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Thomas Willard. *Thomas Vaughan and the Rosicrucian Revival in Britain: 1648–1666*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2022. xx + 338 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-51972-5. $209.00.

Thomas Willard's *Thomas Vaughan and the Rosicrucian Revival in Britain* (32nd volume in the *Aries Book Series: Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism*) focuses on Thomas Vaughan (1621–1666), twin brother of the Anglican poet Henry Vaughan. A native of Wales, Vaughan was a Royalist clergyman, writer, and alchemist, lauded as the English translator of the first two Rosicrucian manifestos. Living in seventeenth-century Britain during the English Civil War, Willard identifies Vaughan as the "first spokesman" of a Rosicrucian revival that occurred between 1649–1660 (10). Spanning a range of subjects, Vaughan's writings explored philosophy, medicine, magic, Kabbalah, and alchemy, serving as an exemplar for examining Rosicrucianism within the context of the period (10). In distinction to the Royal Society, Vaughan believed that reconciliation between differing areas of knowledge—such as religion and science—could be achieved through a middle path "between superstition and iconoclasm" to restore "the true goal of learning" (13).

Willard offers a dissection of Thomas Vaughan's life through close analysis of his texts, with attention to sources, style, and influences (1). The book argues that Vaughan is a pivotal figure in the seventeenth-century Rosicrucian revival, a continuation of the movement that began in Germany in 1614 with the publication of its first manifesto (1). Situating Vaughan's life, writing, and intellectual network within the broader cultural and intellectual currents of his time, Willard emphasizes Rosicrucian themes as they intersect with magic, alchemy, and religion. He contends that there is a "center" holding Vaughan's works together, with Rosicrucianism serving as the basis for comprehending his textual works. The centrality of Rosicrucianism—and more broadly, Hermeticism—is demonstrated as a useful lens for discerning the meaning of Vaughan's work. This nuanced account of Vaughan's intellectual legacy connects the history of ideas to his

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multidisciplinary engagements with poetry, alchemy, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and other subjects, during a period when Vaughan and the Rosicrucians were expanding from an intimate and personal readership to wider audiences.

This monograph consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion, supplemented by appendices, a bibliography, and an index of names, subjects, and biblical citations. The work builds on Willard's longstanding scholarship—dating back to his 1978 doctoral thesis on Thomas Vaughan—along with updated references that reflect his engagement with Vaughan's historical and intellectual contexts. At the outset, the introduction addresses Vaughan's use of language in relation to literature, intellectual prose, and the magical, with Willard noting that Vaughan's magical writings and poetry, even if said to be clearly stated, were just as confusing as his academic work. In this chapter, Willard establishes that interest in Vaughan is closely tied to interest in Rosicrucianism, which was socially relevant both in the seventeenth century and in subsequent periods.

The first chapter establishes Thomas Vaughan's historicity, tracing his life within the work's defined timeframe and exploring the intellectual influences which shaped his esoteric and Rosicrucian interests. Willard establishes that Vaughan's lifelong interest in magic, and his formal academic background, were essential for participation in the Rosicrucian milieu. The second chapter connects Vaughan to the broader history of intellectual thought, examining the Hermetic culture of Renaissance magic and, more specifically, the intellectual and esoteric movement of seventeenth-century Rosicrucianism, through the authorial influences of figures such as Agrippa, John Dee, and Paracelsus. Willard firmly establishes that Vaughan's understanding and positioning within the Western esoteric tradition "were in many respects a creation of the Renaissance" (85).

Chapter three draws attention to the relationship between writing, rhetoric, and language in Vaughan's thought, which selectively reveals esoteric and exoteric knowledge. This esoteric understanding and use of language reflects a Rosicrucian idea of magical writing—a secret script that could replace scholastic grammar and logic and aid in the revelation of the occulted aspects of nature.

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Vaughan employed poetic language to align with an inner, mystical world, "and perhaps lead [readers] into inward reflection," while expressing contempt for alchemists captivated by "meer words" (213).

The fourth chapter considers Vaughan through the lens of his reputation, shaped by his association with the Rosicrucian cultural movement. Detractors turned Vaughan into a rhetorical target, using him as a vehicle for critiques of alchemy and mysticism. During a time when magic was juxtaposed with the rising primacy of rationalism and empiricism, such critiques provoked harsh condemnation. Reinterpreted over successive periods, Vaughan's legacy provides insight into shifting historical perceptions of alchemy—ranging from eighteenth-century Masonic lodges that appealed to Rosicrucian ideals, to the nineteenth-century occult revival that situated his works within esoteric and New Age movements, and finally to twentieth-century organizations such as AMORC, which identified Vaughan as a crucial link to the Rosicrucian tradition.

In the closing chapter, Vaughan emerges as a product of Renaissance Hermeticism, shaped by magician figures who engaged in a "unified theory of magic," a framework that allowed for his Rosicrucian positioning (275). Willard argues that categorizing Vaughan solely under the Rosicrucian label is overly restrictive, arguing instead for recognizing his broader contributions to the history of magical ideas and to intellectual history more generally (277).

Willard highlights aspects of Thomas Vaughan's thought that deepen our understanding of his work, demonstrating its continued relevance across academic perspectives. For instance, Vaughan recognized the "division between the exoteric and esoteric expressions of magical ideas," advising against artificially heightening Hermeticism's coherence or misrepresenting Rosicrucianism (277). Structurally, his writing incorporated "poetry to give readers pause . . . and perhaps lead them into the inward reflection" (213). Willard notes that Vaughan's thought is consistently composed of two counterbalancing "movements": an "onward movement" and an "inward movement of illumination" (158). His alchemical rhetoric employed a strategy of "saying one thing and meaning

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another," thereby exercising both concealment and discrete disclosure of information (160). Vaughan's dichotomies—such as the division between the natural and spiritual worlds—further parallel Emile Durkheim's and Mircea Eliade's categories of the sacred and the profane (137). Together, these contributions situate Vaughan's thought within a living intellectual tradition.

The alignment between Julius Evola's perspective on alchemy as "a special form of magic" and Vaughan's view of alchemy within the broader Hermetic tradition reinforces Vaughan's relevance to subsequent contributions on alchemical and esoteric thought (5). The similarity between Vaughan's and Evola's perspectives on "philosophical alchemy" provides a framework for further engaging with Evola's works, such as *The Hermetic Tradition*, in which alchemy is presented as a unified and universal tradition that serves as a key to comprehending other facets of Hermeticism, including its symbology and astrology. Situating Vaughan within the Hermetic tradition, Willard notes that there is "very little evidence of a secret tradition in alchemy . . . that there is no secret tradition as such, only a host of secrets and traditions" (146). Vaughan's placement within Hermeticism benefits those searching to understand the philosophy of alchemy as articulated by Evola and, by extension, provides context to other contributors to the traditionalist school of philosophy, such as René Guénon and Titus Burckhardt.

Viewing Vaughan exclusively through the lens of Rosicrucianism prevents discussion of topics such as alchemy, astrology, magic, and Kabbalah outside the Rosicrucian framework. Vaughan and the Rosicrucians shared an intellectual eclecticism built on an occult synthesis collectively termed "the new learning called Pansophia," which encompassed biblical exegesis, elements of Kabbalah, millenarian politics, magical procedures, and alchemical cures (145). Championing intellectual independence, Vaughan searched for virtues in knowledge areas regardless of prevailing assumptions, using an inner individuality to find meaning. Both Vaughan and the Rosicrucians "did not ignore secular literature and ideas, but rather tried to place such material in a new context" (146). Synthesizing information from multiple traditions—whether

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mystical, philosophical, or theological—demonstrates that true knowledge, for Vaughan, concerned not the "letter" but the "spirit" (153). Readers should avoid conflating distinct practices with their incorporation into Rosicrucianism. While Rosicrucianism was a singular current during Vaughan's lifetime, the movement remains secondary to the central focus on Vaughan himself.

Willard emphasizes that Vaughan's work, while Rosicrucian in character, belongs to a broader Hermetic complex of esoteric tradition. This context is facilitated through the book's structure, with the first two chapters being crucial to fully understanding Vaughan's historical and intellectual setting. The internal structure of the work effectively immerses the reader in the lens necessary to comprehend Vaughan's writing. While the first two chapters provide sufficient scaffolding for the remainder of the book, Vaughan's historical and textual obscurity may still challenge readers. Those already familiar with esoteric traditions are likely better fitted to navigating Vaughan's work, alongside the aforementioned topics presented in Willard's context.

In summary, Willard's *Thomas Vaughan and the Rosicrucian Revival in Britain* provides a critical examination of an area of scholarship unexplored in discourse and literature, offering the first full-length scholarly study of Thomas Vaughan and drawing attention to his continued obscurity compared to adjacent occult figures. Having reconciled mystical and rational thought, Vaughan acknowledged that reader engagement with language motivates both inner reflection and the revelation of information, distinguishing enlightened alchemical practitioners from those of "meer words." His intellectual eclecticism integrated folk culture and late classical texts from the extant European tradition into a coherent, synchronic worldview. Willard's work clarifies Vaughan's literary, philosophical, and intellectual output, positioning these contributions within an esoteric revolution shaped by Rosicrucian and Hermetic currents, and connecting readers to the enduring intellectual legacies of the early modern period.

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