. At the same time, aspects of its mission statement sounds almost like scholarship as we know it: you, fellow humanities scholar, might be a participant in the “comparative study of religion, philosophy . . . [or] science.” But you are unlikely to be pursuing all three. And you are almost certainly not investigating the “supranormal” or looking for a “vital science.” In this essay, I recount an episode of literary history in which we—or our historical equivalents—“quested” in just this way: when many prominent scholars, as well as aspiring scholars from “the more general public,” pursued what I call scholarly enchantment. To illuminate the historical practice and experience of scholarly enchantment, I focus on a work by one of *The Quest*’s seekers that went on to play a central role in literary history: Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), a study in comparative religion and medieval literature that interprets the medieval romances of the holy grail as coded records of an ancient fertility ritual of a goddess-worshiping religion. Works such as Weston’s used scholarly methods to reveal a mysteriously meaningful design behind art and culture. In this project, art always has a “purpose.” While this revelation of purpose could appear reductive, it was more often presented as a source of wonder or deep meaning—a revelation of “that reality which alone can give complete satisfaction.” Key to this feeling of “satisfaction” was a connection to the idea of religious truth, in the sense of insights about the historical, anthropological, and sociological “study of religion” as well as spiritual

Barry, Kate Flint, Andrew Goldstone, Colin Jager, Sebastian Lecourt, Winter Jade Werner, Carolyn Williams, the “Totality” seminar at the Center for Cultural Analysis (Rutgers), Gauri Viswanathan’s ACLA seminar on “The Mobility of Theosophical Thought,” and *NCL*’s editors and anonymous readers for their generous engagement with various versions of this essay.

“wisdom.” In recovering this episode of our disciplinary history, I do not seek to revive such standards and practices. Rather, I aim here to illuminate aspects of scholarship as it was pursued at the simultaneous emergence of the modern research university and the flourishing of major new religious movements.

Scholarly enchantment is created when one finds in a conventionally insignificant phenomenon some meaning that transforms the phenomenon into a significant or valuable one. In the words of *The Quest*, something apparently insignificant is revealed to have a “purpose,” to express an “ideal,” to be the outcome of a particular source of “inspiration.” The transformation of the apparent trifle into a phenomenon of significance suggests a further transformation of our understanding of the order of reality in which we find the phenomenon. For seekers of *The Quest*, such enchantment is a kind of alchemy in which a base material (something apparently insignificant) is transformed into gold (something meaningful), thereby suggesting the existence of magical forces (a previously hidden source of meaning).² The emotions of surprise, wonder, and pleasure color this experience. While this account can apply to a variety of so-called modern enchantments, in this essay I am concerned with a particular kind of enchantment that claims more than metaphorical kinship with alchemy—that claims, rather, participation in magic connected to religion and to spirituality.

“Modern enchantment” is generally taken as a paradox in need of explanation, since Western academic thinking since the nineteenth century has largely categorized enchantment as a characteristic of premodernity, conflating modernization, secularization, and disenchantment. The most familiar classifications of modern enchantments assume a secularized reality in which enchantment can be either an error that emerges among the unenlightened or a playful trick that never claims to be more than an illusion.³ Other conceptions of modern enchantment

² This definition is indebted to the sociologist Mark A. Schneider’s discussion of the “logic of enchantment,” which involves the suggestion of “principles at work that are not just beyond our ken but quite possibly of another order” (Schneider, *Culture and Enchantment* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993], p. 7).

³ These classifications include, in the first place, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s mass-cultural enchantments that merely replace discredited religious

claim to describe and even foster the reenchantment of modernity. These range from enchanted materialism, which describes conventionally inanimate objects acting on people to provoke positive responses marked by feelings of wonder and plenitude, to more modest projects that celebrate aesthetic or scientific wonder as means to such reenchantment.⁴

Of most immediate concern to this essay are modern enchantments that directly challenge the opposition of modernity and enchantment—specifically, occultism. Fin-de-siècle occultists claimed to be party to magic, miracles, and various encounters with otherworlds. But many of them regarded these encounters not as signs of the persistence of premodernity, or of their own resistance to modernity, but as essential to projects that claimed to be modernizing religion and science.⁵ Studies of “occulture” have informed and built upon recent challenges to the familiar secularization thesis. These challenges have shown how the narrative in which modernization is synonymous with secularization is, first, empirically untrue and, second, itself a historical creation that we must study in order to understand better the ideological charge of secularism and the formation of modern knowledge practices.⁶ More specifically,

faith; and, in the second place, Michael Saler’s ironic “delights without delusion” and Simon During’s “secular magic,” which are distinct from the putatively “‘real . . . magic”” claimed by witches or shamans. See Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), p. 13; and Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), p. 1. See also Michael Saler, “‘Clap If You Believe in Sherlock Holmes’: Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity, c. 1890-c. 1940,” *The Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), 599–622.

⁴ For enchanted materialism, see especially Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001); and Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014). For aesthetic reenchantment, see Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008). For scientific reenchantment, see George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).

⁵ See especially Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004); and Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001).

⁶ For these arguments, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); Colin Jager, *The Book*

the modernization/secularization/disenchantment narrative has been shown to be largely a creation of nineteenth-century writers and the twentieth-century scholars who have studied them.⁷ One influential product of this narrative has been the assumption that modern scholarship is itself inherently a secularizing or disenchanting discourse. This assumption has come under sustained pressure by recent work that shows how, contrary to most of our deeply held beliefs about our intellectual genealogies, the modern humanities have never been disenchanted, but rather they, and the secularization thesis they shaped, have had their “origins in the shared terrain between spiritualists, sorcerers, and scholars.”⁸

While path-breaking work by Alex Owen and Joy Dixon on fin-de-siècle occultism highlights the central role of women and gendered concepts of religion, most studies that focus on occultism and scholarship ignore two categories of feminized scholars crucial to this juncture: women and amateurs. Notably, even with a section entitled “The Waste Land,” a recent comprehensive history of “esotericism and the academy” never mentions the occult work of scholarship that provided that phrase to T. S. Eliot: Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*.⁹ The most notorious occult text in Anglophone academia, Weston’s work emerged in large part out of her activities with the Quest Society. In this essay, I take Weston’s monograph as an exemplary case of how, in a period of flourishing new religious movements, spiritual, literary, and academic practices converged to

of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006); and Gauri Viswanathan, “Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy,” *PMLA*, 123 (2008), 466–76.

⁷ See William McKelvy, W. Clark Gilpin, Colin Jager, Ruth Clayton Windscheffel, and Joshua King, “Forum: On the Sacralization of Literature in the Nineteenth Century,” *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 39 (2012), 17–71; Michael W. Kaufmann, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession,” *New Literary History*, 38 (2007), 607–27; and Charles LaPorte, “Victorian Literature, Religion, and Secularization,” *Literature Compass*, 10 (2013), 277–87.

⁸ Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 18.

⁹ See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012).

yield self-consciously modern practices that have shaped our literary and humanistic canon, the methods brought to studying it, and even the forms in which humanistic scholarship has been written.

By bringing Weston's book into the conversation, I seek here to illuminate a particularly influential, but often overlooked or misinterpreted, case of the entanglement of academic scholarship and occultism. Through a reception history and formal analysis of *From Ritual to Romance*, I argue that a major site of such entanglement was the shared methods and theories that made both emerging humanities fields and occultism especially appealing to women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The later reception of Weston's monograph shows how this appeal was eventually exploited to consolidate the masculine authority of disenchanting scholarly disciplines in the twentieth century. In connection with this historical account of enchanted scholarship, I offer an analysis of its formal qualities: through a close reading of the monograph, I show how certain of its forms and methods not only engaged with emerging concepts of enchantment, but themselves effected scholarly enchantment. Ultimately, though a product of the early twentieth century, *From Ritual to Romance* helps us recognize Victorian-era narratives about religion beyond secularization. This essay thus reclaims Weston for nineteenth-century studies, after nearly a century in which her significance in literary studies has been mostly limited to her influence on Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). While a familiar modernist project, exemplified by Eliot's "mythic method," has been understood to use scholarship on religion to project order onto the chaotic material of art and culture, the late-nineteenth-century project in which I situate Weston used scholarly methods to reveal a spiritual order behind art and culture. This project was a part of a Victorian perspective that regarded modernization not as concomitant with a decline of religion in the world, but as a process of spiritual intensification leading to a "New Age" linked to women's spiritual, and sometimes political, prominence.¹⁰ This Victorian

¹⁰ On the Victorian New Age, see Diane Sasson, *Yearning for the New Age: Laura Holloway-Langford and Late Victorian Spirituality* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press,

New Age was populated into the twentieth century by seekers such as Weston participating in *The Quest*.



The intertwined story of *From Ritual to Romance* and *The Waste Land* exemplifies the separation of enchantment from academic scholarship. In 1922, T. S. Eliot endorsed Weston's study in his notes to the poem, both as a key to the poem's symbolism and for "the great interest of the book

2012); and Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2001). Paul Heelas dates relevant use of the term "New Age" to A. R. Orage's periodical, the *New Age*, and an earlier Swedenborgian book, *The New Age and Its Message* (1864) by the American Warren Felt Evans (see Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* [Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996], p. 17). On connections between the Victorian and later New Ages, see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999). In addition to Hutton, several historians and sociologists have recounted a continuous tradition of New Age or alternative spiritual practices from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries, citing certain fin-de-siècle writings and social groups as important sources for early and later New Age movements. Hutton, Heelas, Sumathi Ramaswamy, and Chas Clifton and Graham Harvey discuss specific Victorian texts as significant sources for late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century alternative spiritual practices. Hanegraaff cites twentieth-century sources that themselves cite Victorian texts, but leaves the Victorian texts largely unmentioned. By contrast, Victorianist literary scholars who discuss alternative spiritualities, such as Dennis Denisoff and J. Jeffrey Franklin, connect the Victorian era and later New Age only by loose affiliation or speculation. Ann Braude and Anne Stiles have indicated the potential for such connected literary histories, but beyond Srinivas Aravamudan's 2006 *Guru English*, which traces a genealogy from late-Victorian religious leaders to New Age gurus like Deepak Chopra, such work has yet to appear. See *The Paganism Reader*, ed. Chas S. Clifton and Graham Harvey (New York: Routledge, 2004); Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2004); Dennis Denisoff, "The Posthuman Spirit of the Neo-Pagan Movement," in *Oxford Twenty-First-Century Approaches to Literature: Late Victorian into Modern, 1880–1920*, ed. Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016); Dennis Denisoff, "Women's Nature and the Neo-Pagan Movement," in *History of British Women's Writing, 1880–1920: Volume Seven*, ed. Holly A. Laird (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); J. Jeffrey Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008); Anne Stiles, review of *Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God* by Gail Turley Houston, *Studies in the Novel*, 46 (2014), 130–31; and Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006). I thank J. Winter Werner for this last citation.

itself.”¹¹ Three decades later, he distanced himself: “It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.”¹² Eliot’s shift is consistent with the decline of Weston’s once-sound scholarly reputation.¹³ If Weston is recognized within academia today, it is first as a footnote to Eliot, and second as a “crackpot” scholar with “goofy” theories tainted by occult affiliations.¹⁴ But in her heyday she was the foremost British authority on Arthurian literature, writing all twelve of the entries on this topic for the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*.¹⁵ Since her death in 1928,

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, “Notes on the Waste Land” (1922), in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2015), p. 72.

¹² T. S. Eliot, “The Frontiers of Criticism,” *The Sewanee Review*, 64 (1956), 534. Eliot claimed that he only added the notes in the first place to bulk up the poem for its book publication—an explanation repeated by scholars of the poem including Lawrence Rainey, despite work that suggests Eliot had planned the notes before beginning negotiations with publisher Horace Liveright and had written them before the poem appeared in *The Dial*. As Jo Ellen Green Kaiser writes, “Eliot’s contention that the notes were added only because his poem ‘was inconveniently short’ has been disproved” (Green Kaiser, “Disciplining *The Waste Land*, or How to Lead Critics into Temptation,” *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 44 [1998], 83).

¹³ For example, Eliot’s disavowal mirrors that of Roger Sherman Loomis, a prominent American medievalist, who cited Weston approvingly in 1927 only to publish a “retraction” in 1963 (See Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1927], p. 186; and Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963], p. ix).

¹⁴ See Norris J. Lacy, “Jessie Laidley Weston (1850–1928),” in *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst (Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001), p. 339; and Leon Surette, “*The Waste Land* and Jessie Weston: A Reassessment,” *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 34 (1998), 241.

¹⁵ Weston first established her career in the 1890s as a textual scholar, translating medieval romances for popular audiences and publishing commentaries on the manuscripts of medieval romances, and, consistent with the conventions of Victorian women’s scholarship, she also published poetry and fiction. Her translations were well received, and her *Gawain and the Green Knight* is still in print (New York: Dover, 2003). While Weston never attended university, she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Wales in 1923. The most comprehensive biography of Weston remains Janet Grayson’s biographical essay, “In Quest of Jessie Weston,” *Arthurian Literature*, 11 (1992), 1–80. Helen Brookman supplements Grayson’s work in her essay on Weston as a pioneering medievalist: Brookman, “From Romance to Ritual: Jessie L. Weston’s *Gawain*,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXI: Corporate Medievalism*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Rochester, N.Y.: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 119–44. Other brief biographies include Lacy, “Jessie Laidley Weston”; and Angela Jane Weisl, “By Her Works Shall Ye Know Her: The Quest for Jessie L. Weston (1850–1928),” in *Women Medievalists and the*

professional literary criticism has largely either ignored Weston or, when invoking her work in relation to Eliot, protected the poet from association with the discredited scholar.¹⁶ The one notable exception is the myth-ritual school of literary criticism that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, which drew on the theories of Weston, J. G. Frazer (author of *The Golden Bough* [1890]), and others to look for mythic patterns in modern literature, carrying on the Victorian project I illuminate here.¹⁷ Bolstering its position outside the bounds of scholarship, Weston's work has persisted as a countercultural touchstone, from its cameo in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to its role as a canonical text of Neopagan religious traditions.¹⁸ In this account, Weston's scholarship became discredited thanks to its association with icons of enchantment—"Tarot cards and

Academy, ed. Jane Chance (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2005), pp. 37–54. Weston is given her most prominent recent treatment by historian Matthew Sterenberg in *Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain: Meaning for Modernity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁶ The paradigmatic, and earliest, example is I. A. Richards, who in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) carefully advises that *From Ritual to Romance*'s "'astral' trimmings" have "nothing to do" with *The Waste Land*, even if the book must still be read with the poem (I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* [New York: Routledge, 2001], p. 275).

¹⁷ As Marc Manganaro noted in 1990, while the myth-ritual approach was mostly discredited in anthropology by the end of the 1920s, it "persisted in literary criticism" for another fifty years, "culminat[ing]" in the work of Northrop Frye (Manganaro, "Textual Play, Power, and Cultural Critique: An Orientation to Modernist Anthropology," in *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*, ed. Manganaro [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990], pp. 12–13, 14). The myth-ritual critic Stanley Edgar Hyman (Bennington College) wrote the first biographical essay on Weston in 1965, locating Weston in the tradition of criticism of which he was himself a later practitioner (see Hyman, "Jessie Weston and the Forest of Broceliande," *Centennial Review*, 9 [1965], 509–21). Princeton University Press's 1993 edition of *From Ritual to Romance* features a foreword by scholar of myth Robert A. Segal that draws heavily on Hyman's essay. The 1990s appear to have witnessed the end of myth-ritual scholarship as anything close to a mainstream academic practice, though for most critics it was out of bounds by the end of the 1970s. For the most recent consideration of this school of literary criticism, see Sterenberg, *Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain*.

¹⁸ A copy of the bright yellow 1958 Doubleday paperback edition of *From Ritual to Romance* appears on top of a copy of *The Golden Bough* on Colonel Kurtz's nightstand in *Apocalypse Now*. For Weston's influence on cinema, see Martin B. Shichtman, "Hollywood's New Weston: The Grail Myth in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and John Boorman's *Excalibur*," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, 4, no. 1 (1984), 35–48; rpt. in *The Grail: A Casebook*, ed. Dhira B. Mahoney (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), pp. 561–74. I will discuss *From Ritual to Romance*'s role in Neopagan religious movements below.

the Holy Grail." Its shift in status from scholarly to unscholarly reflects more broadly a now-familiar sense that to be scholarly is to be disenchanting—to reveal the ordinary reality behind illusions. If a text instead is enchanting—if it claims instead to reveal a transcendently extraordinary reality—it therefore cannot be scholarly.

More specifically, most considerations of Weston since the 1970s have cited her purported occult affiliations as a primary factor in discrediting her work. But the emergence of occult affiliation as a disqualifier of scholarly legitimacy is a historical development that requires our investigation. It is one of my aims here to explore how and why occultism shifted from a rival discourse and sometimes complement to scholarly endeavor to its anathema. Weston's scholarly reputation suffered its earliest blows without reference to occultism. Her fall from a pre-eminent place as Britain's leading Arthurian scholar can be explained in part by better-known factors in intellectual history, especially in the first years after her death in 1928. Thanks to the shift from Victorian armchair anthropology to fieldwork-based ethnography, by the 1930s Weston's reliance on the increasingly outmoded *Golden Bough* began to delegitimize her work. At the same time, as literary scholarship became increasingly professionalized, Weston's lack of university training and affiliation increasingly marked her as an amateur whose work was to be regarded with suspicion. Gender played a decisive role in this development: while Frazer was discredited as an empirical scholar, he was deemed to have been wrong grandly and in good faith, and his reputation as a literary writer flourished.¹⁹ By contrast, Weston and other women who built their

¹⁹ Frazer's reputation first shifted from exciting innovator to respectable if increasingly outmoded founding figure of anthropology in the late 1910s. In the next decade, his former protégé, Bronislaw Malinowski, moved away from Frazer's influence to inaugurate a new phase in academic anthropology in Britain, based on firsthand fieldwork (Franz Boas did similar work in the United States). By the 1930s, Frazer's shift to discredited forefather was under way, though he would not be wholly dismissed until after his death in 1941. While anthropology has since then "viewed [Frazer] as an empiricist who failed," retrospective appreciations of Frazer as a literary writer began to appear in the same period. See Robert Fraser, "The Face beneath the Text: Sir James Frazer in His Time," in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination: Essays in Affinity and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 4.

work on the edifice of Frazer's theories, even those with university affiliations such as fellow theorists of religion Jane Harrison and Margaret Murray, were deemed not only mistaken but foolish, crazy, and manipulative.²⁰

Significantly, around the time Eliot distanced himself from Weston's work, Weston's gendered amateur status became more emphatically linked to her occult affiliations. Only then did these associations function as grounds for discrediting her scholarly reputation. It is telling that later treatments of Weston's work that aim at establishing her place in intellectual

²⁰ Weston, Harrison (1850–1928), and Margaret Murray (1863–1963), had strikingly similar careers. Between 1903 and 1933, each published histories of art and religion with Cambridge or Oxford University Presses. Their studies adopted the methods (and sometimes the data) of *The Golden Bough*, but their histories centered not on the figure of the dying god, but on women and goddesses. Their work was widely circulated, thanks to its coverage in newspapers and their contributions to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but it was vehemently discredited following its popular success. Their work remains marginal to intellectual history today, but it persists in popular literature and films and in Neopagan religions. For Murray, see Mimi Winick, "Modernist Feminist Witchcraft: Margaret Murray's Fantastic Scholarship and Sylvia Townsend Warner's Realist Fantasy," *Modernism/Modernity*, 22 (2015), 565–92; for Harrison, see Mimi Winick, "Jane Harrison's Ritual Scholarship," in *Modernist Women Writers and Spirituality: A Piercing Darkness*, ed. Elizabeth Anderson, Andrew Radford, and Heather Walton (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 95–114. Murray was specifically accused of manipulating her source material; folklorists and historians of their field Caroline Oates and Juliette Wood have shown how Murray's methodology, while incommensurate with today's standards, was fully in keeping with those of the era in which she published her controversial study of witchcraft (see Caroline Oates and Juliette Wood, *A Coven of Scholars: Margaret Murray and Her Working Methods* [London: The Folklore Society, 1998]). The classicist Tina Passman recalled hearing Harrison described in an undergraduate class on Greek mythology as "a fanatic who had nothing to say of any importance" (Passman, "Out of the Closet and into the Field: Matriculture, the Lesbian Perspective, and Feminist Classics," in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, ed. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin [New York: Routledge, 1993], p. 191). A comparative study of the similar career trajectories of other thinkers of Weston's generation such as Henri Bergson and Walter Benjamin who also wrote enchanted scholarship and held esoteric preoccupations would, I suspect, further highlight the role of gender in the way scholarship becomes discredited but also stays discredited. Unlike Weston's or Murray's, Bergson's and Benjamin's reputations have been recuperated in recent years, with even their flawed theories being put to creative new uses. (Harrison might be the exception that proves the rule, as her place in intellectual history has been increasingly acknowledged since Robert Ackerman's 1969 dissertation, which became the study cited below in note 21.) Similar comparisons could also be made with Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and William James, though these figures might be better compared with Frazer, since they are arguably founding figures in ways that Weston, Bergson, Benjamin, etc., were not.

history tend to understate her occult associations, while those invested in marking *From Ritual to Romance* as always having been beyond the scholarly pale overstate them. For example, Weston's sympathetic biographer Janet Grayson contends that Weston could not have been a participant in occultism because she "in conscience and practice followed a rational religion deeply rooted in Old Testament law" ("In Quest of Jessie Weston," p. 6). By contrast, the intellectual historian Robert Ackerman, who disparages Weston as part of a project to establish the (historically) scholarly *bona fides* of her peer Jane Harrison, claims that Weston was a member of the elite occult organization the Order of the Golden Dawn.²¹ The only evidence we have of Weston identifying with a particular religious tradition or organization is a commitment to Anglicanism (Grayson, "In Quest of Jessie Weston," p. 44). But, contra Grayson, such an avowed affiliation still could be compatible with membership in occult organizations such as the Theosophical Society, which explicitly welcomed members who identified as Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, etc. There is no evidence that Weston was ever an official member of either the Theosophical Society or the Order of the Golden Dawn. But she references her associations with occultists who belonged to both, and she was heavily involved in the Quest Society, an organization that was run by a former high-ranking member of the Theosophical Society and was deeply engaged with occult and specifically Theosophical ideas and aims. Weston, then, was neither a Theosophist nor an occult insider, but her work was steeped in Theosophical ideas and embraced a recognizably Theosophical commitment to investigating the spiritual truth of historical religious practices for the sake of a modern religion.

In light of these commitments, the initial mainstream academic success of *From Ritual to Romance* helps us perceive an earlier moment (but not a "premodern" moment) when to be scholarly and to be enchanting could be coexisting, even mutually reinforcing, states.²² While Weston's text has come to be

²¹ Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 219, n. 33.

²² Of course, scholarship and enchantment were closely associated in medieval and early modern Europe, and into the eighteenth century in the case of antiquarians and

seen as occult and therefore unscholarly, upon its publication in 1920 by Cambridge University Press its scholarly status and its identity as an occult work were not consistently linked. Both laudatory and critical reviews sometimes ignored and sometimes mentioned the monograph's occult elements. Moreover, while the initial reviews were mixed, the positive reviews outnumbered the negative, and the book received the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize for the best study of English literature written by a woman in English. To Weston and many of her peers, *From Ritual to Romance* was the pinnacle of modern literary scholarship.

Weston's book further positioned itself—and was largely accepted—as a landmark contribution to the emerging academic field of “Comparative Religion,” which embraced an evolutionary anthropological approach to construct a history of humanity's spiritual or mental development.²³ As the first major study of Comparative Religion to focus on European literature, *From Ritual to Romance* attained a level of cultural prominence through which it became, as Matthew Sterenberg has recently argued, “one of the formative elements of an intellectual climate” obsessed with tracing myth in literature (*Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 41). Weston's “Comparative Religion” is a representative instance of what Ted Underwood has identified as an early, anthropological iteration of “comparative literature” that pursued “a general theory of literary development.”²⁴ These overlapping fields of

dilettanti. See, for example, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998). Josephson-Storm makes a complementary argument that humanistic scholarship has consistently been an enchanted project since the early modern period, focusing on the occult and magical “preoccupations” of figures from Francis Bacon to members of the Frankfurt School (*The Myth of Disenchantment*, p. 22).

²³ Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), p. viii. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text. For the history of “Comparative Religion” as a field, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1975). As Sharpe shows, this was a varied field that, during Weston's career, was united primarily by its embrace of the “comparative” method, which he defines as identical with the “evolutionary” method (*Comparative Religion*, p. xiii). Its practitioners believed that this method allowed them to “trac[e] the stages by which religion has evolved in human consciousness” (*Comparative Religion*, p. 142).

²⁴ Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2013), p. 117.

comparative religion and literature—what I term the comparative humanities—were the culmination of a nineteenth-century scholarly project committed to constructing totalizing theories of human development through applying methods of induction and comparison deemed particularly modern and scientific. They were also committed, in many cases, to modernizing religion.

The late-Victorian comparative humanities shared these aims and approaches with contemporary occult organizations including, most prominently, the Theosophical Society. Both these new fields and new religious movements explicitly embraced so-called scientific methods and modeled themselves on more established “scientific” disciplines such as philology to legitimize themselves as distinctly modern searches for truth.²⁵ As Jason Å. Josephson-Storm has recently argued, while these new fields and new religious movements “considered themselves to be different and were sometimes opposed, . . . [they] nevertheless exhibited the same basic habits of thought” (*The Myth of Disenchantment*, p. 19).²⁶ Among these “habits of

²⁵ See Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion, 1860–1915* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2010); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005); and James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2014). Importantly for our understanding of the history of knowledge, these disciplines—which often were categorized as “human sciences”—were drawing not only on the natural sciences for precedent and prestige, but also on fields concerned with subjects now primarily considered humanistic, such as literature and language (e.g., philology). As the new field of the history of the humanities helps to show, the history of professional knowledge in the West does not exclusively consist of the establishment of the natural sciences as the most prestigious category of knowledge—and the mining of that prestige by humanistic disciplines—but also of the establishment of a scientific approach honed in relation to both natural and human subject matter.

²⁶ Josephson-Storm’s recent study revises the familiar narratives of religious studies emerging out of Protestantism or philology to one that “demonstrat[es] the shared history of religious studies, spiritualism, and theosophy,” and esotericism more broadly (*The Myth of Disenchantment*, p. 95). (Of course, this “shared history” includes links with Protestantism and philology, too.) The “habits of thought” common to late-Victorian scientific inquiry and new religious movements are evident even in infamous oppositions, such as that between the Theosophical Society (TS) and the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), headed by prominent men of science including William James. In the 1880s, the SPR investigated the TS’s claims of miracles and “phenomena” and ultimately labeled H. P. Blavatsky a fraud. But, as J. Barton Scott has shown, the TS and the

thought” were a commitment to the trappings of professional scholarship: as Joy Dixon has shown, the Theosophical Society presented itself as pursuing an explicitly scholarly project regarding religion.²⁷ Its founder, H. P. Blavatsky, claimed Theosophy was a “synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy,” while the prominent Theosophist Annie Besant presented Theosophy as a sister-science to “comparative mythology.”²⁸ Theosophical works embraced the skeptical stance of late-Victorian science, promising to explain away mysteries: “In our studies, mysteries were shown to be no mysteries.”²⁹ Importantly, however, Theosophy’s “skeptical ethic” was grounded in a “spiritualist skepticism” that questioned orthodoxies of scientific materialism as well as of religion (Scott, “Miracle Publics,” pp. 187, 190). It used methods of comparison and induction—explicitly framed as scientific approaches—to assert extreme possibilities regarding spiritual or supernatural truths, ultimately explaining mysteries by asserting the reality of marvels.

From Ritual to Romance exemplifies the compatibility of late-Victorian academic scholarship and occult scholarship,

SPR shared a family resemblance (Scott calls the TS the SPR’s “esoteric cousin”): both presented themselves as the proponents of the most up-to-date scientific approaches, which were equally skeptical of the dogmas of materialism and religion (J. Barton Scott, “Miracle Publics: Theosophy, Christianity, and the Coulomb Affair,” *History of Religions*, 49 [2009], 183). The primary difference between them (a crucial one), Scott argues, was the SPR’s greater embrace of scientific transparency. For both groups, questions such as the reality of spirits and the astral plane were within the bounds of legitimate inquiry. See Scott, “Miracle Publics,” pp. 172–96.

²⁷ Dixon writes: “Enough eminent scholars took the trouble to rebut theosophy’s claims that the society gained, however tenuously, the appearance of participating in scholarly debate. As one alarmed critic of the TS noted, A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* had sold more copies than Max Müller’s erudite *Essays*; Max Müller responded by taking Sinnett’s work seriously enough to publish a rebuttal of it” (*Divine Feminine*, p. 43). While such an exchange may constitute merely the “appearance . . . of scholarly debate,” its participants on both sides appear to have understood themselves as scholars engaged in scholarly exchange, and the publication of such debate granted a degree of legitimacy to the participants and the points in question as pursuing a common project.

²⁸ See H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Co., 1888); and Annie Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom: An Outline of Theosophical Teachings* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1897), pp. 2–3.

²⁹ H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (New York: J. W. Bouton, 1877), p. vi.

outlining its debts to both in its preface. Weston first acknowledges academic scholars, including Frazer, the Cambridge classicist and author of *The Golden Bough*; the German orientalist Leopold von Schroeder; and the English classicists Jane Ellen Harrison (Newnham College, Cambridge) and Gilbert Murray (Oxford).³⁰ In a last-but-not-least position, the preface then cites G.R.S. Mead, who had been a prominent Theosophist until he left the society in 1907 to found the Quest Society and edit its journal. Weston credits Mead's work—published with the Theosophical Publishing Society—with “the final link” in her argument, the “proof” for her hypothesis (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. viii). She further cites Mead as a personal contact.³¹

The overlapping projects of late-Victorian comparative humanities and occultism are further evident in the ease with which Weston intertwines their discourses in her theory that the grail legend is a coded account of an ancient ritual practice. Following work in Victorian history and anthropology not explicitly linked to occult projects, Weston uses the framework of scientific, secular history—that the history of humanity is a long story of gradual change going back into a distant past far anterior to biblical history—to posit pre-Judeo-Christian origins of humanity. Building on the work of occultists such as Blavatsky, she asserts these origins to be divine. And in ways that resonate with both occult imagery of powerful women (the self-presentations of Blavatsky and Besant, the figure of Isis) as well as with non-occult theories of prehistory (J. J. Bachofen, Friedrich Engels) and more recent archaeological scholarship (Harrison, Arthur Evans), Weston highlights the associations between prehistory and women in power.³² Weston contends

³⁰ In the context of academic scholarship, Weston thus situated herself most specifically among the group that Robert Ackerman dubbed the “Cambridge Ritualists.” These included Harrison; Gilbert Murray; the historian of philosophy Francis Cornford, whose work provided an epigraph to Weston's book; and the classicist A. B. Cook.

³¹ For Mead, see *G.R.S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest*, ed. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and Clare Goodrick-Clark (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2005).

³² By the late nineteenth century, histories of religion had become notably hospitable to theories of prehistorical goddess-worshiping societies. Scholars including J. J. Bachofen, Friedrich Engels, E. B. Tylor, Karl Pearson, and Jane Harrison hypothesized that the origins of religion and civilization more broadly were located in matriarchal or at least matrilineal societies. For Arthur Evans, see Cathy Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of*

that “the centre of Western civilization” where the grail rite had been preserved had been under the sway of Eastern and female (“*Magna Mater*”) deities, and that these woman-centered religions had a “profound influence” over the “better known” religions to come (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. 144).

As Sumathi Ramaswamy has shown, nineteenth-century scholarship unaffiliated with occultism enabled occult scholarship in particular ways. Crucially, theories of prehistory and deep geological time created room for the possibility not only of primitive matriarchal societies, but also of sophisticated vanished civilizations as sketched out by Blavatsky and other occultists. Weston combines these theories of prehistory and lost civilizations. Lost civilization theories postulated a golden age in which an ancient civilization superior to contemporary civilizations had flourished. According to this devolutionary, and racist, theory, later civilized societies are the degraded remnants of this superior community, which, while ancient, was racially distinct from so-called “primitive” societies. Prominent versions of this theory understood this lost civilization to have been founded by humans imbued with divinity or some form of otherworldly knowledge. Such theories inspired scholarly projects devoted to recovering the ancient wisdom purported to be lost with these vanished civilizations. Weston presents her own project as driven by such ambitions, claiming that the records of early religious practices preserved in the grail legend are in fact the “surviving fragments” of “a vanished civilization” that constituted the “spiritual, not . . . material, origin of the human race” (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. 7). By promising to collect and reconstruct these “surviving fragments” and thereby recover their ancient wisdom, *From Ritual to Romance* offered its scholarly project as an aid to occult endeavor.

The occult commitments of Weston’s book are most prominent in its use of the theory that analogical relations exist between astral and physical planes of existence. Weston applies this theory to what she regards as the grail legend’s crucial narrative episode, in which a knight is wounded in a dream

Modernism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009). Evans was a crucial influence on Harrison and, via Harrison, Weston. I thank Brian Pietras for this citation.

battle only to awake and find he is fatally wounded in reality. She argues that this episode is rooted in a historically real ritual with an occult meaning. The ritual consisted of the kind of fertility rite chronicled in *The Golden Bough*; its occult meaning was an analogy between sexual intercourse as the physical origin of life and a secret (and vague) initiation rite, known only to an elite, as the spiritual source of life. In this analogy, spiritual energy on the “*astral plane*” corresponded to sexual energy on the physical plane (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. 182).

The earnest reference to the “*astral plane*” in a work of scholarship may seem startling to today’s reader, but it appears to have been hardly notable to Weston’s contemporary audience. Those few critics who did note this or other occult terms in the book did not find them uniformly disqualifying. Of twenty-one English and French periodical reviews of *From Ritual to Romance* between 1920 and 1924, only three mentioned Theosophy.³³ Of these, only two, in the *Liverpool Post and*

³³ These reviews appeared in a mix of academic journals, journals of learned societies (including the Quest), religious periodicals, and daily and weekly newspapers. The list of twenty-one reviews, most of which are preserved as clippings in the Jessie L. Weston Papers at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, follows: Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Anglo French Review* (March 1920), 192; Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Church Times* (26 March 1920), 331; Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Holborn Review* (October 1920), 539–41; Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Publisher’s Circular* (27 March 1920), 347; Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *The Quest*, 11 (April 1920), 423–25; Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *The Scotsman* (29 January 1920), 2; The Bookworm, Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Northern Chronicle* (21 April 1920), 3; T. P. Cross, Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Modern Philology*, 18.12 (April 1921), 677–80; W. R. Halliday, “The Mystery of the Grail,” Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Liverpool Post and Mercury* (Welsh edition), (31 March 1920), 7; Eleanor Hull, Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Folklore*, 31.2 (30 June 1920), 163–68; G. Huet, Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Moyen Age* (July–April 1920), 201–3; S. L., Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Manchester Guardian* (2 February 1920), 7; R. R. M[arrett], “The Anthropology of the Grail,” Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Athenaeum* (5 March 1920), 305; William A. Nitze, Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Modern Language Notes*, 35.6 (June 1920), 352–60; Garnet Smith, “Romance and Religion,” Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Times Literary Supplement* (27 May 1920), 330; Arnold van Gennep, Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Mercure de France* (1 March 1924), 464–65; “The Holy Grail,” Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Expository Times* (October 1920), 17; “The Holy Grail: Miss Weston’s Effort at Elucidation,” Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *The Western Mail*, 7 May 1920), 9;

Mercury and the *Saturday Review*, found the monograph's Theosophical elements to be in conflict with Weston's established scholarly reputation, while the third, in the Methodist journal *The Holborn Review*, merely speculated about her religious affiliation without pronouncing judgment either way: "We have no information as to her own religious position, her phraseology suggests that she is a Christian but her reference to an initiation on the astral plane, as indeed some other features of the book, link her to theosophy" (rev. of *From Ritual to Romance*, *Holborn Review*, p. 540).³⁴ By contrast, Weston received more criticism from reviewers for her use of the term "Aryan," which critics read as a superseded philological reference, than for her use of the occult term "astral." While only two of the nineteen periodical reviews noted Weston's use of "astral" (one critically), five noted the term "Aryan," with three criticizing it as outdated.³⁵ Such responses attest to the largely unremarkable relationship between occultism and humanistic scholarship at this period, and the acceptance of humanistic scholarship as a source of claims about religious truths. The dismissive verdicts of the *Liverpool Post* and *Saturday Review* were the exception, not the rule.

These reviews were exceptions both in their negative references to occultism and in their thorough dismissal of *From Ritual to Romance*. Although Weston's book has come to be seen as laughably illegitimate, upon its publication it received mostly positive notices. Even reviews that found fault with the book

"The Origin of the Grail," Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Outlook* (14 February 1920), [tk]; "The Problem of the Grail," Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *Saturday Westminster Gazette* (28 February 1920), 19–20; and "A Source of Romance," Review of *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston, *The Saturday Review* (28 February 1920), 212–13.

³⁴ The classicist W. R. Halliday in the *Liverpool Post and Mercury* found such "higher flights" as references to the "astral plane" to be a "disappointment" to those familiar with Weston's sound textual scholarship. Similarly, the *Saturday Review* bemoaned the fall of "a student who bore a high reputation as a trustworthy copyist of ancient documents and a diligent collector of facts" to the level of manifesting "an unquestioning faith in the fabrications or delusions of modern theosophists, and the ignorant assertions of fortune-tellers."

³⁵ S. L. and the reviewer for *Saturday Westminster Gazette* note but do not criticize "Aryan," while Marrett, "The Bookworm," and Halliday are critical of Weston's use of the term.

took it seriously as a work of scholarship. This reception is exemplified in two opposing reviews. On the one hand, it was lauded by the leading anthropologist R. R. Marrett as “scholarly, scientific work through and through” (rev. of *From Ritual to Romance*, *Athenaeum*, p. 305). On the other hand, it was reprimanded by the literary critic W. M. Nitze as ultimately “unscholarly”—though not for its Theosophically influenced theory (which Nitze deemed “fundamentally sound”), but instead for what he felt were its inadequate citations and biased presentation of evidence (rev. of *From Ritual to Romance*, *Modern Language Notes*, pp. 358, 353).³⁶ In this manner, irrespective of the ultimate verdict, the reviews demonstrate how *From Ritual to Romance*’s occultism did not determine whether it was judged as scholarly or unscholarly.



The late-Victorian comparative humanities and occultism shared not only aims, approaches, and spaces, including the pages of *From Ritual to Romance*, but they shared too a particular hospitality to women participants. A key part of this hospitality was their common embrace of a new theory and application of a scientific imagination. While the imagination’s role in scientific inquiry had been reprobated for much of the nineteenth century, by the end of the century it was becoming subject to selective rehabilitation.³⁷ Fin-de-siècle aesthetics

³⁶ Nitze was a friendly colleague of Weston’s in Arthurian Studies, and his critical account of her work comes from an in-depth nine-page review of the book. This is a representative range of the response the book garnered in the academic press. Notably, the eminent French folklorist Arnold van Gennep also praised Weston for her method: “C’est un des plus élégantes démonstrations ritualistes que je connaisse” (“It’s one of the most elegant demonstrations of ritualism that I know”) (rev. of *From Ritual to Romance*, *Mercur de France*, p. 465). Another review in the French academic press, by G. Huet, rejects Weston’s theory, but treats it as scholarship and Weston as an important scholar.

³⁷ This rehabilitation could be contentious, as illustrated by the public resistance, as voiced by the *London Times*, against John Tyndall claiming a “scientific use of the imagination” (see Tyndall, “The Scientific Use of the Imagination,” in his *The Scientific Use of the Imagination and Other Essays* [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1872], pp. 1–38). For this episode and the larger historical argument, see Lorraine Daston, “Fear & Loathing of the Imagination in Science,” *Daedalus*, 134, no. 4 (2005), 16–30; and Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (London: Zone Books, 2007). Daston

presented itself as a study at once scientific and imaginative (even creating categories such as Walter Pater's "imaginative sense of fact"), while prominent scholars such as Frazer carried on a Scottish Enlightenment tradition in which he pursued his anthropological work as a man of letters, writing in a self-consciously literary and imaginative vein while explicitly practicing a scientific method.³⁸ Other scholars working in the overlapping emerging fields of anthropology, folklore, and psychology themselves theorized a new concept of the imagination that could be attributed to their own scholarly practices. As Anna Neill has shown, these thinkers held that modern people sometimes manifested "atavistic powers of mind" in the form of "intuition, mystical foresight, and clairvoyant imagination" that were survivals from an earlier stage of mental evolution.³⁹ These powers of mind could drive both artistic creation and scientific discovery. A paradoxical backward/forward chronology was crucial to this idea: such atavistic mental powers were seen at once as primitive vestiges but also as sources of "evolutionary potential" enabling thrilling new achievements (Neill, *Primitive Minds*, p. 138). This concept of the imagination also flourished in fin-de-siècle occultism and fiction. Specifically, occult ideas of the power of the imagination to access transcendent truths (located either "out there"

argues that the nineteenth century saw a "polarization" of the personae of the scientist and the artist, with the imagination aligned with the latter ("Fear & Loathing," p. 17).

³⁸ Walter Pater, "Style," in his *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), p. 4. Frazer regarded *The Golden Bough* as a literary as well as a scientific effort, worrying not only about the book's theories and facts, but also its "plot" (James Frazer, letter to his publisher, George Macmillan, 15 March 1890, quoted in Robert Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987], p. 97). Critics such as Robert Crawford have further observed that "study and scholarship were for Frazer imaginative activities" (Crawford, "Frazer and Scottish Romanticism: Scott, Stevenson and *The Golden Bough*," in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination*, p. 25).

³⁹ Anna Neill, *Primitive Minds: Evolution and Spiritual Experience in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2013), p. 31. Similarly, Kathy Alexis Psomiades has shown how late-Victorian authors such as H. Rider Haggard understood romance as a "primitive" form of literature, and their fiction as a primitivist project that would connect with readers through a sort of collective imagination (see Psomiades, "Hidden Meaning: Andrew Lang, H. Rider Haggard, Sigmund Freud, and Interpretation," *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 64 [2013]; available online at <www.erudit.org/en/journal/ravon>).

on the astral plane, or in psychological interiority, or in a place that seems to be both “out there” and interior such as the collective unconscious) have affinities with nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary practices that “emphasize[d] the combination of willed control and the independent life of the imagination” (Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 180).⁴⁰

While the simultaneously atavistic and advanced imagination may be most familiar in the character of Sherlock Holmes, it was also a concept with distinctly feminine connotations. As Charles Darwin noted in *The Descent of Man* (1871), “it is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation are more strongly marked than in man,” and that “some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization.”⁴¹ Moreover, this concept of the imagination was linked not only with women but also with spiritual experience. As Charles LaPorte has shown, these latter two categories were themselves increasingly connected as both “primitive” and “backward” in Victorian discourses on religion and history. Thus fields such as folklore and anthropology, and movements such as occultism, which both theorized this atavistic/advanced imagination in the contexts of literature, religion, and scholarship and welcomed its application in these areas, seem to have appeared particularly welcoming to women.⁴²

Women may have felt additionally welcome in these areas thanks to the way the atavistic/advanced imagination was connected to a critique of empiricism that seemed to legitimate certain feminized qualities of scholarly work. In this view, the imagination was celebrated as a scientific tool for going beyond

⁴⁰ Michael Saler, Alex Owen, and Jeffrey Kripal have each shown how occult ideas of the power of the imagination to access transcendent truths have affinities with nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary practices. See Saler, *As If*; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*; and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁴¹ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, quoted in Katherine D. Neustadt, “The Nature of Woman and the Development of American Folklore,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 9 (1986), 229.

⁴² Neustadt, in “The Nature of Woman,” specifically makes this argument for the field of folklore studies, and hypothesizes that it extends to anthropology.

direct observation. Via the tactic of conjecture, scholars could fill in gaps in fragmentary collections of data, and fiction became an instrument for seeking truths. The accessibility of conjectural approaches and fiction writing opened avenues of scholarship to those without formal education.⁴³ Such approaches were especially hospitable to women scholars, who even when having graduated from the first women's colleges, were assumed to have gaps in training, capacity, and knowledge that better fit them to imaginative rather than more distinctly objective work (though they often claimed both effective imaginations and objective perspectives). *From Ritual to Romance* illustrates the scholarly function of fiction vividly: at a crucial moment in her argument, Weston cites in a footnote a short story she wrote that offers "a hypothetical reconstruction" of the ritual about which she is making claims (*From Ritual to Romance*, pp. 182–83, n. 14).⁴⁴ This conceptualization of the imagination, and its application in conjecture and fiction more broadly, flourished in these fields into the 1920s, attracting scholars and, especially, aspiring scholars.⁴⁵

⁴³ Peter Pels has shown how this tradition was also "plebeian"—that is, it featured intellectual approaches that were particularly, as he writes, "accessible to the autodidact." Peter Pels, "Occult Truths: Race, Conjecture, and Theosophy in Victorian Anthropology," in *Excluded Ancestors, Inventible Traditions: Essays Toward a More Inclusive History of Anthropology*, ed. Richard Handler, vol. 9 of *History of Anthropology* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 14, n. 2.

⁴⁴ Weston cites her story "The Ruined Temple," *The Quest*, 8 (1916), 127–39.

⁴⁵ This theory and application of the imagination was also central to better-known projects, such as psychoanalysis and surrealism. As Derek Sayer has shown, surrealists saw surrealism as "an *instrument of knowledge* . . . that strives to bring to light man's profound consciousness" (Paul Éluard, in "Poetic Evidence," delivered at the International Surrealist Exhibition in London, 1936, quoted in Derek Sayer, *Making Trouble: Surrealism and the Human Sciences* [Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2017], p. 10). Its methods included atavistic/advanced imaginative practices also at home in occultism, such as "automatic writing, trances, recordings of dreams" (Sayer, *Making Trouble*, p. 18). Surrealism sometimes gendered its approach, as in André Breton's call to "build a case against *the male type of intelligence at the end of the nineteenth century*" and to "let art yield the passing lane to the supposedly 'irrational' feminine" (André Breton, *Arcanum* 17, trans. Zack Rogow [Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1994]; quoted in Sayer, *Making Trouble*, pp. 46–47). Other scholars and artists pursued related disciplined imaginative practices, though ones less explicitly indebted to a concept of the atavistic/advanced imagination. These include the purposeful use of the imagination by sociologists in Britain, France, and Germany, as chronicled by Wolf Lepenies, as well as the invocation of imaginative empathy or insight in the practices of Wilhelm Dilthey

Eventually these fields became associated with women scholars in a way that devalued both the fields and their female members, and that cemented associations among certain feminine stereotypes, enchantment, and illegitimate scholarship. Some reactionary critics actively encouraged this devaluation, delegitimizing these approaches and pushing the women who had embraced them to the margins of academia. As we have seen, Weston's study was not at first criticized for its occult elements. Only after scholars came to see Weston's initially successful approach more broadly as problematic did her work's occult ties become widely visible as liabilities. And, crucially, once this shift was under way, it was accelerated by a gendered dynamic in which enchanted scholarship was linked to the image of the foolish, crazy, or malicious spinster. Weston and her female peers became the models for misogynist parodies in popular novels, from the character of Dr. Rose Lorimer in Angus Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956), whose theory of a historical conspiracy "was something beside which Dr Murray's Dianic cult and Divine Victims paled into childish insignificance," to Sybil Maiden in David Lodge's *Small World* (1984), a former student of Weston's and, as an assertive and yet old-fashioned spinster obsessed with the hidden meaning of sex in everything, a version of Weston herself that extended mockeries she endured in her own lifetime.⁴⁶ These women's

and R. G. Collingswood (see Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988]). Other famous instances of the scholarly use of the imagination in this general period can be found in what Michael Saler calls the "surrealist histories" of Walter Benjamin and Humphrey Jennings (Saler, "Whigs and Surrealists: The 'Subtle Links' of Humphrey Jennings's *Pandaemonium*," in *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia, and Identity in Modern British Culture*, ed. George K. Behlmer and Fred M. Leventhal [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000], p. 140; quoted in Sayer, *Making Trouble*, p. 69).

⁴⁶ Angus Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956), p. 13. In a striking episode, Weston was lent a copy of one of her own books that had been annotated by Robert Steele. Among other skeptical marginalia, he wrote next to her analysis of a love scene in a medieval romance, "Perhaps Miss Jessie is not an expert in these matters." Weston added her own note, "I know the real article from the sham—that's all." I thank Helen Brookman for sharing her transcriptions of these notes, made for an article in progress. Grayson also mentions the episode in her biographical essay, "In Quest of Jessie Weston." The annotated book is available at the British Library: Jessie L. Weston, *The Legend of Sir Lancelot du Lac* (David Nutt, 1901), British Library, Cup.401.d.25, "MS notes [some by the author] . . . with an autograph letter inserted."

work was cast by critics and authors as a comic mistake, safely dissociated from legitimate professional scholarship.



Before critics mocked Weston's work into marginality, they saw it as participating in the period's most advanced scholarly methods, in particular the so-called comparative method.⁴⁷ The forms and practices associated with this method constitute a key source of *From Ritual to Romance's* enchanting effects. The "comparative method" assumed that religion, along with the rest of human culture, developed through "unilinear evolution" and was therefore best approached by "world-wide comparison" (Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 252). The assumption of unilinear evolution allowed for the comparison of different societies to illustrate general laws of development and to explain various practices so that a similar rite of worship practiced by, say, an Australian aboriginal tribe and a German peasant would be assumed to be rooted in the same belief. Through such analogical reasoning, one could fill in the fragmentary historical record, conjecturing "missing links" in evolutionary development, "lost" continents

⁴⁷ My understanding of the comparative method in this context is indebted to Carlo Ginzburg's discussion of what he calls the conjectural method (see Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" [1979], rpt. in his *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989], pp. 96–125). For the most recent discussion of the comparative method in nineteenth-century Britain, see Devin Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature between the Darwins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2016). Two prominent scholars of the period give a vivid sense of the prominence of the comparative method and its status as the most up-to-date approach. In 1872, the Oxford historian Edward A. Freeman proclaimed that "the discovery of the Comparative method in philology, in mythology—let me add in politics and history and the whole range of human thought—marks a stage in the progress of the human mind at least as great and memorable as the revival of Greek and Latin learning" in the Renaissance (Freeman, *The Unity of History* [1872], quoted in Turner, *Philology*, p. 345). A year later, the philologist and first self-described practitioner of the "science of religion," F. Max Müller, declared that "all higher knowledge is acquired by comparison and rests on comparison. If it is said that the character of scientific research in our age is pre-eminently comparative, this really means that our researches are now based on the widest evidence that can be obtained, on the broadest indications that can be grasped by the human mind" (Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* [1873], quoted in Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 43).

in geography, and the origins of art and religion. In this comparison's inductive approach, the researcher begins with observation, but then uses reasoning informed by probability and imagined "conjectures" to move beyond it: the researcher gathers facts and then connects them in a narrative—a theory—that links them in a meaningful way. This conjectural "chain" consists of a combination of noncontiguous observed facts (e.g., artifacts, fossils, textual fragments) and conjectured facts that are supposed to supply the missing links between them. The best conjectural theory tells the most plausible and coherent, but also the most interesting, story.

Comparison and conjecture were thus tied to the late-Victorian scholarly standard of coherence. For Weston, coherence guaranteed that the literature she examined encoded a fundamental unity of human religious experience that was at once the origin and essence of religion. The standard of coherence applied both to scholarship and to the object of scholarly study. In the first instance, comparative studies judge "the true test of an hypothesis" (in the words of an epigraph to *From Ritual to Romance*) to be "the number of facts that it correlates, and explains."⁴⁸ Such studies assume that a good theory will find a rational explanation for the phenomena in question and that, in the second instance, a rational order indeed exists to be discovered. The coherence of a theory becomes a sign of scientific soundness as well as a reminder of inherent meaning and order in the world. It also became a source of pleasure for writers and readers of comparative studies, who found both narrative satisfaction and the sense of a mystical unity of human nature and culture in the theories put forth. Coherence, as Christopher Herbert observes, was "the defining topos of advanced thinking" in the nineteenth and early twentieth

⁴⁸ The full epigraph runs: "Many literary critics seem to think that an hypothesis about obscure and remote questions of history can be refuted by a simple demand for the production of more evidence than in fact exists.—But the true test of an hypothesis, if it cannot be shewn to conflict with known truths, is the number of facts that it correlates, and explains" (Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p. vii; taken from Francis M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* [New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1914], p. 220). Similarly, James Frazer aimed in *The Golden Bough* "to bring a variety of scattered facts into some sort of order and system" (J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, 2 vols. [London: Macmillan, 1890], I, vii).

centuries.⁴⁹ It was central both to the academic comparative humanities as well as to the “expressive rationality” of occultists that Alex Owen describes (*The Place of Enchantment*, p. 146). It shapes narratives that enchant by simultaneously proffering feelings of rationality and of deep significance, of up-to-date knowledge alongside ancient or timeless meaning.

This standard of coherence is part of a scholarly enchantment that finds the ultimate source of coherence not in artistic creation, but in a source seen as somehow more real or fundamental—in spirituality, psychology, or even history. It assumes a kind of conspiracy orchestrated by anything but mere human creativity. (As far as human creativity is involved, it is somehow a vehicle for other forces.) This is the kind of coherence that J.R.R. Tolkien famously objected to in his 1936 lecture on *Beowulf*, where he complained of the “quarrying researchers” who treat poetry only as historical documents and not art.⁵⁰ Tolkien argued that they were looking to the wrong source for the coherence of the poem: it should be explained not with reference to historical facts, but to the poet’s mind. Trying to explain *Beowulf* by history actually makes the poem incoherent; it is only properly appreciated as “a self-consistent picture” when the “design and thought” of the poet are acknowledged as its primary shaping forces (Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics*,” p. 124). In this way, Tolkien was aligned with the New Critics who also celebrated the coherence of the literary work as rooted in its creation out of artistic effort, and not in spiritual, psychological, or historical meanings. Tolkien and the New Critics embraced an aesthetic enchantment that celebrated the imaginative power of the work of art in contrast to a scholarly enchantment that celebrated a more transcendental source of power. But the history of twentieth-century literary criticism is not exclusively a story of the ascendance of aesthetic enchantment over scholarly enchantment: this distinction helps us see too that other approaches to literary

⁴⁹ Christopher Herbert, “The Conundrum of Coherence,” *New Literary History*, 35 (2004), 190.

⁵⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics*” (1936), rpt. in *Beowulf: A Verse Translation: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, trans. Seamus Heaney, ed. Daniel Donoghue (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2002), p. 104.

criticism emerging in this moment, such as Freudian or Jungian analysis, can best be understood as invested in the kind of coherence, and enchantment, that Weston and her fellow comparativists pursued.

Weston was indeed just the kind of “quarrying” researcher that Tolkien deplored, and the characteristics of coherence as a sign of rational and yet mysterious significance are evident, even exaggerated, throughout *From Ritual to Romance*. She criticizes the “faulty method” of “an outworn critical tradition” in Arthurian studies (*From Ritual to Romance*, pp. 68, 62), and promotes an innovative, explicitly “scientific” approach that, as she writes on page one, promises to “resolve” the “conflicting ingredients” of the grail legend “into one harmonious compound” (p. 1). Her scientific approach will yield coherence, using new methods to answer old questions. Weston exploits the potential of the comparative method to unite superficially distinct phenomena by revealing underlying connections that can only be apprehended indirectly, through interpretive (e.g., imaginative) work. In this way, she uses this convention of scholarship to find meaning in apparent randomness, to bring order to chaos, and to convince her readers of her theories, invoking their rationality to demand a strong belief in the coherent, inherently meaningful world her theory creates.

Coherence in *From Ritual to Romance* offers readers the pleasure of narrative satisfaction and perhaps belief in a thrilling theory. Weston further guides readers to these experiences by performing her own delight in the text, as when she describes parallels that support her theory. For example, in a chapter connecting ritual dances to the grail legend, she exclaims: “In one form of the Morris Dance, that performed in Berkshire, the leader, or ‘Squire’ of the Morris carries a Chalice!” (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. 99). In such moments, Weston is not so much marshaling evidence while building up to a conclusion as celebrating the way a detail affirms her already-formulated theory. She is a reader of her own theory, expressing delight at the way it comes together. For Weston the highest pleasure of her study is not in “mere literary invention” but in both the effect of narrative coherence and in what the completed, coherent

narrative suggests: that the grail romances preserve the universal origin and essence of religion (p. 30).

While the ostensible source of meaning in the world is this original religious experience, it is through comparison and conjecture that Weston formally illustrates a world saturated with meaning, and thereby creates an experience of enchantment for her readers. Weston embraces the assumptions of late-Victorian comparative scholarship that every detail, whether of a text or of the historical record itself, has meaning as part of a coherent whole. There is no such thing as a random coincidence—a “correspondence can hardly be fortuitous” (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. 80). Neither are there unimportant details or phenomena: the most apparently trifling detail often proves of great significance in connection with something else. “A curious little poem,” for example, offers “a most striking and significant parallel to certain surviving Fertility processions,” and an apparently “fantastic fairy-tale” has meaning as a symbolic account of historical fact (pp. 103, 173). Correspondences, merely suggestive, gain definite meaning in the context of a large body of evidence: “certain parallels with our Grail stories which, if taken by themselves, are perhaps interesting and suggestive rather than in any way conclusive, . . . when they are considered in relation to the entire body of evidence, assume a curious significance and importance” (p. 25). Here we see the alchemy of scholarly enchantment in action: the apparently insignificant “assume[s] a curious significance and importance,” and affirms an order in which no coincidence is merely “fortuitous.” Furthermore, the way in which this approach asserts the significance of “little” details and even “fairy-tale[s]” suggests a particular source of appeal to feminist scholars: it takes the minor, diminutive, and unhistorical—the feminized—and asserts their great value.

While meaning is everywhere in this account, sublime mystery persists alongside it. *From Ritual to Romance* presents the fact of meaning itself—of the existence of connections between superficially distant details—as awe-inspiring. In one case, “the full force of the parallel” between details “is nothing short of astonishing” in view of their “close correspondence” despite “their separation in point of time (3000 B.C.; 1200 A.D.; and

the present day)" (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. 61). In addition to revealing apparently unimportant details to have significance, Weston's conjectural and comparative practice shows apparently unrelated phenomena to be in "a close and intimate union" (p. 5). Her study registers, and then fulfills, a desire for "gulf[s] to be bridged" (p. 52). Over the course of the monograph, Weston claims to have bridged the gulfs between "Classical, Medieval, and Modern forms of Nature ritual" and prehistoric "Aryan practice" (p. 56); "the position of the people of the Shilluk tribe, . . . the subjects of the Grail King, . . . [and] the ancient Babylonians" (p. 60); the "prehistoric record" and "the extant practice and belief of countries so widely separate as the British Isles, Russia, and Central Africa" (p. 113). By bringing together divergent examples, and asserting heretofore-unknown connections rooted in "nature" (e.g., fertility) rituals among them, Weston's comparatism works like surrealism, emphasizing "*unexpected juxtapositions* . . . that [work] to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious."⁵¹ This is one of the methods by which the comparative method can be recognized as effecting "not science but magic," and, more specifically, a scholarly enchantment.⁵²

From Ritual to Romance effects scholarly enchantment not only through its methods, but also through its deployment of scholarly conventions such as footnotes, block quotations, and scholarly asides. These elements may be used to disrupt the reader's immersion in a narrative, encouraging reflection, as

⁵¹ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), p. 118; quoted in Sayer, *Making Trouble*, p. 31, emphasis added.

⁵² The historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith was perhaps the first to look closely at the affinities between the methodology of Victorian comparative scholarship and its theories of magic and enchantment. He argues that the comparative method traffics in the same sort of magic that Victorian anthropologists such as Frazer used this method to theorize. Like Frazer's sympathetic magic, comparison makes the subjective objective: it takes a subjective impression of similarity and presents it, Smith writes, "as an objective connection through some theory of influence, diffusion, borrowing, or the like" (Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* [Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1982], p. 22). Kripal sees the method as effecting literary magic: "comparison is the act of lining up numerous such coincidences until a hidden pattern can be posited and a story intuited" (*Authors of the Impossible*, p. 74).

above, on the marvelous connections it makes; or they may be used to invoke skepticism of a narrative—the better, in such studies as these, to then assure the reader of its plausibility.⁵³ Weston's scholarly poetics are especially vivid at the climax of her study, where she recounts the story of the knight's dream in which a visitor to the grail chapel is wounded on the "*physical*" and "*astral*" planes. She frames this episode with a highly dramatic setup of a mystery and then its equally dramatic solution. After summarizing the story, Weston raises a problem: "how can we account for so wild, and at first sight so improbable, a tale" having, unlike most other episodes of the grail legend, certain details suggestive of a historically specific setting (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. 182)?

The wildness of this tale is not just the narrative itself, but rather how such an apparently impossible story comes to have the specific characteristics of a historical story. Weston then promises to solve this puzzle—but with an explanation equally strange:

At the risk of startling my readers I must express my opinion that it was because the incidents recorded were a reminiscence of something which had actually happened, and which, owing to the youth, and possible social position, of the victim, had made a profound impression upon the popular imagination.

For this is the story of an initiation (or perhaps it would be more correct to say the test of fitness for an initiation) carried out on the astral plane, and reacting with fatal results upon the physical. (From Ritual to Romance, p. 182)

In this solution, Weston asserts that the events of a story, which itself recounts a dream, actually refer to a historical and also "*astral*" event. This moment in the text effects the alchemy of scholarly enchantment. First, Weston establishes an apparently insignificant phenomenon: the knight's dream episode is introduced as a "meaningless adventure of the most conventional type" (p. 179). Then she purports to find meaning in it after all: this episode is shown to be the record of a historical initiation

⁵³ My analysis of such scholarly apparatuses is informed by Saler's discussion of their profusion in *New Romance* (see Saler, *As If*).

ritual; moreover, it is a ritual carried out on the astral as well as the physical planes. Thus meaning is not only revealed, but shown to be transcendent: to be “out there” in history and in the otherworld of the astral plane. This revelation transforms the episode into one of “high importance” (p. 179). A broader transformation is further suggested: the grail romances themselves shift from “mere literary invention” to historical records (p. 30). Finally, magical forces are revealed as reality itself is extended from the conventionally accepted physical plane to include an astral plane intimately connected with the familiar, physical one, ultimately suggesting the existence of a close, even attainable otherworld.

This passage is particularly marked by a performance of scholarly style. Weston opens her conclusion with rationalistic language: as a scholar, she aims to “account for” a tale “so wild” and “so improbable.” Like the sound historian of religion, she is taking a rational approach to irrational material. The setup includes other terms of rational inquiry: the “semi-historical,” the “definite,” the “precise,” the observation of “a rule” (*From Ritual to Romance*, p. 182). She then frames her revelation by invoking skepticism: she knows she might “startl[e]” her readers with the solution she offers; yet she “must” offer it. Finally, the italicized conclusion is interrupted by a nonitalicized parenthetical that illustrates her scholarly caution (“or perhaps it would be more correct to say”) even in the midst of her experience of making an exciting discovery. Weston thus assures us of her scholarly *bona fides* at this crucial moment. This formal strategy, moreover, replicates within a short passage the structure of a fantastic frame/tale narrative, playing with the invocation of skepticism and the invitation to credulity, weaving them together to yield an apparent rational affirmation of the reality of a conventionally irrational idea.

Weston thus performs the conventions of scholarship to create feelings of awe and wonder, and to encourage readers to experience feelings of mystery within a scientific framework. Her writing presents the fact of meaning itself as awe-inspiring in ways akin to the spiritual experiences it chronicles. It fosters such experiences not only by aligning itself with standards of both scientific and spiritual truths, but also by

creatively deploying scholarly conventions. Primarily, it uses the comparative method to synthesize observed facts and inductive inferences to construct a coherent account of a lost original whole. The coherence of these theories, along with Weston's presentation of marvelous histories in a scientific frame, fosters the readerly experience of scholarly enchantment.



In the years after *From Ritual to Romance's* initial reception, a range of readers have made it central to literary histories that recognize and extend a Victorian New Age. These histories challenge secularization narratives in which scholarship undermines and literature replaces religion. They instead offer accounts of scholarly enchantment in which forms of scholarship preserve, diffuse, revive, and create religious experiences or modern magic. In this last section, I consider three such readers of *From Ritual to Romance*.

In 1941, Cyril Connolly, editor of the little magazine *Horizon*, referenced a literary history in which, in a reversal of the more familiar account, *From Ritual to Romance* constitutes the central text and *The Waste Land* its subordinate paratext. This history emphasizes the intimacy of scholarship and “magic” in Weston's text. In a “Comment” in *Horizon*, Connolly describes the phenomenon of the modern “search for a Myth,” tracing it from *The Golden Bough* to “one of the few mythological poems of our time (T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*) and to the even more remarkable book behind it”:

This is Miss Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge, 1920), which, alas, is almost unprocurable. According to Eliot, *The Waste Land* is largely a poetical adaptation of Miss Weston's account of the Grail Legend correlated to the present day (1922), and with some references to Frazer's *Attis: Adonis: Osiris* added.⁵⁴

In Connolly's account, *The Waste Land* is parenthetical to, and even “largely a poetical adaptation of,” Weston's “even more

⁵⁴ [Cyril Connolly], “Comment,” *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*, 4 (1941), 82.

remarkable" original. Moreover, Eliot's now famous "mythic method" is elided and his poem is cast as merely another quest in the Victorian project of the "search for a Myth." In expounding upon what makes Weston's book so "remarkable," Connolly protests, "It would not be fair to give a résumé of Miss Weston's book, for in reading it one is transported into a whirl of argument and magic that is incommunicable" ("Comment," p. 83). Connolly describes Weston's text as encouraging a state akin to an ineffable experience of enchantment in the reader. His phrase "whirl of argument and magic" suggests that its "magic" is inextricable from its scholarly mode. Moreover, by claiming that this effect cannot be adequately represented by a "résumé," he suggests how the transporting "whirl" is a function not of the book's "daring" argument ("Comment," p. 82), which he goes on to summarize, but of its form.

In 1933, the novelist Mary Butts placed *From Ritual to Romance* at the center of a similar literary history, in which readers of fiction and scholarship alike are on the same quest for magic. Butts's history assumes the occult idea of "mere literature," arguing that fiction and scholarship are meaningful for what they might reveal about the "structure of reality."⁵⁵ Highlighting her conflation of scholarship and fiction, Butts gives Weston (alongside Jane Harrison) pride of place in an essay on the "Uses of the Supernatural in English Fiction." After discussing novels and short stories by a range of authors, from H. Rider Haggard to May Sinclair, Butts subordinates "them all" to two works of scholarship:

After them all, there is no better book than the late Miss Harrison's "Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion," or Miss Weston's "From Ritual to Romance," the work to which T. S. Eliot owes so much. There is set out the *natural* history of many of our beliefs. . . . Some were absorbed direct into Christianity; all have affected our culture; not one of which has not been, in its time, material for the finer orders of men to see more deeply into the structure of reality, and to make others see also. ("Ghosties and Ghoulies," p. 14)

⁵⁵ Mary Butts, "'Ghosties and Ghoulies'—concluded: Uses of the Supernatural in English Fiction," *The Bookman*, 84 (1933), 14.

For Butts, fiction as well as scholarship were means to discovering truths about religious practices, and even reviving them. Weston's scholarship specifically raises the possibility of modern magic "powers." At the end of her essay, Butts prophesies: "The time may be coming when, their ritual origins traced, their risings and settings chased through our subconscious, we shall know what powers we have evoked exterior to us" ("Ghosties and Ghoulies," p. 14). Butts herself reread *From Ritual to Romance* annually, suggesting further her own ritualistic relationship to Weston's account of the "ritual origins" of medieval romances.⁵⁶

More recently, the historian Ronald Hutton has recounted an intellectual history in which *From Ritual to Romance* is one of the major shaping forces of Modern Pagan Witchcraft, a prominent branch of Neopaganism. Hutton is both a historian working in the academy and an insider to Neopaganism, having been raised in a form of modern Paganism.⁵⁷ Neopaganism or modern Paganism refers to new religious movements that feature spiritual and ritual practices while generally disavowing dogmas and sometimes even belief. Many, such as Modern Pagan Witchcraft, are affiliated with feminist spiritualities and eco-spiritualities, though there are right-wing Neopagan practices too, often associated with neo-Nazism. Some practitioners claim ancient antecedents, referencing classical, aboriginal, even Atalantean origins.⁵⁸ Hutton places Weston in a small group of similarly positioned writers, including Jane Harrison and Margaret Murray, whose work shifted from being read widely by other scholars and the educated public to being read primarily by Neopagan practitioners and countercultural artists (*The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 194). Their work became a significant source for the idea of the persistence of paganism from

⁵⁶ See Sterenberg, *Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 61.

⁵⁷ See Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), p. 269. Hutton discusses this history in *The Triumph of the Moon*.

⁵⁸ Neopaganism may be familiar to most readers via popular culture, thanks to its place in works such as the best-selling novel *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley (1980), which retells the Arthurian legend while drawing on an archive of writing on religion including books by Margaret Murray and Weston. On *Mist's* Westonian syncretism, see John B. Marino, *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), p. 76.

the ancient past into modernity, as well as for woman-centered religious practices (Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 125). These writers' books continue to circulate today in cheap paperback or free online editions. While the paperbacks are harder to trace, the online editions are hosted on sites outside of academia and often within the Neopagan community. In these forms, the scholarship of Weston as well as of her peers Harrison and Murray became sacred texts.⁵⁹

So, what can we learn from these readers and their less familiar literary and religious histories? What accounts of the study of nineteenth-century literature, and of humanistic inquiry more broadly, do they illuminate? First, the reception history of *From Ritual to Romance*, from its initial reviews in the 1920s to its late-twentieth-century Neopagan editions, affirms the need to tell a literary history that recognizes the constant presence of religious or spiritual practices as complements to, even motivating factors for, fiction and scholarly writing since the fin de siècle, when the Victorian comparative humanities and new religious movements emerged as sometimes rival, sometimes complementary, projects. In Weston's work, which is shaped by both of these repertoires, fiction writing and scholarship were related ways of seeking the truth about what happened in history, and, more broadly, about humanity and divinity. Weston's scholarly work constituted a scholarly spiritual quest of the kind endorsed by the Quest Society. For Weston and many of her peers, such projects were not "cover stories" in which scholarly or literary work provided a secular alibi for spiritual seeking; rather, such projects were explicitly pursued and received as spiritual as well as intellectual and artistic efforts.⁶⁰

Second, the history of scholarly enchantment allows us to trace further the changing role of the imagination in literary,

⁵⁹ They can be found, for example, on <sacredtexts.com>, a site sympathetic to Neopaganism. In this way, these works shared a similar path to the one that Josephson-Storm traces for *The Golden Bough*, which in Aleister Crowley's hands "became a scripture for the Golden Dawn" (*The Myth of Disenchantment*, p. 176).

⁶⁰ Victoria Nelson refers to such "cover stories" as constituting "the tendency of many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western writers and scholars to disguise their religious instincts (from themselves as much as from others) within an intellectual quest to discover a surviving pagan or indigenous authenticity" (Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001], p. 12).

scholarly, and spiritual practices. As we have seen, Weston used the imagination as a tool for seeking scholarly and spiritual knowledge. Embracing an instrumental imagination in this way assumes that products of the human imagination (e.g., literature, visual art) are valuable because they reveal certain spiritual truths. That is, literature and art are valuable because of what information they convey, what they reveal when they are interpreted or, more precisely, decoded. Researchers have begun to construct such histories of the instrumental imagination and how it was used as a tool for spiritual inquiry.⁶¹

Third, *From Ritual to Romance's* reception history and the literary and religious history the book helps bring into relief also have a lesson about the legacy of the Victorian New Age in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Texts such as Weston's have been largely invisible or confounding to literary and intellectual histories predicated upon familiar ideas of secularization and gendered accounts of what counts as scholarship. In contrast, Weston and peers such as Harrison and Murray have long been important to histories of new religious movements, some written by those with ties to Neopagan communities. Practicing Neopagans themselves have been aware of the shift in scholarly standards that had discredited these scholars; indeed, they often argued against such rejections, embracing an idea of disavowed knowledges sometimes infused by conspiracy theories.⁶² In this way, Neopaganism has offered competing criticism of secularization narratives. The discrediting of theories of the existence (and, importantly, persistence) of ancient religious traditions that featured women in positions of prominence and power—which had themselves been argued by prominent women scholars making use of methods deemed foolish and effeminate by the new generation of (overwhelmingly male) professional scholars—coincided with the resurgence of competing and more emphatically secularizing Victorian

⁶¹ See Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*; and Viswanathan, "Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy."

⁶² Courtney Bender describes an exemplary instance of this dynamic, though featuring a Swedenborgian rather than a Neopagan practitioner (see Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010], pp. 12–18).

theories that cast religion as a vestigial survival from the past without influence on the present or future, and as disconnected from or made irrelevant by scientific approaches to knowledge. These were theories rejected by Neopagan writers, who—in their readings of works by Weston and her peers—saw modern knowledge and religion instead as inextricably linked, and religion at the center of modernization. In light of the recent resurgence of religion in public life, it is remarkable how prescient the narrative told by practitioners of new religious movements themselves has turned out to be.

Most literary or intellectual histories that address the Victorian New Age stop short of connecting their histories to twentieth- and twenty-first-century new religious movements such as Neopaganism, even in cases where texts such as *From Ritual to Romance* are considered. This lacuna is, I think, an effect of the strength of the secularization narrative in the modern humanities. More specifically, it is an effect of secularization narratives that link enchantment with the category of the feminine, and link both to illegitimate intellectual practices. Outside of focused studies of new religious movements, to include Neopaganism in literary or cultural histories can still be seen as courting illegitimacy: it invites associations with the unscholarly that were cemented in the years following the publication of *From Ritual to Romance*.

Finally, this episode in literary history—and *From Ritual to Romance* itself as an object of both enthusiasm and of disavowal—has shaped the way we conceive, judge, and write humanistic scholarship. Recounting this history illuminates the practices and forms that effect scholarly enchantment through comparison, conjecture, coherence, and the deployment of scholarly poetics from claims to rationality to parenthetical asides. By recognizing how the close connections among new religious movements and the Victorian comparative humanities shaped the ways *From Ritual to Romance* works formally, we can better understand the forces shaping our scholarly practices and the formal effects of our own writing. For example, when we embrace coherence as a standard for our arguments, are we doing so with the assumption that order ultimately rests in the design of an artistic creator (e.g., aesthetic enchantment) or in

a source of meaning rooted in a more transcendental source of design on the order of history, psychology, or spirituality (e.g., scholarly enchantment)? We can also better recognize the wider range of people who have shaped our current scholarly practices—the amateurs and the enthusiasts who often belonged to what were then, and what are still, underrepresented populations in scholarly spaces. By widening our sense of the repertoires of people, works, practices, and ideas that have shaped modern humanistic inquiry, we might be more likely to engage with a wider range of ideas, coming sooner to appreciate, say, the insights of Neopagan practitioners regarding secularization.

Some writers on enchanted scholarship or modern enchantments more broadly argue for the recuperation of enchantment in scholarship. They call for scholarship that embraces imagination and even “‘magical’ thought” (Sayer, *Making Trouble*, p. 46). Derek Sayer and Jeffrey Kripal, for example, each see their historical studies of enchanted scholarship as offering models for better ways to do scholarship now and in the future. Sayer explicitly argues “for bringing imagination back to the human sciences” (*Making Trouble*, p. iii). Kripal is even more ambitious, calling on historical precedent “to expand the imaginative possibilities of contemporary theory through a certain authorization of the Impossible,” “asking us [not] to know more . . . [but] to imagine more” (*Authors of the Impossible*, p. 25). But while most humanistic scholars today may not be pursuing the gnosis that Kripal endorses, most already seem to include some imaginative practices in their scholarly work. Thus, I do not see the need for a polemic in favor of using the imagination in scholarship today. But I do see the need for a greater recognition that we already use it, and for better understandings of how we do—historically, formally, and theoretically.

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ABSTRACT

Mimi Winick, “Scholarly Enchantment” (pp. 187–226)

This essay describes the “scholarly enchantment” of pioneering women writers who combined academic research and occultism in fin-de-siècle Britain. It focuses on Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), a study infamous for interpreting

medieval romances as coded records of an ancient fertility cult. Through a reception history and formal analysis of Weston's monograph, the essay identifies a set of shared characteristics that made both emerging humanities fields and occultism especially appealing to women, including a standard of coherence, a comparative methodology, and a tactic of conjecture. The same attributes constitute formal sources of enchantment in humanistic scholarship of the period that promised to reveal "real" spiritual meanings behind art and artifacts. In this sense, Weston does not analyze medieval romances as works of the human imagination, but claims to decode them to reveal spiritual facts. The essay goes on to show how the gendered appeal of these practices first fueled their popularity and then was eventually exploited to consolidate the masculine authority of professional, disenchanted literary scholarship. Ultimately, though a product of the early twentieth century, *From Ritual to Romance* helps us recognize not only unfamiliar disciplinary histories, but also Victorian-era narratives about religion other than secularization. In works such as Weston's, modernization is not defined by a decline of religion in the world but by a process of spiritual intensification leading to a "New Age" of women's prominence.

Keywords: history of humanities; women scholars; secularization; Theosophy; Jessie L. Weston