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The Pseudo-Science Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe

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inextricably intertwined, just as the assumptions grow that the witch herself is driven by her own envy: “it was their infertile, hag-like bodies that impelled them enviously to attack the fertility of others” (97). Even more compelling is the fact that such ideas represent the “beliefs about witches, not the real emotional dynamics” playing out in the real world. Employing insights derived from her study of the history of emotion, Roper points out that what really happened “was not that the old woman felt envious, and then destroyed her neighbors’ cattle and crops or made their children die: rather, her neighbors feared envious attacks, identified the witch as the cause of misfortune, and then drove that person to her death” (113). The driving motivation of the witch-hunts was the envy of the accusers, not that of the victims, especially perhaps because that envy was subconscious. The resulting “murderous aggression” (113) was essentially “collective psychosis” (176) played out at the expense of those men and particularly women who suffered the onslaught.

Ultimately, this book is not the standard account of witchcraft, or even ideas about witches, in early modern Europe, but it does provide much food for thought. Why was the iconography of the witch not universally condemning? Why was the witch’s body female? Why weren’t emotions “at fever pitch” continuously? Although Roper does not always provide unassailable answers to these and other questions, this work, like her others, encourages readers to look beyond the established explanations, to stretch one’s imagination as it were.

Kathryn Brammall, Truman State University


Historian Michael D. Gordin’s *The Pseudo-Science Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe* opens with an astute statement about the nature of “pseudoscience”: “No one in the history of the world has ever self-identified as a pseudo-scientist. There is no person who wakes up in the morning and thinks to himself, ‘I’ll just head into my pseudolaboratory and perform some pseudoeperiments to try to confirm my pseudotheories with pseduofacts’” (p 1).

Those who study topics variously referred to as the paranormal, occult, new age, or fringe science are well aware of the good intentions of those who desire to prove the “reality” of ghosts, Bigfoot, ancient astronauts and the like. Ghost hunters utilize a host of equipment, invented technical terms, and protocols, and claim great skepticism in their desire to appear scientific. Seekers of Bigfoot and other “monsters” have
invented a new field, “cryptozoology” in their quest to be taken seriously by the scientific establishment. Yet neither subject has been able to avoid the label of “pseudo-science,” the placement of which marks a subject as not worthy of consideration and the people involved as lacking in credibility.

Gordin explores the power of the pseudo-science label via a historical case study of reaction to the works of Russian psychoanalyst Immanuel Velikovsky during the Cold War era (1940s - 1970s). Virtually unknown today outside of “fringe science” circles, Velikovsky argued in a series of books such as *Worlds in Collision* and *Earth in Upheaval*, that Earth’s early history was defined by a series of close passes by Venus, Mars, a large comet from Jupiter and other celestial bodies that produced a series of upheavals and catastrophes. This revised history, Velikovsky argued, made sense of many of our myths and legends by providing a natural explanation for the parting of the Red Sea, great plagues and other spectacular events.

Although Gordin provides a history of Velikovsky’s early life in Russia, his career in psychoanalysis and the genesis of his ideas regarding planetary upheaval, the book primarily focuses upon the extraordinary vehemence leveled at his theories by conventional scientists. Early book reviews of Velikovsky’s work by scientists (particularly astronomers) were particularly fervent and led to a successful campaign to have MacMillan pull the book and sell its rights to Doubleday.

Oftentimes scientists will simply ignore pseudo-scientific claims. Gordin ties the intensity of reaction to Velikovsky’s work to the World War II/Cold War era context in which that work appeared. Following World War II the American scientific establishment found itself blessed with both greater power and prestige than previously experienced and higher levels of anxiety about the possible threat to American scientific domination posed by Soviet scientists such as Trofim Lysenko. Branding Velikovsky as a crank acted as boundary maintenance; it provided clear signals as to what constituted proper science, Gordin argues.

Although Gordin does not draw this connection, his argument places the book within a strong existing literature in the study of functionalist perspectives on deviant behavior. For example, Kai Erikson’s *Wayward Puritans* persuasively argues that the Salem Witch Trials acted as boundary maintenance for early Puritans whose identity was in flux in the wake of the Antinomian Controversy. Having a clear, unambiguous villain to rally against, Erikson argues, served the needed function of strengthening the community. Labeling outsiders serves the complementary function of defining insiders.

As a historical case study, Gordin’s book sometimes focuses on the specific details of the Velikovsky case, but more on the general principles or lessons that we should learn from it. However, this careful case study of scientists protecting their boundaries should be read by those with an
interest in the sociology of science, deviant behavior and/or the New Age and fringe sciences.

Christopher D. Bader, Chapman University


At some point in the 1980s a frantic Mormon missionary rammed the shaft of an umbrella into the gaping mouth of an aggressive dog in an alleyway in La Paz, Bolivia, wrenched the bloody tip from its throat as the beast died, and brandished it before the stunned local children, who henceforth greeted him with the chant “Gringo, jeringo!” (Roughly, “Gringo the Impaler.”) Or so David Knowlton retells the story. It illustrates in particular lurid microcosm the rough assimilation Anglo-American missionaries faced in the rough streets and persistent poverty of this part of the world – and more, the service folklore offers in the steady transformation of Mormon life and culture. Over and over again in *Latter-day Lore* we are told about the power of stories to manage anxieties, express aspirations, and offer motifs for self-definition.

But, as Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould, the co-editors of this volume, make clear, stories are far from the only such expression. Eliason and Mould clearly intend *Latter-day Lore* to be a landmark: it is comprehensive and sweeping in both chronology and scope, with essays dating from the 1940s to the present and ranging in theme from hay derricks Mormon pioneers built in rural Idaho to nineteenth-century Maori legend to dating patterns among suburban Utah high school students. To a great extent they have succeeded. The volume consists of twenty-eight essays divided into six parts, covering, in the parlance of Jill Terry Rudy, “things people make, things people do, and things people say.” (337) The sections cover topics like Mormon landscapes and material culture; Mormon customs and lifeways; Mormon history, both events and folk heroes; humor, including jokes and tricksters; and, finally, the most awkwardly organized section, entitled “Beyond Deseret,” which, oddly, focuses on American Mormon missionaries rather than the experiences of non-American Mormons, though Eliason and Mould argue that they seek to examine the ways American Mormons come to terms with their rapidly diversifying church.

The essays in the longest section of the book discuss the supernatural, which Eliason and Mould note is among the most distinctive and persistent themes in Mormon folklore. These essays deal with the Three Nephites, disciples of Jesus granted immortality in the Book of Mormon, whose presence in Mormon folklore rivals (and sometimes