Mary-Jane Rubenstein. *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. xxi + 294 pp. ISBN: 9780231189460. Hardcover. $35.00/£27.00.

In the conclusion to his 2012 book, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture,* Wouter J. Hanegraaff cited Frances Yates's description of the religion of hermetic literature as a "religion of the world."[1] For Yates and for Hanegraaff, hermetic literature and the European esoteric traditions that sprang up from it in the Renaissance and the early modern period described a divinity that was present in, and perhaps even synonymous with the material cosmos: it was a cosmology "based upon the fundamental assumption that the divine is at home in the world."[2] This immanent religious posture was not easily superimposed onto the dominant monotheisms of the time, in which a lone transcendent God creates the world *ex nihilo*. Indeed, as Hanegraaff argues, the intractable tension between these two religious worldviews has been the primary source of the entire cultural phenomenon that scholars would later call Western esotericism:

> I suggest that the emergence of what we now call Western esotericism was made possible by a deep structure of conflict between the dynamics of these two mutually exclusive systems and all that they imply. In short, the logical incompatibility of monotheism and cosmotheism has led to an endless series of creative attempts to resolve it.[3]

This "religion of the world," which has been so significant to understanding the referential corpus of the study of esotericism, is the subject of Mary-Jane Rubenstein's new book *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters*.

Rubenstein describes the inspiration for the book in her previous work on multiverse cosmologies and the contemporary (dis)engagement between science and

1. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 371.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

religion. Rubenstein notes how she kept coming across what she calls "pantheologies" in the history of science. These pantheologies are scientific and secular theories of the cosmos that often took on a theological valence in their narratives. In these scientific stories, depictions of cosmic creation, cohesion, and destruction are portrayed in utterly immanent and material terms. Despite their secular context and scientific purpose, these narratives still produced ethical and cultural implications in keeping with the religious cosmologies they purportedly left behind (xix).

In attempting to trace the conceptual history of pantheism itself, Rubenstein notes, she realized that "there is no real conceptual history of pantheism" (xx). At least in the intellectual history of Europe, "pantheism" is merely a polemical term, a conceptual bugbear to level against a philosophical opponent. In a critical position that scholars of esotericism can certainly appreciate, Rubenstein's book asks two major questions: first, what is pantheism? Second, what is the problem with pantheism?

In so doing, Rubenstein marshalls an array of historical and theoretical tools: readers will be led through such diverse terrain as the early engagements in continental philosophy over the problems of pantheism, pantheistic thought in Albert Einstein's writings on religion and science, and contemporary theories of immanence such as new materialism, posthumanism, and Amerindian perspectivism. Perhaps most interesting to readers of this publication is Rubenstein's careful engagement with Giordano Bruno, whose pantheistic opinions (which Rubenstein attributes to his reading of Lucretius [78]) are presented as the beginning of pantheist controversy in Europe.

Throughout the book, Rubenstein argues that what makes pantheism so repulsive — indeed, so *monstrous* — to so many throughout history is its implied upending of many hierarchical patterns that have shaped Western thought through the centuries. Binary formations of hierarchical difference in race, gender, and even humans and nonhumans are not erased but profoundly reconfigured in the pantheist rejection of the fundamental separation of God

and world. Rubenstein's argument proceeds in four chapters. In the opening chapter, "Pan," Rubenstein addresses G. W. F. Hegel's challenge that Baruch Spinoza's pantheistic thought submerges all the world in an "abyss" of indifference. Rubenstein's assessment of Spinoza's position and Hegel's critique sets up her own articulation of a pluralist pantheism, a monad composed of many, rather than a Hegelian abyss of indifference. As mentioned above, *Pantheologies* is a theological call for a pantheism that embraces rather than erases difference, upending rather than ignoring hierarchies.

Chapter two, "Hyle," should be of special interest to *Correspondences* readers for its focus on Giordano Bruno. In this chapter, Rubenstein takes up the issue of matter, asking why European theological and philosophical traditions have so strictly and nervously denied any manner of animacy or divinity in the material. The earliest major outlier in this trend is Bruno, who Rubenstein interprets as a critic of Aristotle's emphasis on form over matter. Chapter two continues its analysis of theories of animate matter by looking at indigenous cosmologies of animate matter — precisely the kind that the intellectual descendents of Bruno's critics encountered on their subsequent colonial and imperial excursions. Finally, Rubenstein turns toward the contemporary world of microbiology via the work of Lynn Margulis, whose work on symbiosis and bacteria illuminated a new dimension of material animacy in twentieth-century science.

Chapter three, "Cosmos," turns to the concept of "world" and more precisely what it means to not only associate but also identify the concept of divinity with it. Readers of Carolyn Merchant will be familiar with Rubenstein's description of the mechanistic or "clockwork" cosmos of the European seventeenth century, in which a nascent science and capitalism collaborated to drain the conceptual life out of the physical world. Rubenstein again directs these early modern trends to their contemporary analogues in the sciences, by outlining the controversy over James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis's "Gaia Hypothesis." Simply put, Lovelock and Margulis argued that the scientific data points towards an under-

standing of the planet Earth as an organism unto itself; sustaining, regulating, and being sustained by the organisms within it. Much as in the early modern period, the Gaia hypothesis was the subject of severe criticism and even ridicule by mainstream professional scientists in the late twentieth century.

Chapter four, "Theos," builds on and concludes the book by looking directly at the pantheistic elements in Einstein's theoretical physics and in his writings and public statements on religion. Einstein found himself torn between a "rational," Newtonian cosmos of reliable consensus reality and the endlessly perspectival and relational world that his theories of relativity suggested. Chapter four, and the book, conclude with a bracing critique of nothing less than the problem of evil from a pantheological perspective and a convincing response to the charge that any pantheism would be indistinguishable from atheism.

In Antoine Faivre's well-known delineation of Western esotericism's "six fundamental characteristics," the second, "Living Nature," begins with the line: "The cosmos is complex, plural, hierarchical."[4] For all the ways in which *Pantheologies* corresponds with the study of esotericism, readers will note important differences as well. Rubenstein's own articulation of "living nature" (which she might call animate matter) firmly retains the complexity and plurality of Faivre's category while fundamentally destabilizing the hierarchical organization of the persons (human and nonhuman) therein. As Rubenstein points out, both matter and nature itself have been constructed in racialized, gendered, and classist formations throughout the history that she outlines. Perhaps some of the hierarchies in Faivre's cosmos will unravel if they are subjected to a similar analysis. Indeed, Rubenstein's book poses both a challenge and an opportunity to the field of esotericism: to consider the meaning of this "religion of the world" more deeply, and in so doing, to scrutinize the hierarchical patterns that have shaped the history of esotericism itself.

4. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 11.

Rubenstein's book takes on a project of sweeping scale and historical breadth, and she successfully demonstrates that pantheist thinkers and pantheism itself have been a remarkably consistent intellectual punching bag in Western thought since at least the seventeenth century. Of course, with such a broad scope packed into a relatively short book, the author's choice of subjects can read as somewhat idiosyncratic: in the hopscotch from Spinoza to Einstein, we land only for a moment on Bruno, Hegel, and the American literary sources from the nineteenth century. This choice of subject matter does not detract from the overall quality of the book or the efficacy of the argument. *Pantheologies* is a work by a theologian with an interest in religion and science, rather than an attempt at a complete history of pantheism.

As a work of philosophy of religion which leans heavily on the history of early modern Europe and the study of religion and science, *Pantheologies* represents a critically relevant text for the contemporary study of esotericism. Giordano Bruno is far from the only figure in the referential corpus of esotericism to espouse pantheist opinions, and there remains much more work to be done in sorting out what, precisely, has made both pantheism and esotericism, Frances Yates's "religion of the world," so simultaneously exciting and revolting to so many throughout the modern history of Europe.

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