

Magic

1. Introduction

The history of magic became in the 1990s an increasingly important field of medieval history. New scholarship was able to show that magic was practised at every level of medieval society and engaged the greatest minds of the time. Contrary to a previous historiographical focus on crude superstitions, historians have demonstrated that magic texts reveal medieval people's syncretic, sophisticated and morally ambiguous understanding of their universe, and that learned magic was tolerated or even valued by diverse people and institutions, including religious insiders. The concept of magic can reveal the interior lives and lived experience of medieval people because magical activities express the desire to have agency over daily or emotional challenges, familiarity or experimentation with rituals, and an interest in having spiritual experiences and investigating the uses of natural objects.

The category of medieval magic – *ars magica* – is capacious. This is firstly because it includes many analogues and subcategories, such as natural magic (*magia naturalis*), necromancy (*nigromantia*) and sorcery (*sortilegia*), that demarcate different techniques, sources of power, types of practitioner and degrees of social approval. Secondly, the spectrum of practices that could be classified by medieval observers as magical ranges from the recitation of words or incantations over everyday objects like knots, bread and cloth, to complex ritual magic texts like the *Ars notoria*, whose full complement of ascetic preparations and rituals took at least three years to perform.¹ Thirdly, the diversity of types of source means that the historian of magic needs to build connections between the visual and material culture of magic that was part of its ritual performance, and the 'ritual residues' and 'odd deposits' studied in the separate field of archaeology.² Finally, the views of readers and authorities as to what constituted magic and what should be condemned changed over the course of the Middle Ages, from the embrace of occult knowledge and its possibilities in the period immediately following the translating movement (twelfth to mid thirteenth centuries), to the increasingly hostile fifteenth-century scrutiny of charms, curses, amulets and other forms of common magic, as the mythology of witchcraft began to take a more defined shape and anxieties about harmful magic increased.³

It is important to view medieval belief in the reality of magic as rational because attempting to conjure spirits, channel celestial power into objects or manipulate occult

¹ Burchard of Worms, *Corrector* (c.1008-12), book XIX, 63. Véronèse, Julien. 2007. *L'Ars notoria au Moyen Age. Introduction et édition critique*. Florence: Sismel.

² García Avilés, Alejandro. The Visual Culture of Magic in the Middle Ages; Page, Sophie. Medieval magical figures: Between image and text, and Gilchrist, Roberta. 2018. Magic and archaeology: Ritual residues and "odd" deposits. In *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. Sophie Page and Catherine Rider, 383-458. London: Routledge.

³ Boudet, Jean-Patrice. 2007. *Entre science et nigromance: Astrologie, divination et magie dans l'Occident médiéval* (XIIe-Xve siècle). Paris : Sorbonne, 2007, and Bailey, Michael, 2013. *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

properties in natural objects made sense within the medieval understanding of the cosmos.⁴ Nevertheless, some medieval authors expressed scepticism about the claims of magical and other occult practitioners and viewed their apparatuses of occult names, images and qualities as arbitrary human constructions that expressed fake knowledge, that is unconnected to the accepted domains of knowledge expressed by mainstream religion and science.⁵ Recent historiography, not always uncontroversially, has also approached the question of belief in magic by unpacking the psychological and cognitive conditioning and deliberate deceit and sleight of hand that contributed to subjectively convincing experiences of magic.⁶ Finally, before we distance ourselves from superstitious ignorance and non-modern ways of thinking we should note that many contemporary psychologists have argued that magical thinking (the belief that our thoughts or wishes may influence the world around us or that one event happens as a result of another with no plausible link of causation) is an integral part of human cognition and part of our current lived experience too.⁷

From the Middle Ages to the present the concept of magic has been applied to texts, images and objects that observers find challenging to place, understand or approve of, and how to approach it continues to provoke lively discussion among historians. In the recent *Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, Richard Kieckhefer argued that ‘magic’ was too general and ambiguous a term to permit rigorous analysis and instead proposed that scholars view it as an ‘aggregative term’ and focus their energy on identifying and refining its ‘constitutive’ terms, such as ‘conjunction’, ‘symbolic manipulation’ and ‘directly efficacious volition.’⁸ In the same volume, Claire Fanger engaged positively with the challenge of magic as a large, abstract and ambiguous term that can ‘make reality manageable in conversation.’⁹ For Fanger, the value of magic lies in its marking a particular kind of problem in medieval thought: how to deal with phenomena whose causes were mysterious or opaque.

It is possible to study and write about medieval magic using only the ‘emic’ concepts of medieval writers. These are found in both the ‘insider discourses’ articulated by those who theorised about, practised, or read and collected magic texts, and those of the clerics and lay writers who condemned them. Although historians have tended to specialise in either the pro-magical or anti-magical genres, it can be useful to view these as part of the

⁴ Kieckhefer, Richard. 1994. The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic. *American Historical Review* 99: 813-836. Weill-Parot, Nicolas. 2010. Astrology, astral influences, and occult properties in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. *Traditio* 65: 201-230.

⁵ Sceptics (or authors presenting sceptical positions) include William of Auvergne, Bishop of Paris (c.1180-1249), the natural philosopher and theologian Nicole Oresme (ca.1320-1382) and the legal scholar Ulrich Molitoris (ca.1442-1507). On Augustine’s view of magic as fake knowledge see Fanger, Claire. 2019. For Magic. Against Method. In *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, 28-29.

⁶ See the Special Issue on Magic and Cognition. Summer 2012. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 7, 1, and the discussion of Nicole Oresme’s attack on magicians below.

⁷ See, for example, Subbotsky, Eugene. 2010. *Magic and the Mind: Mechanisms, Functions, and Development of Magical Thinking and Behavior*. Oxford: University Press and *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*, ed. Sophie Page and Marina Warner. 2018. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum Press.

⁸ See also Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausber’s proposal that scholars identify the ‘patterns of magicity’ particular to their sources from a catalogue of features of magic. 2013. *Defining Magic. A Reader*, 1-4. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing.

⁹ Fanger, For Magic, 34.

same conversation engaged in by members of the same social order.¹⁰ In the case of necromancy (*necromantia* or *nigromantia*), for example, a category of ritual magic that involved conjuring demons to do the operator's will, authors, practitioners and critics alike were mainly drawn from the clerical class, although some historians think that enthusiasts for this kind of magic belonged to a 'clerical underworld' of clerics with minimal training and education, and unfulfilled ambitions.¹¹

Historians also use 'etic' concepts and categories, that is those created by historians to address particular challenges in the sources or to enable a comparative history of magic that is (in theory) more free of value judgments than contemporary sources.¹² For example, 'common magic' and the 'common tradition of magic' have been used by historians to demarcate magical practices that were widely known, rooted in everyday life, did not require a high degree of education and did not necessarily make use of religious rituals or language.¹³ Richard Kieckhefer's use of 'the common tradition of magic' was an explicit rejection of the problematic concept of 'popular magic' in order to draw attention to shared magic practices across social groups, such as making rings and talismans, inscribing knives and pieces of clothing, preparing ritual concoctions and performing rituals which drew on the natural powers of celestial bodies, herbs, stones and animal parts. The neutral associations of the term 'common magic' for practices carried out by non-literate people appealed to Catherine Rider as a counterbalance to hostile terms such as superstition (*superstitio*) and sorcery (*sortilegium*) that dominated discussion of magic in the surviving sources she was using: statutes of Church councils, penitentials, sermons and devotional treatises.

For historians of learned magic, 'etic' concepts can be used to focus on 'insider discourses' rather than on critical perspectives. In her introduction to the first collection of studies on ritual magic texts intended to persuade angels to confer knowledge and spiritual benefits, Claire Fanger proposed using the concept 'theurgy' (in summary: practices that engage with the divine) to give validity to authors who used or adapted magic rituals to initiate spiritual experiences.¹⁴ Another influential 'etic' concept in the recent historiography of medieval magic is Nicolas Weill-Parot's category of 'addressative magic.' 'Addressative' here refers to any ritual elements – prayers, invocations, inscriptions and other magical signs – that were, or were assumed to be, addressed by the human practitioner to another Intelligence (angels, demons or other spirits).¹⁵ The concept of 'addressative magic' engages in a helpful way with the thought processes behind medieval thinkers' assessment of magic texts, to demonstrate why texts from diverse traditions – Arabic, Jewish and Christian – were condemned in similar ways. It also explains the strength of the emic category of

¹⁰ Fanger, *For Magic*, 27. See also Ostorero, Martine. 2019. Witchcraft. In *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, 502-522 on the need for dialogue between historians of magic and historians of witchcraft.

¹¹ Kieckhefer, Richard. 1998. *Forbidden Rites*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press.

¹² For an example of using 'ideal types' to compare magic in different chronological and cultural contexts, see D'Avray. *The Concept of Magic*.

¹³ Rider, Catherine. 2015. Common Magic. In *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West*, ed. David J. Collins, 303-31. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Kieckhefer, Richard. 1989. *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 56-90.

¹⁴ Fanger, Claire, ed. 2012. *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, 1-33. University Park, PA: Penn State Press and Julien Véronèse's chapter in the same volume.

¹⁵ Weill-Parot, Nicolas. 2002. Astral Magic and Intellectual Changes (Twelfth-Fifteenth Centuries): "Astrological Images" and the Concept of "Addressative" Magic. In *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, 167-86. Leuven: Peeters.

'natural magic' (*magia naturalis*), a category of texts in which no magical signs were identified by critics and which tends to survive in larger numbers than other genres.

Medieval magic has been described as 'a point of intersection between religion and science,' and the concept has attracted the interest of both historians of science and historians of religion. For Lynn Thorndike, one of the earliest historians of magic, it was part of the history of 'experimental science'; that is, it represented an early branch of knowledge that identified natural properties and tested their effects through observation and experience.¹⁶ Other historians, however, have interpreted magical practice as a religious activity that expressed a human desire to engage with the numinous, and aimed, like other sacred rituals, to strengthen or sever relationships between people, overcome material obstacles, and spread good or evil by protecting a community or introducing sickness and death.¹⁷ To some extent these divergent views of magic can be explained by the fact that they focus on different genres of magic, as texts that describe how to conjure spirits may be more 'religious' than the more 'scientific' endeavour of exploiting occult properties in nature. But too strong a division between these two types of magic obfuscates that many learned magic texts include elements of both and that the two genres were often compiled together in manuscripts, suggesting they were of interest to the same collectors and practitioners. In the current state of the field it is worth noting that studies putting magic in its religious context predominate, but this is primarily a reflection of the expertise of historians, many of whom are based in religious studies departments, rather than a rejection of the importance of the relationship between magic and science. In the rest of this chapter I will show the ways in which the concept of magic can provide insights into medieval life and thought through a discussion of its relationship with religion, science, politics and society.

2. Magic and Religion

The close relationship between mainstream Christianity and ritual magic can be seen most clearly in magic texts authored, collected and practised by Christians, usually grouped by historians under the categories 'angel magic' and 'necromancy.' Christian ritual magic texts were influenced by Arabic astral magic and Jewish angel magic, and the ways in which these traditions had already adapted rituals to engage with spirits to a monotheistic world view, for example by emphasising that the success of the operation depended upon the will of God. After the mid thirteenth century, the identification, circulation and condemnation of learned magic texts was such that it would have been difficult to claim ignorance of the opprobrium and risk attached to them. Nevertheless many Christian authors claimed that their souls (though not those of all potential users) were not sullied by an interest in magic, and some clearly believed that magic was a practice good Christians could engage in.¹⁸

Angel magic involved performing rituals to persuade angels to help the practitioner achieve various pious goals, notably the acquisition of knowledge, an increased likelihood of

¹⁶ Thorndike, Lynn. 1923-1958. *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁷ Kieckhefer, Richard. 1994. The Holy and the Unholy: Sainthood, Witchcraft, and Magic in late Medieval Europe. *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24: 355-85

¹⁸ See for example the note added to the image magic text entitled, the *Glossulae*: 'whoever you are who has found these <words>, I ask through Christ that you do not reveal them unless by chance to a good and benevolent man, and if you do the contrary, may your soul be imperiled and not that of the writer. Amen.' Page, Sophie. 2013. *Magic in the Cloister*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 146.

salvation and the vision of God.¹⁹ Necromancy was the practice of safely conjuring and gaining control over demons in order to compel them to perform tasks such as revealing buried treasure or bringing a desired partner into the practitioner's presence.²⁰ Texts belonging to both these genres involved wholesale adaptation of mainstream Christian practices (such as fasting, meditation and prayer), texts (for example liturgical prayers, exorcism rituals and sacramental language) and goals (such as salvation, the beatific vision and exercising control over demons). There were also more subtle Christian sensibilities embedded in the texts: respect for the efficacy of ritual actions and objects, awe of God's power and the purity of angels, a longing for spiritual experience and fear of the malignity of demons. Finally, while it is the case that most magic rituals were performed for the personal benefit of the practitioner, some angel magic texts – notably the *Liber Razielis* and the *Liber de essentia spirituum* – exhort magical practitioners to act explicitly as instruments of God's will: following their ascent to the level of angels using magical techniques, they are to return to the earth with a prophetic message and gather followers.²¹

In addition to their adaptation to the needs, habits and desires of Christian authors and practitioners, the cosmologies of learned magic texts in circulation in late Medieval Europe were by their nature syncretic and allusive because they had originated in Greco-Roman, Arabic, and Jewish traditions. To some extent of course these allusions were intentional. Flexible and ambiguous rationales, mythologies, and cosmological foundations meant that rituals were adaptable to each practitioner's own cosmological certainties (of angels, demons, God, nature, spirits, stars and so on). The authors of magic texts introduced cosmological elements, not primarily in order to elucidate or endorse a particular view of the universe but rather to map which elements in the universe could be manipulated by the practitioner and how this could be done. Inevitably this ambiguity and flexibility provoked critics, who saw demonic languages in magical characters that imitated the constellations, idols in astrological images, and delusion in the idea that one could control spirits. Critics of magic perceptively identified other emotions and desires mingling with the appropriately Christian attitudes of awe of God, deference to angels, purification rituals and performative piety. In necromantic rituals, the basic Christian framework of requesting the aid of God and the saints to subdue demons is combined with exhortations to secrecy, the aesthetics of grand court illusions, curiosity about spirits, thrill seeking and clerical longing for the secular trappings of success (horses, lovers, and the favour of princes).²²

Angel magic texts defended their art in ways that were positive but distinct from mainstream Christian practices and sensibilities, especially in their capacious category of good or neutral spirits with whom the practitioner had ambiguous relationships, sometimes including the ability to constrain them. In this respect, this genre may have been influenced by Arabic astral magic, in which a spirit's malice or benevolence depended on its planetary ruler.²³ The Christian author of the early fourteenth century *Liber iuratus* presents magic as the practice of a virtuous Christian using a consecrated book to compel good and evil spirits to do his bidding.²⁴ Similarly, Antonio da Montulmo, a fourteenth-century Italian theorist of

¹⁹ See Fanger, Claire. Ed. *Invoking Angels*.

²⁰ Kieckhefer, Richard. *Forbidden Rites*.

²¹ See Page, Sophie. 2012. Uplifting Souls: *The Liber de essentia spirituum* and the *Liber Razielis*. In Fanger, ed., *Invoking Angels*, 79–112.

²² Klaassen, Frank. 2007. Learning and Masculinity in Manuscripts of Ritual Magic of the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance. *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 38/1: 49-76

²³ See Weill-Parot, Astral magic.

²⁴ See the chapters by Katelyn Mesler and Jan R. Veenstra in Fanger. *Invoking Angels*.

magic, identified magical practitioners as special and often especially virtuous individuals (in his case virgins, old women and men who had been born with exceptional nativity horoscopes) who worked with a set of universal rules and occult operations to compel spirits in the order Intelligences.²⁵ The idea and practice of necromancy has particular interest for the student of medieval religion. It is important as an adaptation of a mainstream ritual – exorcism – to personal and unorthodox ends.²⁶ The image of the necromancer was prominent in anti-magical literature, where it often stood for the whole concept of magic and certainly its most transgressive sense.²⁷ Finally, the circulation, practice and representation of necromantic rituals contributed to the development of and belief in witchcraft mythologies and is thus part of the origins of the witchcraft persecutions.²⁸

The idea that a belief in magic might, counter-intuitively, be useful to the Church is expressed by the influential theologian Thomas Aquinas, who thought that stories about necromancers provided to sceptical lay people persuasive evidence for the existence of demons.²⁹ By the fifteenth century, however, necromancy had become an inconvenient model for the idea of humans entering into willing relationships with demons because it remained – by reputation and probably in practice – the preserve of elite male specialists trained in rituals. Eventually the idea that the necromancer's 'cursed imagination' foolishly led him to believe that he controlled spirits rather than that he was being deceived by them was superseded by the idea of the demonic pact, in which men and women actively entered into relationships with demons and in exchange for their souls gained the ability to wield harmful magic.³⁰ One of the most important questions faced by the historian of medieval magic is the question, still in its historiographical infancy, of how this concept contributed to the origins of witchcraft mythologies and persecutions.³¹

3. Magic and Science

Natural philosophy (natural science in our modern terminology) and magic had a close relationship in the late Middle Ages. The translation of Greek and Arabic scientific and philosophical texts into Latin in Spain, Sicily and the Middle East from the late eleventh century influenced medieval Christian conceptions of nature and the cosmos and provided scholars in the Latin West with a new technical vocabulary to describe their universe. In Muslim Spain the exact sciences were inextricably mixed up with astrology and magic and this pattern of interests was continued by Latin translators, debated by scholastic thinkers and embraced by the collectors of texts in both genres. The new university based discipline

²⁵ Antonio da Montolmo, *De occultis et manifestis*. Edited and translated by Nicolas Weill-Parot and Julien Véronèse. In Fanger. *Invoking Angels*, 238–87.

²⁶ See especially, Véronèse, Julien and Florence Chave-Mahir. 2015. *Rituel d'exorcisme ou manuel de magie ? Le manuscrit Clm 10085 de la Bayerische Staatsbibliothek de Munich (début du XVe siècle)*. Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo.

²⁷ García Avilés. *The Visual Culture of Magic*.

²⁸ See, for example, Bailey, Michael. 2002. *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *De malo*, Q. 16, article 1.

³⁰ Bailey, Michael. 2002. The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch. *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19: 120–134; Boureau, Alain. 2006. *Satan the Heretic*. Trans. Theresa L. Fagan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. On the cursed imagination see John Lydgate, *The pilgrimage of the life of man* (1426), l.18609.

³¹ A good place to start with this question is Boudet *Entre science et nigromance*, 431-508.

of natural philosophy developed its own literature to describe and analyse the structure and operation of the cosmos with all its objects and creatures. Learned magic texts claimed to reveal the occult properties of natural objects and living beings, and their instructions for using these in rituals, recipes and crafted objects signalled their aspiration to be a technology.

Medieval critics of magic texts were aware of their claims to reveal hidden knowledge of the natural world. In her *Liber vitae meritorum* of 1158 the Abbess, visionary and author Hildegard of Bingen personified Magic (*maleficium*) as a monstrous hybrid creature with the body of a dog, the head of a wolf and the tail of a lion.³² Magic argues that her disciples, Hermes and other philosophers, were wise men (*sapientes*) who through their investigations of the cosmos learned how to harness the elements.³³ They became (Magic declares) pre-eminent experts in the arts of the planets, trees, herbs and all animals, and their study of natural causes was a worthy enterprise because God had created all natural things to benefit humankind.³⁴ Hildegard does not deny the knowledge of these wise men, but asserts that their learning was acquired only partly from God and partly from evil spirits. Here Hildegard touches on a theme common to arguments defending magic and arguments condemning it: that the *scientia* of ritual magic was acquired through a constant process of revelation and communication with spirits.

In the *Picatrix*, a Latin translation (ca 1256) of pseudo-al-Majriti's *Ghayat al-hakim* and one of the most complex magic texts in circulation in late Medieval Europe, magic is presented as the culmination of human knowledge. The ideal practitioner of magic is a *philosophus perfectus* who has mastered natural philosophy, metaphysics, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy.³⁵ His goal is to use his investigation of the cosmos to create tools for magical practice, for example by identifying significant shapes in the heavens and then using them in rituals to draw down celestial power.³⁶ This exemplary magician has acquired his wisdom from a study of the cosmos and books but derives his power from the planets dominant in his nativity (the astrological chart drawn up for the moment of his birth) and the aid of celestial spirits. Indeed, the founder of magic, Caraphzebiz, is said to have had a 'familiar' (a spirit who remained with him as his companion) who performed marvels for him, helped him understand the secrets of nature and the sciences, and came when invoked with sacrifices.³⁷

Magic could also be thought of as one of the branches of science. In the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the period in which Greek and Arabic philosophy and science was being translated and assimilated in the Latin West, some medieval thinkers gave the name 'necromancy' to 'the science of properties of natural things' when these derived from occult causes.³⁸ This term, probably originating in Isidorian traditions, first became prominent as a Latin translation of the Arabic word *sihr* that designated magic in the *Picatrix* and other

³² *Liber vitae meritorum*, ed. Angela. Carlevaris. 1995, 222-3. Turnhout: Brepols. The animal parts of the personification are explained as follows: the wolf devours lambs like the devil devours sinners; the lion's tail stirs up hatred and tyranny; and the dog chases evil things.

³³ *Liber vitae meritorum*, 222.

³⁴ *Liber vitae meritorum*, 222.

³⁵ *Picatrix Latinus*, II, ii, 3.

³⁶ *Picatrix Latinus*, II, v, 2.

³⁷ *Picatrix Latinus*, III, vi, 3.

³⁸ Draelants, Isabelle. 2019. The notion of "Properties": Tensions between *Scientia* and *Ars* in medieval natural philosophy and magic. In *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, 169-186.

texts.³⁹ In some Latin texts on the classification of the sciences, necromancy was grouped with other practical sciences that involved the study of the four elements such as medicine, agriculture, astrology, alchemy, optics and navigation, even though its activities were classified as unlawful when they were suspected of operating by means of evil spirits. Necromancy thus lay on the borders of natural philosophy because it could be considered either natural (in accord with nature) or supernatural (involving rituals directed to spirits).

The most important development for the classification of some kinds of magic as part of natural science, however, was the appearance of the concept of natural magic (*ars magica naturalis*) in the work of the Parisian bishop William of Auvergne. Natural magic was the study of surprising natural phenomena whose effects could (in theory) be experienced by the senses, such as the power of the peony to prevent epilepsy, the magnet to attract iron or the basilisk to kill with its gaze. These extraordinary effects were caused by 'occult' properties in nature, that is those whose causes were invisible, but which natural philosophers explained with reference to the heavens or the 'substantial' form of the matter itself.⁴⁰ For William these natural wonders originated in the creative power of God, and the concept of 'natural magic' was part of a new and positive approach to nature, inspired on the one hand by enthusiasm for Aristotle and on the other by the desire to emphasise the goodness of Creation and God's creative versatility in the wake of the threat of the Cathar heresy and its hostile approach to the physical world.

The new concept of magic provided legitimisation for the authors, collectors and practitioners of texts compiling the properties of stones, plants and animals. These were sometimes called books of *experimenta*, and included both a 'native' heritage of Latin magic and newly translated texts of Arabic and Greco-Roman magic. Some works of natural magic incorporated scientific theories in order to make their claims for efficacy and orthodoxy more persuasive, such as concepts of celestial influence, the placebo effect, and similarity and universal sympathy.⁴¹ The magnet's ability to attract iron was a popular example in magic texts of a striking property that could be experienced by the senses but was difficult to explain. Indeed, the idea that magicians were 'maystres by experience' – that is that their art had progressed through experimentation and observation – is expressed by the messenger of Necromancy in John Lydgate's *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, as he tries to disrupt the journey of the pilgrim to the heavenly city, declaring moreover that Solomon, Virgil, Saint Cyprian and Abelard had all been practitioners of this art.⁴² In theory, natural magic did not involve ritual, craft or the invocation of spirits, but in practice many books of *experimenta* included such human interventions in their instructions on how to collect, prepare and activate natural substances for use. Although some medieval thinkers thought that it was not possible for humans to craft magical objects without the assistance of demons, others allowed for the natural power of words and astrological images.⁴³

³⁹ Draelants. The notion of "Properties", 176.

⁴⁰ Weill-Parot, Nicolas. 2013. *Points aveugles de la nature : l'occulte, l'attraction magnétique et l'horreur du vide* (XIIIe-milieu du XVe siècle). Paris, Les Belles Lettres.

⁴¹ For example, the *De mirabilibus mundi*, ed. Antonella Sannino. 2011. *Il "De mirabilibus mundi" tra tradizione magica e filosofia naturale*. Florence: Sismel, and Qusta ibn Luqa's *De phisicis ligaturis*, ed. Judith Wilcox and John M. Riddle. 1994. Qustâ ibn Lûqâ's Physical Ligatures and the Recognition of the Placebo Effect. *Medieval Encounters* 1, 1: 1-25.

⁴² John Lydgate, *The pilgrimage of the life of man*, ll.18731-39.

⁴³ Weill-Parot, Nicolas. 2002. *Les «images astrologiques» au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance: spéculations intellectuelles et pratiques magiques (XIIIe-XVe siècle)*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 303-340

Even when they accepted that some natural knowledge was part of magical practice, critics argued that powerful natural substances were combined with the arts of illusion to provoke harm and confusion. In his *Treatise on the Configurations of Qualities and Motions*, the natural philosopher and theologian, Nicole Oresme (c. 1320–1382), described how magicians used psychoactive substances, powerful odours, music, dramatic shifts in light and darkness and tricks with mirrors to create terrifying and discombobulating illusions that their audience interpreted as supernatural manifestations.⁴⁴ Moreover, to increase the success of their performances, he declared that magicians deliberately targeted those likely to be most vulnerable to their trickery: male adolescents and old women, and more generally the melancholy, weak, imprudent, credulous and infirm.⁴⁵ Oresme's critique of magical deceit draws attention to the real effects of substances (such as plants, roots and seeds) given to victims to ingest or anoint on their bodies so that they became confused about the true colour, figure, motion or characteristics of things.⁴⁶ He calls this harmful application of natural substances *veneficia* or *maleficia* and contrasts it with the positive use of stones, plants, seeds by other experts, such as surgeons or goldsmiths, to help humans live well.⁴⁷

In conclusion, for medieval people there remained substantial differences between the natural philosopher's attempt to understand nature and the magical practitioner's aim to harness its power and exert control over it. The philosopher and the magus are paired and contrasted on Chartres Cathedral in famous sculptures produced after the 1250s. The philosopher holds a stone, which he scrutinises intently, a representation of the careful study of nature. The magus is represented in the famous pose of the enchanter and the asp, holding a scroll with which he tries to charm into submission the asp crouching below him. In most versions of this story and image, the snake resists the enchanter's charms by inserting his tail in his ear, though in this sculpture the message (as well as the identification of the allegory) has been compromised by the asp's broken and absent tail. In spite of this loss, we should read the intended meaning of this representation as the active resistance of nature, God's good creation, to the seductions of magical ritual.

Magic, Social History and Politics

Magic was a marginal activity in late Medieval Europe, but it was accessible to all social groups and transmitted between them. If we take a step back from the complexity of the concept and define magic as an instrument, a practical art that claimed to offer the tools to manipulate the cosmos, we can gain insights into medieval lived experience. When a medieval man or woman chose to use magic to address a daily or emotional challenge, a fantasy or an aspiration, we can observe their interest in natural forces and spiritual influence, reason and imagination, and effective and merely symbolic ritual action. In the fourteenth-century monk John of Morigny's autobiographical account of his experimentation with magic and his subsequent visionary experiences, the reflections and

⁴⁴ Nicole Oresme, *Tractatus de configurationibus qualitatum et motuum*, II xxvi-xxxii.

⁴⁵ Oresme, *Tractatus de Configurationibus*, II, xxvi-xxx.

⁴⁶ The use of psychoactive and poisonous substances in medieval magic is little studied but see Dan Attrell and David Porreca. 2019. Trans. *Picatrix*. 26-30. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, on references to such ingredients in the *Picatrix*.

⁴⁷ Oresme, *Tractatus de configurationibus*, II, xxxi

doubts of a user are vividly expressed.⁴⁸ In addition to discovering and editing learned magic texts, historians have explored their readership and circulation among physicians and in the clerical underworld, competitive court circles and the monastic cloister.⁴⁹ It has become increasingly clear that manuals of ritual magic were tailored to the individual interests of their owners, whether this was talking to spirits or having success in love.⁵⁰ Magical items also appear in lay household books alongside instructions for such things as preparing leather, grafting trees, making soap, glue and ink, washing clothes, curing fevers and catching fish.⁵¹ It is artificial to entirely separate the realms of the mundane and the fantastical, however. The fifteenth century occult miscellany, Wellcome MS 513, has magical experiments for flying horses and invisibility but also for making a lamina (a small square magical figure usually inscribed on metal) to keep mice out of the house.⁵²

In learned magic, the personalisation of magical instruments to fit the interests of a new practitioner involved making new copies of texts, incorporating personal names into images (of the user or victim) or even summoning one's own angelic tutor. These actions encouraged practitioners to feel that they were joining a select elite of magical experts. The 'common tradition of magic' offers examples of users adapting magical items to fit a range of budgets. For example, surviving instructions to make laminas for conception and childbirth range from a lead exemplar that could be wrapped in leather and silk to silver, tin and paper versions.⁵³ Magical figures (large two dimensional diagrams that were assigned an instrumental power) were collected by literate users into their manuscripts and inscribed onto pieces of parchment (textual amulets) or other objects where their power could be accessed by illiterate owners.⁵⁴ Surviving examples demonstrate how individual owners elaborated, simplified and recomposed figures, including by the simple action of erasing dubious names and drawing crosses over them.⁵⁵ Creative interventions could thus express positive engagement with magical concepts or anxieties about orthodoxy.

Historians in this field are aware that, broadly speaking, medieval magic has two quite different trajectories. On the one hand, the translation and dissemination of learned magic texts from the Greco-Roman, Arabic and Jewish traditions, and the recognition of their intellectual resonances with Greek and Arabic philosophy and science, led to more positive attitudes to magical texts and ideas. More than one hundred distinct texts and several hundred surviving manuscripts with magical contents have been identified by scholars. From the thirteenth century magic texts were reaching ever wider audiences

⁴⁸ Watson, Nicholas and Claire Fanger, eds. 2015 *John of Morigny's Liber florum celestis doctrine*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. Fanger, Claire. 2015. *Rewriting Magic: An Exegesis of the Visionary Autobiography of a Fourteenth-century French Monk*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.

⁴⁹ On the reception of Arabic image magic by learned physicians see Weill-Parot, *Les images astrologiques*, part 3 and his chapter on Jérôme Torrella in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*. Monastic collectors of magic texts are discussed in Page, *Magic in the Cloister*, Fanger, *Rewriting Magic* and Véronèse, *L'ars notoria au Moyen Age*.

⁵⁰ For the former see Oxford, MS Rawlinson D 252 and for the latter Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS italiano 1524 della, edited by Florence Gal, Jean-Patrice Boudet and Laurence Moulinier-Brogi. 2017. *Vedrai mirabilia. Un libro di magia del Quattrocento*. Rome: Viella.

⁵¹ For discussion of magic in a household book see Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 2-6

⁵² Page, Sophie. 2018. Love in a Time of Demons: Magic and the Medieval Cosmos, ed. Page and Wallace. *Spellbound*, 57-8.

⁵³ Page. *Medieval Magical Figures*, 435-8.

⁵⁴ Skemer, Dan C. 2006. *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press).

⁵⁵ See Page. *Medieval Magical Figures* and, in particular, London, British Library, Sloane MS 513, f. 199v.

through vernacular translations, and the appeal of learned magic to readers from the court to the cloister meant that many condemned texts circulated widely under the radar.⁵⁶ In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries some authors of magical texts also, for the first time, allowed their works to circulate under their own name rather than ascribing them to legendary figures such as Hermes or Solomon. Since theological condemnation made it dangerous to claim authorship of a magical text, the fact that authors were becoming confident enough to put their real names to works of magic is a striking development and is evidence of a gradual shift towards more positive attitudes towards certain magical texts and ideas in Western Europe.

On the other hand, magic was condemned with increasing vigour and precision in ecclesiastical sources. The development of the concept of the demonic pact and the involvement of the Inquisition in investigating magical practices widened the scope of persecution and contributed to the emerging theology of witchcraft. Clerical writers used the concepts of magic and superstition to define and control the boundaries of legitimate religious practice and repress dangerous errors, even as they tried not to stifle genuine (if from their perspective often confused) expressions of lay piety.⁵⁷ Because the legitimacy of practices was hard to discern, the focus often shifted to the legitimacy of the practitioner, a scrutiny to which women were particularly vulnerable. Before the fourteenth century it had been difficult for clerics to believe that women, who were deemed physically, mentally and spiritually weaker than men, could control powerful, threatening demons. But this paradox was resolved by the increasing theological emphasis on the satanic pact. It was thought that in exchange for surrendering their souls, witches could call on the assistance of demons using only simple gestures or spells.⁵⁸

The relationship between magic and gender is an established topic in the historiography of magic, though until recently most research has focussed on understanding why a disproportionate number of women were put on trial and executed for witchcraft in the early modern period. Medieval historians have shown that writings by learned clerics on canon law, theology and pastoral care were more likely to associate women with the sins of 'magic' and 'superstition,' partly because of an association between magic, love and sex and partly because of the misogynistic stereotype that women were more easily deceived by the devil.⁵⁹ The practitioners of 'common magic' are often represented in medieval sources as illiterate women who had learned their trade through an apprenticeship and worked closely with natural materials, especially herbs and animal parts.⁶⁰ Clerical writers attempted to undermine the reputation of such practitioners by emphasising that they used their powers for profit and could not heal or predict the future by channelling the power of God as saints did.⁶¹

Although arguments condemning magic dominate the sources on 'common magic', pastoral literature in particular has been mined for evidence of real magical activities.⁶² It is

⁵⁶ Giralt, Sebastià. 2019. Magic in Romance Languages. In *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, 99-111.

⁵⁷ Bailey. *Fearful Spirits*. Rider, Catherine. 2012. *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*. London: Reaktion.

⁵⁸ Bailey, Michael. 2002. The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch. *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19: 120–134

⁵⁹ See Rider, Catherine. 2019. Magic and Gender. In the *Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, 343-54 for an overview.

⁶⁰ Doggett, Laine E. 2009. *Love Cures: Healing and Love Magic in Old French Romance*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press. 2009.

⁶¹ Rider, *Magic and Religion*, 61-9.

⁶² Rider, *Magic and Religion*.

likely that there were many local specialists in magic who offered help with everyday problems such as lost objects, telling fortunes, identifying thieves or attracting a lover. These local practitioners need to be distinguished from early modern 'cunning folk,' however, since the latter flourished in the era of anxiety provoked by widespread belief in the powers of malefic witches.⁶³ A large part of the services of cunning men and women involved helping people to escape bad luck or suspected spells and it is possible they increased in popularity after reforming fifteenth-century writers designated protective practices employed against witchcraft the only 'legitimate superstition.'⁶⁴ The medieval manuscript evidence suggests, however, that occult services were frequently offered by medical practitioners, both in the form of magical remedies, protective charms and amulets and as more proactive experiments to achieve victory, fine weather or success in love.⁶⁵

Individuals offering occult services, including physicians, clerics and members of religious orders, flourished in the *demi-monde* of the court as well as among common people, and many magic texts seem intended facilitate courtly services: gaining the help or favour of social superiors, producing spectacular illusions, causing the destruction of enemies or predicting the outcome of a battle.⁶⁶ Occult expertise was attractive in highly competitive socio-political contexts, and magic in medieval courts offers interesting perspectives for historians: the study of rulers who collected magic texts, patronised their production or used occult knowledge to enhance their reputation; or the accusations, scandals and paranoia about magic to which courts were particularly prone, with their layers of formal and informal sources of power, frequent political tensions and succession problems.⁶⁷ Accusations of magic provided a way to indirectly criticise the king (censuring his advisors, mistresses or relatives) or explain misfortunes such as infertility or madness, or could even be an ingenious device for attacking a pope (who was protected from other charges, including heresy).⁶⁸ Noting twenty cases of magic during a twenty year period in the reign of Charles VI of France (himself subject to magical attempts to cure his madness), Jean-Patrice Boudet has argued that, on this occasion, magic did not merely play an instrumental role but had 'a central function in the exercise of power.'⁶⁹

Magic at court intersects with many other themes relating to this concept, such as the literary image of the magician, anti-magical arguments, the relationship between magic

⁶³ Davies, Owen. 2003. *Popular Magic. Cunning-folk in English History*. London: Hambledon.

⁶⁴ Bailey, *Fearful Spirits*, 194.

⁶⁵ For physicians offering magical remedies see Peter Murray Jones and Lea T. Olsan. 2019. Medicine and Magic. In *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, 304-7. For other magical services see Page, 'Magical Figures', pp. 440-1 and Mitchell, Laura. 2011. Cultural Uses of Magic in Fifteenth-Century England. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 166-203.

⁶⁶ Peters, Edward. 1978. *The Magician, the Witch and the Law*. University Park, PA: Penn University State Press on the *demi-monde*; Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites* and Conrad Kyeser, 2 vols, *Bellifortis*. 1967. Ed. Götz Quarg. Düsseldorf: Verlag des Vereins Deutscher Ingenieure.

⁶⁷ Brown, Peter. 1970. Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages. In *Witchcraft: Confessions and Accusations*, ed. Mary Douglas, 17-45. London: Tavistock. Boudet, Jean-Patrice. 2019. Magic at Court. In *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic* and Jean-Patrice Boudet, Jean-Patrice, Martine Ostorero, and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, ed. 2017. *De Frédéric II À Rodolphe II: Astrologie, Divination Et Magie Dans Les Cours (Xiiiè-Xviiè Siècle)*. Florence : Sismel.

⁶⁸ Coste, Jean. ed. 1995. *Boniface VIII en proces. Articles d'accusation et depositions des temoins, 1303-1311*. Rome: Ecole Francaise.

⁶⁹ Boudet, Magic at Court, 338.

and gender, and the origins of witchcraft. When deciding whether or not to consult a practitioner of magic, rulers might follow the example of romance literature, in which professional magicians like Merlin were 'elegant, learned and powerful' or heed the warnings of a court cleric like John of Salisbury or Nicole Oresme who linked magic to fraud, frivolity and the schemes of demons.⁷⁰ In the thirteenth century, a period relatively open to its intellectual and practical potential, magic was promoted at the courts of two princes who were in close contact with Arab-Muslim culture: Frederick II Hohenstaufen and Alfonso X of Castile.⁷¹ As fear of magic grew in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, many rulers became paranoid about magical attacks. In the case of Pope John XXII this had serious repercussions for the repression of magic and divination, leading eventually to the Inquisition treating magical practices as heretical.⁷² Women at court were particularly vulnerable to allegations that they had used magic to cause impotence or ensnare with love, and fourteenth-century political trials for magic contributed to the idea of a real sect of sorcerers and sorceresses who were participating in a vast plot against Christianity.⁷³

Conclusion

Magic is not a tyrannous concept if it is freed from anachronistic associations with crude superstition, non-modernity and irrationality. Of course other challenges are still present: some historians are uneasy about the fact that magic is general, ambiguous, and has no single agreed definition but is a word still actively in use. Although definitions of magic always apply better to some practices, objects, practitioners, periods or cultures than others, there is something appealing about the familiarity historians of magic feel when encountering the concepts of others.⁷⁴ It is not simply that medieval magic should be studied in all its rich, complex diversity and its multivalent relationships with religion and science, but that sophisticated concepts, including those from outside our period, can provoke an intellectual response that helps us shape and refine our own definitions. In my own current work I am thinking through the implications of two perspectives on magic, one emic and one etic. The first is John Lydgate's characterisation (mentioned above) of the practitioner of magic as having a 'cursed imagination' and the second is the idea that magic is found at the intersection of ritual and cosmology (a distilling of religion and science). What are the implications of the fact that magic rituals rarely have an audience or communicate doctrine, and that their cosmologies are syncretic, allusive and pragmatic rather than explanatory?

In this paper I have explored some of the ways medieval magic expresses, elucidates and enriches our understanding of contemporary thought and practice of religion, science,

⁷⁰ Maksymiuk, Stephan. 1996. *The Court Magician in Medieval German Romance*. Frankfurt and Berlin: P. Lang.

⁷¹ Boudet, Magic at Court, 332-6.

⁷² Boureau, *Satan the Heretic*.

⁷³ Veenstra, Jan. 1997. *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France*. Leiden: Brill. Carey, Hilary. 1992. *Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages*. London: Palgrave, 138-53.

⁷⁴ This is put very well by Claire Fanger in her 'Response' in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, 66.

politics and culture. Though there is also a very real sense in which medieval magic was a self-contained and self-referential discipline or practice, and is illuminative of magic only, I have pointed towards some methods for using the concept of magic to reveal the interior lives and lived experience of medieval people and their attempts to understand and describe their social, political and spiritual environments, and the observed and imagined cosmos.