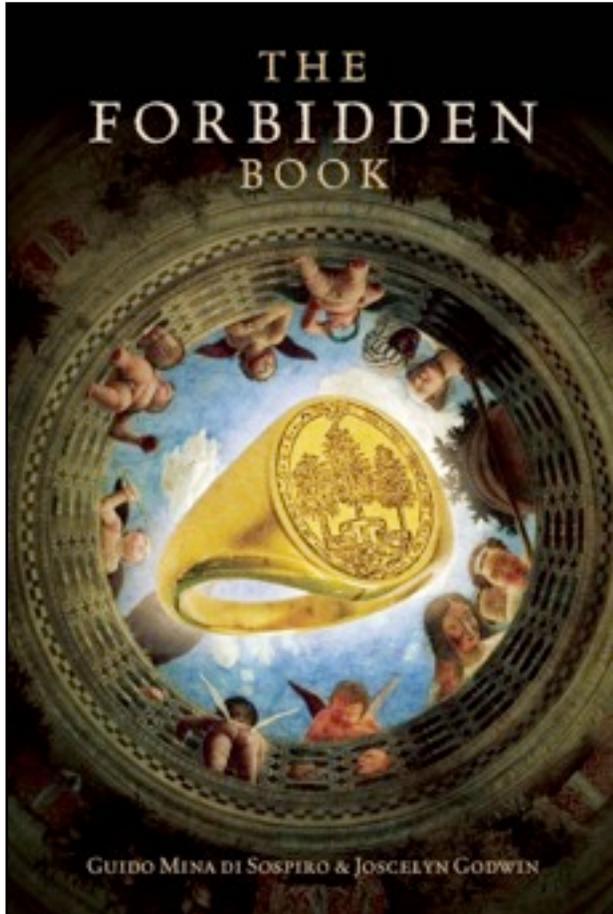


REVIEW:

'The Forbidden Book' by Guido di Sospiro and Joscelyn Godwin

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"The Forbidden Book"

Authors: Guido Mina di Sospiro and Joscelyn Godwin

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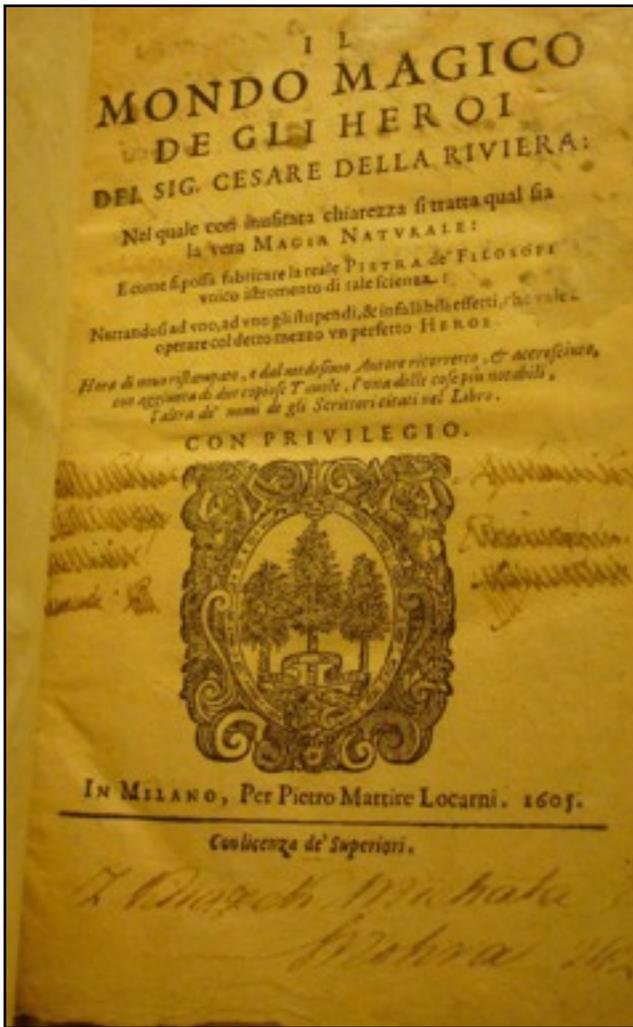
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From the start one should realize that *The Forbidden Book*, by Guido Mina di Sospiro and Joscelyn Godwin, is a novel, but it is also much more than a novel. As a novel, it incorporates all of the elements of a good, action-packed, adventure with a generous dose of love, intrigue, sex, and violence. Primary characters include Leonard Kavanaugh, chair of the Italian Department at Georgetown Uni-

versity (Washington, D.C.) who is in love with his former intern, some sixteen or so years his junior, the Italian Baroness Orsina Riviera della Motta. She is, in turn, in love with him despite having married the wealthy Englishman Nigel MacPherson. And there is Orsina's rather sinister uncle, patriarch of the ancient family, Baron Emanuele Riviera della Motta, who owns an ancestral villa near Verona and a palazzo on Venice's Grand Canal, as well as Orsina's younger sister, Angela Riviera della Motta. I will not give away the plot here, for those who wish to read this book simply as a novel should do so. It is a good story.

However, beyond the novelistic tale, this is a book that can (and should) be read at progressively deeper and more occult levels; it has multiple layers of meaning and contains profound insights into the ancient and enduring perennial philosophy. In many ways the central character of *The Forbidden Book* is a genuine book, first published in the early seventeenth century, *Il Mondo Magico de gli Heroi* by Cesare della Riviera (Mantua, 1603; Milan, 1605). *The Magical World of the Heroes* is a noble but obscure treatise that synthesizes the epitome of hermetic thinking in its age. The premise of the novel is that besides the published editions of *Il Mondo Magico*, there exists a private and secret, uncensored and unexpurgated, edition of the book that was successively passed down through the eldest generation of the Riviera family (with the Baroness Orsina being the most recent recipient; she calls on her former mentor, Prof. Kavanaugh, for help in understanding the difficult text). The secret edition of *Il Mondo Magico* is the "forbidden book" from which the novel derives its title. The concept of a secret edition is not unlike the understanding that Dr. John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica* (Antwerp, 1564) had an oral, or perhaps written but severely



restricted in its circulation, explanation that is now lost (or possibly still concealed, and known only to a select few). Indeed, Cesare della Riviera included an illustration (page 24 of the 1605 edition) and discussion of Dee's hieroglyphic monad in his work, although he never mentioned Dee by name (see Peter J. Forshaw, *Ambix* [Society for the History of Alchemy and Chemistry], November 2005). In their novel, Guido Mina di Sospiro and Joscelyn Godwin provide a number of authentic excerpts from *Il Mondo Magico* (the book has not yet been published in English, and the translations are by the authors) which provide a ready and fascinating introduction to the alchemical-magical practices of the late Italian Renaissance, a spiritual tradition that persists surreptitiously to this day. Reading their novel made me hunger for a full-fledged English translation of Cesare della Riviera's book.

One of the core themes of *Il Mondo Magico*, made clear in the novel, is the practical application of (or minimally, appreciation of) parapsychological phenomena. This is magic (magick), true magic, real magic, in the sense discussed by David Conway (a pseudonym, by the way) in his marvelous recent book *Magic without Mirrors: The Making of a Magician* (Logios Publishing, 2011). Now such magic (that is, paranormal phenomena) can be induced through the use of various ceremonies (including, in some cases, the harnessing and redirecting of sexual energies), instruments, sigils and symbols, spells, charms, regalia, and other paraphernalia associated with more outwardly oriented means of elicitation (as magisterially discussed by Eliphas Lévi [Alphonse-Louis Constant] in *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, Germer Baillière, Paris, 1856, 1861), or by more simple, unadorned, and inward means – it really depends on the personality, imagination, and volition of the individual or group involved. Both schools, both approaches, come through in *Il Mondo Magico* and are recounted in the novel; consequently *The Forbidden Book* can be seen as a primer on various forms of magical thinking.

In recent decades *Il Mondo Magico* has been reprinted a number of times, beginning in 1932 with a modernized Italian text, an introduction, and notes by the right-wing, reactionary, traditionalist, aristocratic, and heroic Italian esotericist and philosopher Baron Julius Evola (1898-1974). In the novel Baron Emanuele refers to this edition when he tells Prof. Kavenaugh that a good friend of the family brought the book back into print in the 1930s. The copy Kavenaugh purchases is described as having seven sleeping men on the cover, which can only refer to a more recent reprint of Evola's version of the book (published by Edizioni Arktos – my copy appears to lack a date, but bibliographers seem to agree on 1982 for this edition). Evola refers to *Il Mondo Magico* numerous times in his *La Tradizione Ermetica* (Giuseppe Laterza & Figli, Bari, 1931; *The Hermetic Tradition*, translated into English by E. E. Rehmus and published

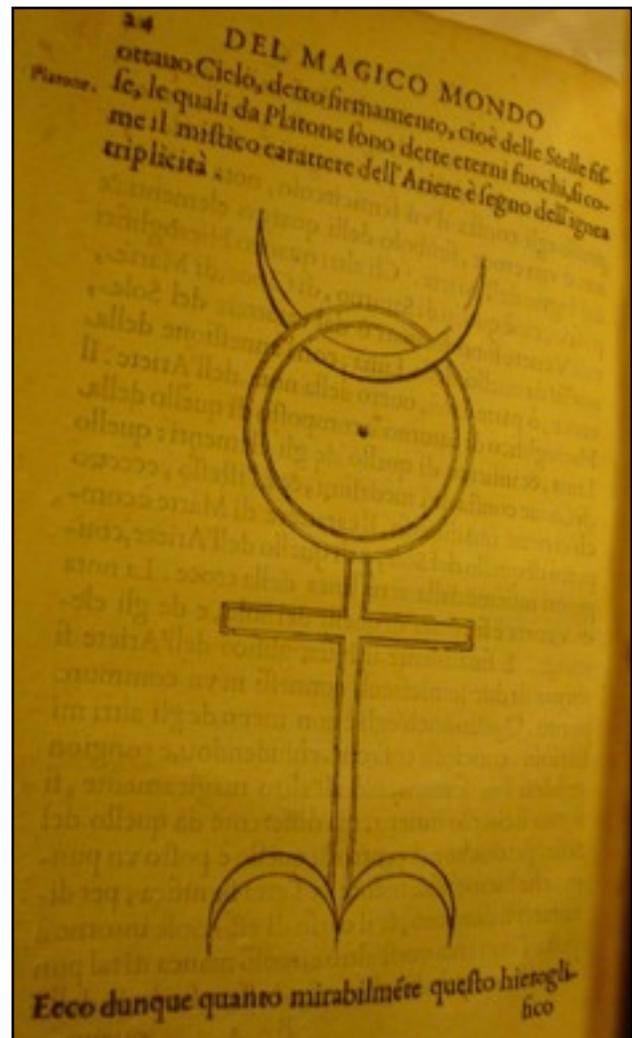
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by Inner Traditions, 1995). In his subsequent writings Evola elaborated on his elitist, anti-democratic, anti-Modernistic, and anti-materialistic ideas. As E. Christian Kopff has written, according to Evola's way of thinking, "Real men exist to attain knowledge of the transcendent and to strive and accomplish heroically" (*The Occidental Quarterly*, Summer 2002, p. 96). And, in Evola's own words (translated from the Italian), "Nothing is more evident than that modern capitalism is just as subversive as Marxism. The materialistic view of life on which both systems are based is identical" (quoted by Kopff, p. 96, from Evola's *Men Among the Ruins: Postwar Reflections of a Radical Traditionalist*, Inner Traditions, 2002, first published in Italian, *Gli Uomini e le Rovine*, Edizioni dell'Ascia, Rome, 1953). Baron Emanuele of the novel reflects many of the values espoused by the real life Evola. And Baron Emanuele put these values into action, both through his lectures and influence on his disciples and followers (his "sympathizers," as he referred to them), and via the application of alchemico-magico-sexual rituals – even if in the end the Baron's efforts were somewhat misguided, to put it mildly (but I will not ruin the story for the reader). Here we find another layer of meaning in *The Forbidden Book*.

A still deeper layer of meaning occurs at the level of allegory, and this in turn brings out another core theme of *Il Mondo Magico*. *The Forbidden Book* is among the latest in a long list of literary works in which the Hermetic tradition, the mental work, the Great Work (spiritually), the alchemical search for the Philosophers' Stone, is enciphered. A modern succinct key to such allegories is Roy Norvill's *The Language of the Gods* (Ashgrove Press, Bath, 1987). Norvill admirably introduces the subject: "The mind of Man is capable of a certain, deliberate act of will, the successful application of which results in his being elevated to a higher state of consciousness, a realm of beneficence such as he has often dreamed of but never considered a reality... attainment of this much desired goal places at

one's disposal powers [Norvill is writing of that which in other terms is referred to as paranormal or psychical powers] that, if misapplied, can adversely affect the lives of others . . . Accordingly . . . the initiates devised a form of advertising which, while open to all eyes, would be understood completely only by those in whom the sense of intuition was greater than ordinary reason" (p. 9). "Commonly, this method of encipherment is known by the term 'allegory', but in due deference to the wholly spiritual world to which it really refers, the initiates chose to call it the 'Language of the Gods'" (p. 10).

Whether consciously and intentionally, unconsciously (perhaps due to their heavy involvement in the subject), or simply coincidentally (perhaps it is synchronistic) on the



part of the authors, *The Forbidden Book* is a sublime allegory for the mental work of which Norvill writes. The classic allegorical pattern involves a hero who, among other things, may discover "a strange and ancient book" (Norvill, p. 26); undergoes arduous travels and travails in a quest for secret wisdom; is involved in magical contests, persecutions, and sacrifices; ultimately dies and is "reborn"; and finally discovers the "treasure." This allegory reflects the mental process of the adept. The hero, the adept in the making, initially is filled with doubt and skepticism relative to the spiritual, transcendent, nonmaterial world, and the mental work. A long and difficult period of concentration and meditation is required to still the mind, control the conscious thought stream, and tap into the higher consciousness (the pure consciousness, sometimes referred to as the subconscious, although there is nothing "sub" or "lower" about it). Backsliding may occur, and the would-be initiate may be subject to persecution and ridicule by those who do not understand (and most never will), and she or he may come to doubt and possibly even abandon the quest. Ultimately if the adept pushes on, new vistas and understandings, an entire new world (and the powers that go with it – paranormal wonders) is opened up. There is a death of the old and a rebirth, a resurrection in the form of a new mentality and being.

In many allegorical works of this genre, the process of the mental work is depicted in three major stages, often represented by different characters in the story, and key terms, names, phrases, and places are used to encode information about the mental work. Furthermore, these stages are classically associated with three standard colors (Norvill, pp. 31-32). Black portrays the beginning of the process for the would-be adept, the long and difficult labor to control the will and master the forces of one's own mind while cleansing one's psyche of erroneous (if commonly accepted) ideas and assumptions. White represents the second stage, the mastery by will power over thought. The final stage, the complete mastery

and control of one's own mind, and the power and gifts of the pure consciousness that are associated with this mastery, is symbolized by red. To give just a superficial indication (even a modestly complete analysis is not feasible here) of how these allegories are incorporated into *The Forbidden Book*, we can look at the descriptions and names of the primary characters.

Leonard Kavenaugh, the would-be adept and hero of the story, is described as having black hair (the first stage of the mental work) and blue eyes (potential for progress and insight). He is both physically handsome (potential to achieve the state of pure consciousness) but has an ugly past (the incessant mental thought stream that must be tamed and subdued). His name is that of a hero: Leonard, which can be interpreted as "lion-hearted" or brave, and Kavenaugh, which can be interpreted as "comely" or "handsome." The Baron has white hair; he has reached the second stage, but he uses it for evil and ugly purposes. He paints; he pursues the mental process. His unwitting accomplice is Angela, who is blonde, and has also (perhaps not entirely consciously) achieved the second stage; her female beauty is an allegory for mental reflection. And their names too are telling. Baron Emanuele ("God is with us," connoting that the Baron is attempting to harness the spiritual powers) Riviera (river bank or coast; the mental stream) della (a dual role, referring to either "noble" and/or "of the") Motta (a fortified stronghold; that is, the place where the mental work is pursued; the inner mind; the vessel, retort, or laboratory of the spiritual alchemist). Angela, the messenger of God, plays the role of go-between or intermediary, and is also a sacrificial lamb, the death of the old mentality. Orsina is beautiful (reflection; gifts of higher consciousness), with red hair and sunny green eyes. Red is the third stage of the mental work; green is often used to indicate initiation (Norvill, p. 32), and the Sun represents the pure consciousness. The name Orsina refers to a bear, perhaps an allusion to the Great Bear in the sky (Ursa Major), and I can-

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not help but also think of Osiris (perhaps just a superficial similarity of names), the Egyptian god and initiate who died and was resurrected (accomplished the Great Work). And then there is the incredibly wealthy and materialistic Nigel MacPherson. Nigel can be interpreted as referring to black, the first stage (if he should even be considered at the first stage, which is questionable) and MacPherson, which can mean son of the parson, or he who is responsible for church property (materialistic) and collects the offerings and tithes (monetary concerns as opposed to spiritual progress).

We should not forget to mention the supposed (according to the novel) Riviera heraldic shield, which appears on the title page of the 1605 edition of *Il Mondo Magico* (in fact, this colophon or printer's mark/device was used by the publisher/printer Pietro Martire Locarno on the title pages of a number of books that are not associated with Cesare della Riviera). It shows the Tree of Life, along with two other trees (possibly representing the occult and mental phenomena – this reviewer's interpretation, based on the Baron's comments in the novel), with the River of Life (according to the Baron, but not distinct in the 1605 colophon) flowing through their roots. On the actual 1605 colophon the motto "CRESCIT OCCVLTO" (it grows/increases by or from a hidden [source/knowledge]) appears on a banner across the three trees and the words "VELAS CVS" (extras/numerous [more] stand ready/guard) are written on the trunk of the middle tree (the crude interpretations of the mottos are by this reviewer).

I cannot confirm that the authors of *The Forbidden Book* consciously intended to write a Hermetic allegory (and I have only just scratched the surface in this interpretation of the book), but one thing is clear: The authors are in possession of a deep understanding of – and sympathy for – esoteric Hermeticism. In particular, Dr. Joscelyn Godwin, a professor at Colgate University, is an authority on various occult and esoteric subjects; among his many literary contributions is a foreword to the 2002

English-language edition of Evola's *Men Among the Ruins*.

The Forbidden Book has already been published in a number of languages (Spanish, Russian, Danish, Greek, Polish, Bulgarian, and Romanian), and it is a welcome addition to have it available in English. The Disinformation Company deserves hearty thanks. I encourage everyone to acquire a copy and read it closely!

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