

Book Review

By Bro. Robert Blackburn, P.M.



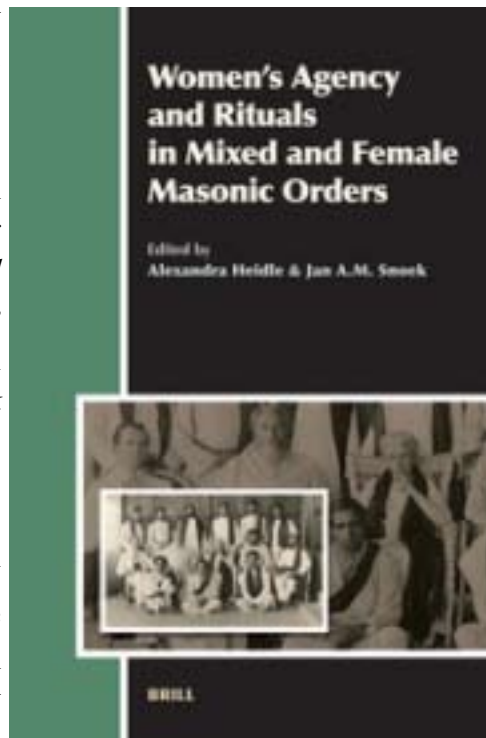
Women's Agency and Rituals in Mixed and Female Masonic Orders, ed. Alexandra Heidle and Jan A.M. Snoek (Brill, Boston 2008, \$ 219.00 USD)

WOMEN'S AGENCY AND RITUALS IN MIXED AND FEMALE MASONIC ORDERS

Freemasonry is increasingly becoming a “respectable” topic for academic consideration, particularly as it intersects specialized areas of research such as globalization and gender studies. *Women's Agency and Rituals in Mixed and Female Masonic Orders* is the eighth volume in “*Brill's Aries Book Series: Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism*.”

A collection of scholarly essays, this book examines the varied relationships women have had with Freemasonry over the centuries through “adoptive,” mixed/female, and assorted esoteric bodies. Specifically, it explores two aspects of these connections, “(w)omen's agency (ie. the power women gained and exercised in this context) and rituals (ie. women in changing and shaping the rituals they work with).”

The first essay is an historical survey of female Masonry. Craft Masonry, it is now known, was predominantly, though not *exclusively*, a male organization. From the middle ages



until the early 18th century, women were, in rare instances, admitted into this guild and even served as masters. By contrast, Speculative Masonry, appearing in the mid to late 17th century England, Scotland, and Ireland, was established as an all-male fraternal organization. Mixed-gender clubs, like the “Order of the *Mopses*” (so named for a breed of lap dog), and “adoption” lodges (female or mixed bodies working a specially developed “Masonic” ritual), had to wait for the Fraternity's transmission to the Continent

- and then did not begin to appear until after 1740.

Adoption lodges remained the sole Masonic forum available to women for the next hundred years. By the late 19th century, however, a growing feminist movement prompted some Masonic lodges to directly initiate women. This led to the first truly gender-mixed Masonic order, *Le Droit Humain*, in 1893. The LDH continues as a world-wide organization today.

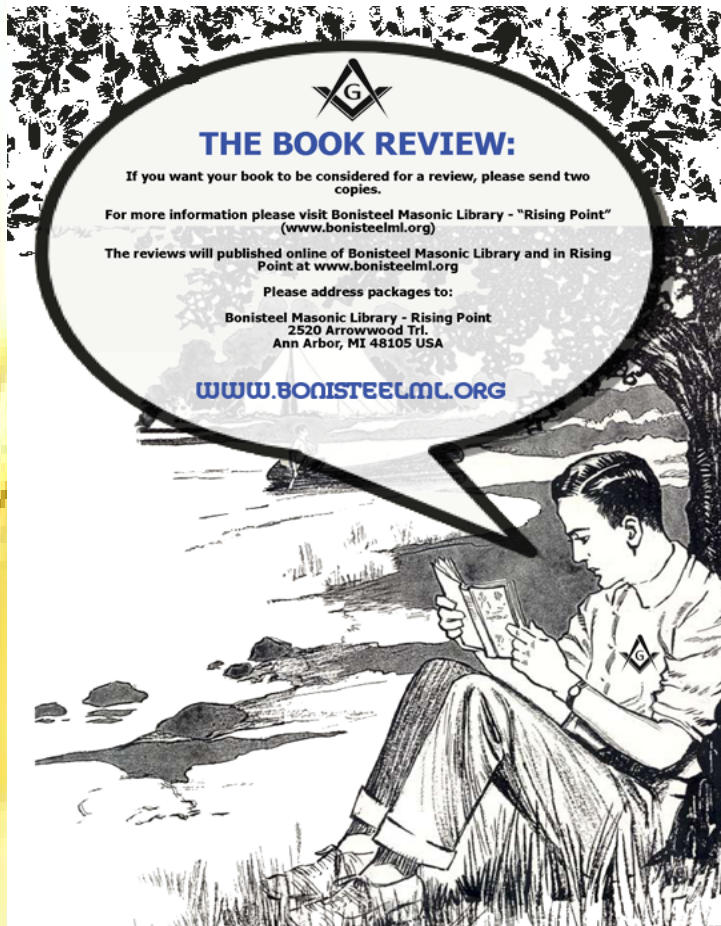
Notable offspring of this body include, in England, the Order of Women Freemasons (1958). Moreover, Adoptive Masonry in France and Germany laid the groundwork for such purely female Masonic bodies as the *Union Maconnique Feminine de France* (1945) (now the *Grand Loge Feminine de France*) and the Women's Grand Lodge of Germany (1949).

The following essays examine, in greater detail, the earliest attempts at female fraternalism through biographical sketches of, among others, Annie Besant, Theosophist protégé of Madame Blavatsky, and Mina Mathers, Florence Farr, and Annie Horniman of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. All are well-referenced - providing opportunity for further research -

and include select bibliographies. Even more intriguing is the inclusion of obscure source materials, such as a proposed female Strict Observance ritual, in both its original German and English translation.

Women's Agency and Rituals in Mixed and Female Masonic Orders represents an important step forward in documenting and interpreting this "irregular" side of Masonry. At \$219.00 USD, however, it is unlikely to find a home in most personal Masonic libraries. Instead, eager readers, once they've recovered from the sticker shock, should request their local Masonic or public libraries to purchase it, making the book available to a wider audience.

Women's Agency and Rituals in Mixed and Female Masonic Orders - website: <http://www.brill.nl/women-s-agency-and-rituals-mixed-and-female-masonic-orders>



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