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INTRODUCTION: MAGIC AS A CROSSROADS

This book will approach magic as a kind of crossroads where different pathways in medieval culture converge. First of all it is a point of intersection between religion and science. Demonic magic invokes evil spirits and rests upon a network of religious beliefs and practices, while natural magic exploits "occult" powers within nature and is essentially a branch of medieval science. Yet demonic and natural magic are not always as distinct in fact as they seem in principle. Even when magic is clearly nondemonic it sometimes mingles elements of religion and science: a magical cure, for example, may embody both herbal lore from folk medicine and phrases of prayer from Christian ritual. Secondly, magic is an area where popular culture meets with learned culture. Popular notions of magic got taken up and interpreted by "intellectuals" – a term here used for those with philosophical or theological education – and their ideas about magic, demons, and kindred topics were in turn spread throughout the land by preachers. One of the most important tasks in cultural history is working out these lines of transmission. Thirdly, magic represents a particularly interesting crossroads between fiction and reality. The fictional literature of medieval Europe sometimes reflected the realities of medieval life, sometimes distorted them, sometimes provided escapist release from them, and sometimes held up ideals for reality to imitate. When this literature featured sorcerers, fairies, and other workers of magic, it may not have been meant or taken as totally realistic. Even so, the magic of medieval literature did resemble the magical practices of medieval life in ways that are difficult but interesting to disentangle.

In short, magic is a crossing-point where religion converges with science, popular beliefs intersect with those of the educated classes, and the

conventions of fiction meet with the realities of daily life. If we stand at this crossroads we may proceed outward in any of various directions, to explore the theology, the social realities, the literature, or the politics of medieval Europe. We may pursue other paths as well, such as medieval art or music, since art sometimes depicted magical themes and music was seen as having magical powers. Because magic was condemned by both Church and state, its history leads into the thickets of legal development. Indeed, magic is worth studying largely because it serves as a starting-point for excursions into so many areas of medieval culture. Exploration of this sort can reveal the complexity and interrelatedness of different strands in that culture.

Humor and seriousness also converge in the magic of medieval Europe. Many of the recipes for magic that we will encounter in this book may strike a modern reader as amusing or frivolous, and may indeed have been written in a playful spirit, but it is seldom easy to know for sure whether a medieval audience would have been amused or shocked by such material. Some of the magic that medieval people actually employed may now seem merely inane, but the judges who sentenced magicians to death did not take it lightly.

In a further and rather different sense magic represents a crossroads. The ideas about magic that flourished in medieval Europe came from various sources. Magical beliefs and practices from the classical culture of the Mediterranean regions mingled with beliefs and practices of Germanic and Celtic peoples from northern Europe. Later on, medieval Christians borrowed notions about magic from the Jews in their midst or from Muslims abroad. It is sometimes hard to distinguish precisely where a specific belief first arose, but to understand the overall patterns of medieval magic we must be aware of these borrowings from diverse cultures. The study of magic thus becomes an avenue toward understanding how different cultures relate to one another.

TWO CASE STUDIES

What all of this means can perhaps best be clarified by looking at two fifteenth-century manuscripts in which magic plays an important role: a book of household management from Wolfsthurn Castle in the Tyrol, and a manual of demonic magic now kept in the Bavarian State Library in Munich.

The Wolfsthurn handbook shows the place magic might hold in everyday life.¹ Its compiler was an anonymous woman or man involved

in running a large estate. Perhaps he or she lived at Wolfsthurn, or came from nearby. At any rate, the book is in the vernacular language, German, rather than in Latin, and the compiler was probably a layperson rather than a priest or monk. The work reflects all the practical concerns of a household. People on the estate were constantly prey to illness. The fields needed cultivation and protection from the elements. Rats had to be driven from the cellar. Much of the knowledge required for these tasks could be kept in one's head, but a literate householder might usefully write down some of the details to ensure that they remained fresh, and the book was a convenient place to record such information. It contains instructions for almost every aspect of running a household. It tells how to prepare leather, make soap or ink, wash clothes, and catch fish. Intermingled with such advice are medical prescriptions for human and animal disease. Claiming the authority of Aristotle and other learned men of antiquity, the compiler tells how to diagnose and treat fevers, ailments of the eyes, and other medical problems. Further added to this potpourri are prayers, blessings, and conjurations.

Medieval people who assembled this and other such manuals would never have thought of themselves as magicians, but the book at hand contains elements of what we can call magic. It recommends taking the leaves of a particular plant as a remedy for "fever of all sorts"; this in itself would count as science, or as folk medicine, rather than magic. Before using these leaves, one is supposed to write certain Latin words on them to invoke the power of the Holy Trinity, and then one is to say the Lord's Prayer and other prayers over them; this in itself would count as religion. There is no scientific or religious reason, however, for repeating this procedure before sunrise on three consecutive mornings. By adding this requirement the author enhances the power of science and religion with that of magic. Religion and magic support each other again in the treatment suggested in this book for a speck in the eye. The prescription begins with a story from the legends of the saints, and then gives an adjuration addressed to the speck itself:

[Legend:] Saint Nicasius, the holy martyr of God, had a speck in his eye, and besought that God would relieve him of it, and the Lord cured him. He prayed [again] to the Lord, that whoever bore his name upon his person would be cured of all specks, and the Lord heard him.

[Adjuration:] Thus I adjure you, O speck, by the living God and the holy God, to disappear from the eyes of the servant of God N., whether you are black, red, or white. May Christ make you go away. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The legend itself is religious, and the formula has some of the trappings of a prayer, but magic enters in with the notion that the disease itself has a

¹ Oswald von Zingerle, "Segen und Heilmittel aus einer Wolfsthurner Handschrift des xv. Jahrhunderts", *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 1 (1891), 172-7, 315-24.

kind of personality and can respond to a command. Similar to this is a cure for toothache that starts with a legend of Saint Peter. The saint is suffering from a worm in his tooth. Christ sees him sitting on a rock and holding his hand to his cheek, and cures him by adjuring the worm to depart, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This healing act of Christ becomes an archetype, whose power can be invoked to heal one's own dental afflictions. In the Wolfsthurn book, however, the concrete healing procedure is not explicit. Rather, the legend is followed by a few snippets of religious vocabulary ("Ayos, ayos, ayos tetragramaton"), and then by the unrelated counsel that a person suffering this affliction should write a mixture of Latin and nonsense ("rex, pax, nax in Cristo filio suo") on his cheek.²

At times the liturgical formulas in this handbook are put to patently magical uses. For a woman with menstrual problems the book recommends writing out the words from the mass, "By Him, and with Him, and in Him," then laying the slip of paper on the afflicted woman's head. Even more clearly magical is a remedy for epilepsy: first one puts a deerskin strap around the patient's neck while he is suffering a seizure, then one "binds" the sickness to the strap "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and finally one buries the strap along with a dead man. The sickness is thus transferred from the patient to the strap, then relegated safely to the realm of the dead so it can cause no further harm in the world of the living.

The Wolfsthurn book recommends not only Christian prayers but also apparently meaningless combinations of words or letters for their medical value. At one point it says to copy out the letters "P. N. B. C. P. X. A. O. P. I. L.", followed by the Latin for "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." For demonic possession the book recommends that a priest should speak into the afflicted person's ear the following jumble of Latin, garbled Greek, and gibberish:

Amara Tonta Tyra post hos firabis ficaliri Elypolis starras poly polyque lique linarras buccabor uel barton vel Titram celi massis Metumbor o priczoni Jordan Ciriacus Valentinus.

As an alternative remedy for possession the book suggests taking three sprigs of juniper, dousing them three times with wine in honor of the

² *Hagios* (given here in corrupt form) is Greek for "holy"; Christian liturgy often uses it (or the Latin *sanctus*) in threefold repetition. The Tetragrammaton is the sacred Hebrew name for God, which would have been written in Hebrew without vowels: "YHWH". *Rex* means "king," *pax* means "peace," *in Cristo filio suo* means "in Christ his son," and *nax* does not mean anything.

Trinity, boiling them, and placing them on the possessed person's head without his knowledge.

Prescriptions containing verbal formulas usually come from Christian liturgy, but other prescriptions contain no spoken words at all and have nothing religious in them. To ward off all forms of sorcery, for example, one should carry the plant *artemisia* on one's person. Or to ensure keen eyesight by night as well as by day one should anoint one's eyes with bat's blood, which presumably imparts that animal's remarkable ability to "see" even in the dark. The appeal to ancient authority might indeed seem plausible in such cases: classical writers like Pliny often referred to cures similar if not identical to what we have here. Tracing exactly where the compiler found any particular recipe, however, would be a hopeless task, leading down labyrinthine byways.

Indeed, little if anything in this compilation is altogether original; much of its material echoes ancient formulas or at least those of other medieval compilations. The cure for toothache beginning with the legend of Saint Peter, for example, is a commonplace. Essentially the same formula occurs in many different manuscripts, from Anglo-Saxon England and elsewhere in medieval Europe.

Not surprisingly, material of this sort could raise eyebrows. Marginal comments added to the Wolfsthurn manual in slightly later handwriting indicate that the manuscript came before disapproving eyes. One passage that gave offense was the above-mentioned cure for menstrual problems. A later reader wrote beside this prescription, "This is utterly false, superstitious, and practically heretical." Indeed, certain pages were excised from the compilation, perhaps by this same reader. Because of this censorship some of the author's formulas are badly mutilated, such as the instructions for making oneself invisible, while others have been lost altogether. At another point, however, the book evoked skepticism rather than disapproval: a reader commented beside a particularly dubious passage, "This would be good – if it were true"!

In short, the Wolfsthurn handbook raises a series of questions regarding the history of magic: how does it relate to religion? How does it relate to science and to folk medicine? What role does the tradition of classical antiquity play in medieval magic? How and why did Christian liturgical formulas get used in magic? To what extent was magic an activity of the laypeople? To what degree did it involve the clergy, such as the priest whose aid is invoked for exorcism? How would a philosopher or theologian such as Thomas Aquinas have reacted to the magic in this book? All these questions will recur in later chapters. The point for now is merely to see how the magic of the Wolfsthurn handbook could serve as a starting-

point for exploration in various directions, or as a crossroads in medieval culture.

The second manuscript raises a somewhat different set of questions.³ Unlike the Wolfsthurn book, the Munich handbook involves straightforwardly demonic magic, or what came to be known as necromancy. Also unlike the Wolfsthurn book, the Munich manual is in Latin (though some vernacular material is appended to it), and the author and owner probably belonged to the clergy. On practically every page this handbook gives instructions for conjuring demons with magic circles and other devices, commanding the spirits once they have appeared, or compelling them to return after they have been dismissed. The purposes served by this magic are many. It can allegedly be used to drive a person mad, to arouse passionate love, to gain favor at court, to create the illusion of a mighty castle, to obtain a horse that can carry the magician anywhere he wants to go, or to reveal future and secret things. The magic of this handbook involves elaborate paraphernalia. Apart from the magic circles, the magician needs wax images of the people he wishes to afflict, or rings, swords, and other objects. In some cases the handbook requires that he sacrifice a hoopoe to the evil spirits,⁴ or burn certain herbs so that the smoke can serve as a magical fumigation. Like the Wolfsthurn book, the Munich handbook draws from the riches of Christian liturgy, but it does so much more fully. Rather than merely borrowing short fragments and familiar prayers, the Munich handbook takes over lengthy passages from the Church's ritual, and in other cases uses new formulas clearly modeled on Christian precedent.

Other elements in the work resemble Jewish or Muslim magic. Some formulas involve magical incantation of names for God, as in Jewish magical practice, while the recitation of magical names for Christ is in effect a Christian version of the same thing. Indeed, a great deal of Jewish and Muslim magic seems to have revolved about the basic notion that by magical formulas one can compel the demons to come and do one's bidding. An important Arabic magical text, well known in the later medieval West under the title *Picatrix*, also contains formulas similar to

³ The manuscript in question is Clm 849 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich), fols. 3^r–108^v. For brief discussion see Lynn Thorndike, "Imagination and magic: force of imagination on the human body and of magic on the human mind", in *Mélanges Eugène Tisserant*, 7 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Vaticana, 1964), 356–8; for a full account see Richard Kieckhefer, *A Necromancer's Manual from the Fifteenth Century* (forthcoming) for details.

⁴ The hoopoe is an extraordinary crested bird that figures prominently in magic and in folklore generally. Ulysse Aldrovandi, in his *Ornithologia*, vol. 2 (Bologna: Nicolaus Tebaldinus, 1634), 709, exclaims that he will not record the superstitions that have arisen regarding this bird, but then he does so anyway.

some in the Munich handbook. Furthermore, certain passages in the Munich manuscript presuppose at least a crude knowledge of that astrology which later medieval Western culture had taken over from Arabic sources.

The magic in this Munich handbook is often quite complex. One section, for example, tells how to obtain the love of a woman. While reciting incantations, the magician takes the blood of a dove and uses it to draw a naked woman on the skin of a female dog. He writes the names of demons on various parts of this image, and as he does so he commands the demons to afflict those parts of the actual woman's body, so that she will be inflamed with love of him. He fumigates the image with the smoke of myrrh and saffron, all the time conjuring the demons to afflict her so that day and night she will think of nothing but him. He hangs the image around his neck, goes out to a secret place either alone or with three trustworthy companions, and with his sword traces a circle on the ground, with the names of demons all around its edge. Then he stands inside the circle and conjures the demons. They come (the handbook promises) in the form of six servants, ready to do his will. He tells them to go and fetch the woman for him without doing her any harm, and they do so. On arriving she is a bit perplexed but willing to do as the magician wishes. As long as she is there, one of the demons takes on her form and carries on for her back at home so that her strange departure will not be noticed.

The compiler of this manual had further mischief up his sleeve. He tells, for example, how to arouse hatred between two friends by using a complex ritual in which two stones are buried beneath the friends' thresholds, then unearthed and cast into a fire, then fumigated with sulphur, left three days in water, and smashed together. As the magician fumigates them he conjures forth "all hateful demons, malignant, invidious, and contentious," by the power of God. He demands that these demons arouse between the friends as much hatred as exists among the demons, or as much as existed between Cain and Abel. While striking the stones against each other he says, "I do not strike these stones together, but I strike X. and Y., whose names are carved here." Finally, he buries the stones separately. The handbook warns that the details of this ceremony must be kept secret because of its ineffable power. In case the magician should wish later to undo his damage, he should dig up the stones, heat them, crush them, and cast the fragments into a river.

Another section of the book tells how to become invisible. The magician goes to a field outside of town and traces a circle on the ground. He fumigates the circle, and sprinkles it and himself with holy water while reciting Psalm 51:7. He kneels down and conjures various spirits, compelling them in the name of God to come and do his bidding. The spirits

suddenly appear within the circle and ask what he wants. He requests a "cap of invisibility." One of them goes and procures such a headpiece, and gives it to him in exchange for his white robe. The ritual is not without its hazards: if the magician does not return to the same place three days later, retrieve his robe, and burn it, he will die within seven days.

The author of this book is not squeamish about conjuring "demons" or "evil spirits." Sometimes he invokes them by name, as Satan, Lucifer, Berich, and so forth. Even when the ceremonies do not explicitly identify the spirits who come as demonic, the intent is usually clear, and certainly no inquisitor would have thought about the question for more than a moment.

The materials in the Munich handbook, like those in the Wolfsthurn manuscript, are not entirely original. Parallels can be found in other manuscripts, from other parts of Europe, as well as in Arabic and Jewish traditions. Medieval European examples are rare, since whenever possible the inquisitors and other authorities consigned such stuff to the flames. Enough manuscripts escaped this fate, however, to give an idea of the genre.

This handbook, like the first one, raises a series of important questions: How does this magic relate to religion? (Very differently from that of the Wolfsthurn manual!) Precisely how does this material resemble that found in Jewish and Muslim magic, and how does it differ? What historical links can be established between this magic and Jewish or Muslim precedent? What sort of person was likely to own such a book? Did the owners really practice these rituals, or was it all an elaborate game or fantasy? If the owners did actually carry out such magic, how did they resemble the magicians depicted in medieval sermons, or the sorcerers in medieval romances? Once again, these are questions that will arise later in this book, and for now the point is simply to show how magic can lead to such wide-ranging inquiry.

DEFINITIONS OF MAGIC

The most fundamental question for present purposes is how to define magic. If a person rubs bat's blood into his eyes, is that magic, or is it a kind of primitive medical science? How can we define the border between magic and science? Even if we want to say that there are instances that lie near or on the border, it seems that we must be able to define the border itself. So too, we must be able to indicate how magic relates in principle to religion, even if we want to acknowledge many cases where they resemble each other closely. Still further complications arise. Some people, for instance, would want to say that conjuring a demon merely to foretell the

future is not magic, since magic involves practical manipulation of things in the world – making people ill, gaining favor at court, and so forth – rather than simply learning about predetermined states of affairs.

What would medieval Europeans have said about these questions? Most of them, perhaps, would have given them little thought. There were people who tried to use knowledge such as that in the Wolfsthurn or Munich handbooks, others who worried about its being used against them, and still others who made it their business to keep it from being used, but few of these people would have asked themselves whether the term "magic" applied to these practices. They might have said that the Wolfsthurn book contained "charms", "blessings", "adjurations," or simply "cures," without calling them specifically "magical." They might have called the Munich handbook a book of "necromancy" or "sorcery" rather than of "magic." Only the theologically and philosophically sophisticated elite bothered greatly about questions of definition. When the intellectuals attended to such matters, however, they were reflecting on contemporary practices, and often they were articulating explicitly what other people merely took for granted. By looking at theological and philosophical notions about magic we can at least take an important step toward understanding how medieval people thought about the subject.

Broadly speaking, intellectuals in medieval Europe recognized two forms of magic: natural and demonic. Natural magic was not distinct from science, but rather a branch of science. It was the science that dealt with "occult virtues" (or hidden powers) within nature. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but rather a perversion of religion. It was religion that turned away from God and toward demons for their help in human affairs.

One might quickly conclude that the magic of the Wolfsthurn handbook exemplifies natural magic, and that of the Munich manuscript represents demonic magic. From the viewpoint of the practitioners, this conclusion might be essentially correct. But from the vantage point of medieval theologians, philosophers, preachers, and inquisitors matters were not so simple. Many of these observers would have suspected demonic magic even in the Wolfsthurn book. The unintelligible words that it prescribed might contain names for demons. The use of a deerskin strap to remove a case of epilepsy might be seen as a signal or sacrifice to the demons. If artemisia had power to ward off sorcery, the knowledge of that occult power might have been imparted by demons. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, the person who used the Wolfsthurn handbook might be engaged in demonic magic. The people who went out to gather apparently innocent herbs, or the midwife who seemed blameless and helpful might turn out to be in league with demons (Fig. 1). Indeed,

for many writers in medieval Europe all magic was by definition demonic; not everyone agreed that there was such a thing as natural magic. For such writers the material in the Wolfsthurn handbook could be called magical only because it seemed likely to rely on the aid of demons. But the term "magic" has a history, and understanding what it meant at a given time requires some knowledge of that history.

In classical antiquity, the word "magic" applied first of all to the arts of the magi, those Zoroastrian priests of Persia who were known to the Greeks at least by the fifth century B.C. Some of them seem to have migrated to the Mediterranean world. What, precisely, did these magi do? Greeks and Romans generally had imprecise notions of their activities: they practiced astrology, they claimed to cure people by using elaborate but bogus ceremonies, and in general they pursued knowledge of the occult. Whatever they did, however, was by definition "the arts of the magi," or "the magical arts," or simply "magic." From the outset, the term thus had an imprecise meaning. Because the magi were foreigners with exotic skills that aroused apprehension, the term "magic" was a deeply emotional one, rich with dark connotations. Magic was something sinister, something threatening. When native Greeks and Romans engaged in practices similar to those of the magi, they too were feared for their involvement in magic. The term was extended to cover the sinister activities of occultists whether foreign or domestic.

Early Christian writers who used the term played on these undertones. If the Greek and Roman pagans could foretell the future, or heal diseases, that was because they had help from their gods. But the gods of the pagans were no real gods; from a Christian viewpoint they were in fact demons. Thus the thaumaturgy of Graeco-Roman paganism was unmasked as demonic magic. Even if the pagans did not realize they were using the aid of evil spirits, indeed even if they were merely using curative herbs and amulets made from precious stones, a Christian writer such as Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354–430) was quick to see demonic involvement. The demons took these objects as signs or tokens calling them to do their work. It was demons who had founded the magical arts and taught them to human practitioners, and it was demons who actually carried out the will of the magicians. Divination (or fortune-telling) also was possible only with the aid of demons. These are dominant themes in Augustine's classic book *On the City of God*, and Augustine's authority in medieval culture was so great that on this issue as on many others his outlook prevailed.

Up through the twelfth century, if you asked a theologian what magic was you were likely to hear that demons began it and were always involved in it. You would also be likely to get a catalogue of different



Fig. 1. Group of woman magicians with demons, from Lydgate, *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*

forms of magic, and most of the varieties would be species of divination.⁵ Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636), borrowing from classical authors such as Varro (ca. 116–ca. 27 B.C.), listed geomancy, hydromancy, aeromancy, and pyromancy (divination by earth, water, air, and fire) under the heading "magic," and then went on under the same heading to discuss divinatory observation of the flight and cries of birds, the entrails of sacrificial animals, and the positions of stars and planets (i.e. astrology). Only after cataloging these and other species of divination did he include enchantment (magical use of words), ligatures (medical use of magical objects bound to the patient), and various other phenomena in his discussion of magic. "All such things," he said, "involve the art of demons, which arises from the pestiferous society of men and bad angels."⁶ For centuries, writers repeated and adapted these categories in their discussion of magic. At least into the twelfth century these categories remained standard, and writers repeated and adapted them in their discussion of magic, although no one in the high Middle Ages was still

⁵ Lynn Thorndike, "Some medieval conceptions of magic", *The Monist*, 25 (1915), 107–39.

⁶ Isidore de Séville, *Etymologies*, ed. Peter K. Marshall et al. vol. 2, viii.9., (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986).

foretelling the future by inspecting the entrails of sacrificial animals. Not everyone followed Isidore to the letter: in the mid-thirteenth century, the theologian Alexander of Hales (ca. 1185–1245) used “divination” as a generic term under which he distinguished various species of occult art, including sorcery and illusion. In one way or another, however, medieval writers tended to see magic and divination as closely related.⁷

Two major changes began to occur around the thirteenth century. First there were writers who began to see natural magic as an alternative to the demonic form. Secondly, the term came to be used for operative functions such as healing as much as for divination. William of Auvergne (ca. 1180–1249), an influential theologian and then bishop at Paris, recognized the distinction between demonic and natural magic and devoted considerable attention to the latter sort. Albert the Great (ca. 1200–80) also acknowledged the possibility of natural magic in his scientific writings, though in his theological work he was cautious about distinguishing it from the demonic kind.

Many people, to be sure, persisted in thinking of all magic as demonic and in seeing divination as a central purpose of magic. Even those who referred explicitly to occult powers (*virtutes occultae*) in nature did not always use the term “magic” in reference to them. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–74) believed in occult phenomena caused by the influence of stars and planets, but tended to follow Augustine in reserving “magic” for processes involving demons. Roger Bacon (ca. 1214–ca. 1292) also believed in mysterious and awesome powers within nature, but typically used the word “magic” for various kinds of fraud and deception. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, the notion of natural magic took firm hold in European culture, even if it still was not universally recognized or uniformly described.

When writers spoke of natural magic as dealing with the occult powers in nature, what precisely did they mean? How did occult powers differ from ordinary, manifest powers? In some cases it seems that the distinction was a subjective one: a power in nature that is little known and arouses awe is occult, unlike those well-known powers that people take for granted. *Picatrix*, for example, remarks at one point that it is dealing with matters which are “hidden from the senses, so that most people do not grasp how they happen or from what causes they arise.”⁸ The term had a technical sense, however, that referred not to the subjective response of the beholder but to the objective status of the power in question. Most properties of

⁷ This was not always true of ecclesiastical legislation, which often mentioned them separately without giving precise definitions.

⁸ *Picatrix: The Latin Version of the Ghāyat Al-Ḥakīm*, ed. David Pingree (London: Warburg Institute, 1986), 5.

herbs, stones, or animals can be explained in terms of their physical structure. A herb that is “cold” or “moist” can treat an illness caused by excess of “heat” or “dryness.” (These are standard Aristotelian categories; a plant might be classed as “hot” or “cold” by nature, regardless of its actual temperature at a given moment.) Other properties, however, cannot be explained in these terms. The power of a plant to cure certain ailments, or the power of a gem to ward off certain kinds of misfortune, may derive not from the internal structure of the object but from an external source: emanations coming from the stars and planets. These latter powers were technically known as occult, and natural magic was the science of such powers. The properties in question were strictly within the realm of nature, but the natural world that could account for them was a broad one: instead of examining the inner structure of a plant to determine its effects, one had to posit influences that flowed from the distant reaches of the cosmos.

By extension, a power might qualify as occult if it was grounded in some symbolic feature of the powerful object, rather than its internal structure alone. Plants with liver-shaped leaves might thus promote the health of the liver, or the keen sight of the vulture might cure eye ailments if it was wrapped in the skin of a wolf and hung around the patient’s neck. What we have in these instances is “sympathetic magic,” as James G. Frazer called it: magic that works by a “secret sympathy” or symbolic likeness between the cause and the effect.⁹ A medical scroll from around 1100 advises that the herb *dracontium*, so called because its leaves resemble dragons, can counteract snakebite and internal worms.¹⁰ The reverse principle, also important for magic, is that of “antipathy.” The wolf is antipathetic toward the sheep, and its antipathy is such that even a drumhead made of wolf’s hide will drown out the sound made from a drumhead of sheepskin. For most writers of antiquity and the Middle Ages, sympathy and antipathy were principles of ordinary science, not magic, but writers in the later Middle Ages who worked out the concept of natural magic often included in it phenomena of this sort.

In other cases the effect of the magical object rests on “animistic” principles: the notion that things throughout nature have spirits or personalities dwelling within them. One plant seen as having powerful magical effect was mandrake, the root of which vaguely resembles a human being planted upside-down in the ground. Because this root was thought to have a sort of personality, those who uprooted it to make use of its power feared that it would take vengeance on them. To avoid this fate

⁹ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1913), 54.

¹⁰ Lucille B. Pinto, “Medical science and superstition: a report on a unique medical scroll of the eleventh–twelfth century”, *Manuscripta*, 17 (1973), 12–21.

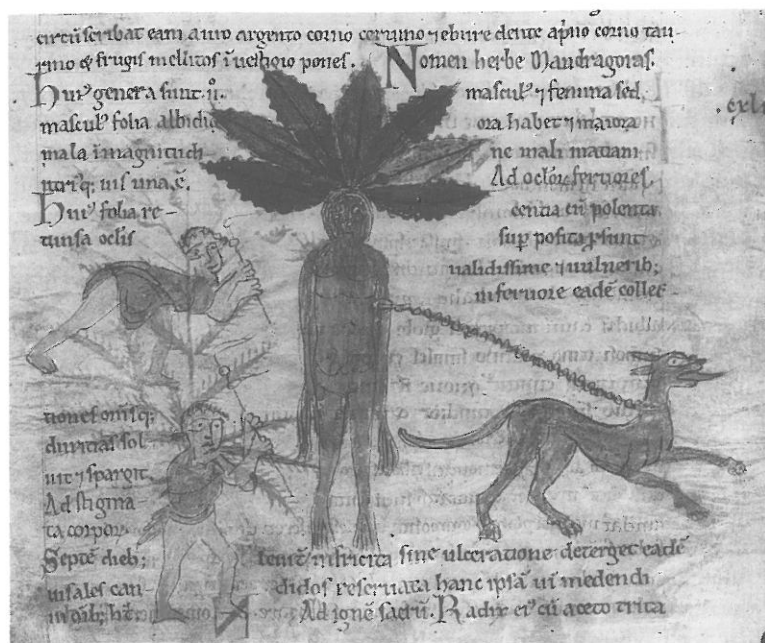


Fig. 2. Extraction of mandrake, from a twelfth-century herbal

they would extract it from the ground by tying a rope around it and affixing the other end to a hungry dog, then throwing meat to the dog. The animal would pull the mandrake from the ground and would thus suffer its vengeance (Fig. 2). Symbolic thought of this sort lay behind many of the phenomena we will be dealing with in this book.

Even when such symbolic principles underlie magic, however, the intellectuals seeking to explain the occult powers in question were likely to posit stellar or planetary influence rather than principles of sympathy, antipathy, or simple animism.

In this book, then, the term “magic” will be used for those phenomena which intellectuals would have recognized as either demonic or natural magic. That which makes an action magical is the type of power it invokes: if it relies on divine action or the manifest powers of nature it is not magical, while if it uses demonic aid or occult powers in nature it is magical.

There is an alternative way of defining magic, which focuses on the intended force of an action, rather than the type of power invoked. This way of conceiving magic has its main roots in sixteenth-century religious debate and gained currency in anthropological writings of the late nine-

teenth and early twentieth centuries.¹¹ According to this approach, the central feature of religion is that it *supplicates* God or the gods, and the main characteristic of magic is that it *coerces* spiritual beings or forces. Religion treats the gods as free agents, whose good will must be won through submission and ongoing veneration. Magic tries to manipulate the spirits – or impersonal spiritual forces seen as flowing throughout nature – mechanically, in much the same way one might use electricity by turning it on or off. From this perspective the border between religion and magic becomes difficult to discern. A person who tries to coerce God by using rituals mechanically can be seen as practicing magic; indeed, sixteenth-century Protestants charged that this was precisely what Roman Catholics were doing. In recent years even anthropologists have tended to put little stock by this pat distinction, but in the general reading public it remains so deeply entrenched that many people see it as the natural meaning of the terms.

Unfortunately, this way of distinguishing magic from religion is unhelpful in dealing with the medieval material. First of all, the sources tell us little about precisely how medieval people conceived the force of their actions. Did the user of the Wolfsthurn handbook intend to coerce God by incorporating liturgical formulas into curative rituals, or did these rituals reflect a deep (if unsophisticated) faith and piety? The handbook itself gives no clue; nor do other, similar sources. Secondly, ordinary people in medieval Europe probably did not distinguish sharply between coercion and supplication. When they used charms such as those in the Wolfsthurn book they surely expected their efforts to have influence; sometimes this influence might be coercive, and sometimes supplicatory, but there was ample room for uncertainty about which form it would take. Prayer could be likewise ambiguous: Christ had promised to do anything that his followers requested in his name (John 14:14), and a Christian with faith would surely expect this promise to be unfailing, but the attitudes of those who invoked Christ’s name could run the gamut from magical incantation at one extreme to mystical piety at the other, and simple Christians were unlikely to analyze precisely where along this spectrum their own intentions lay. Indeed, people in premodern Europe probably viewed their medicine in similarly ambivalent ways: even if a cure was tried and “proven,” the force of its influence in a given case would be hard to calculate in advance. In the case of demonic magic, there is still a third reason why it is unhelpful to focus on the intended force: there were magicians who thought they could coerce demons, but only because they had previously supplicated God and obtained divine power

¹¹ William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, 4th edn. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 332–62.

over the demons. If we start by assuming a fundamental distinction between coercion and supplication, we will make little sense of these complexities.

Some of the cases we will examine do indeed suggest that people using magic were trying to compel demons, or the powers of nature, or God. The intent to coerce was thus one characteristic of these particular magical acts. But intentions are so ambiguous, complex, and variable that it is unhelpful to take the intended force as the crucial and defining characteristic of magic in general.

The definitions given above for natural and demonic magic will be our starting-points, then, for exploring the role of magic in medieval culture. We must bear in mind, however, that these definitions came from a particular class within medieval society, those with theological and philosophical education. In using their definitions we must be careful not to let their viewpoint overshadow entirely that of their unlettered contemporaries. The problem is a familiar one. All of our sources for medieval culture come from that small segment of the population that knew how to write, and there is no shortcut from their mental world to that of the illiterate populace. The best we can do is read the documents sensitively, with the right questions in mind. In what ways did the literate elite share or absorb the mentality of the common people? Do some writings reflect the views of ordinary people better than others? Can we accurately reconstruct popular notions from learned attacks on them? Do the definitions of magic used by the intellectuals reflect or distort popular ways of viewing things? The intellectuals have the advantage of having formulated explicit theories and definitions for us to read and adopt. The rest of society also had its ways of thinking about the world, but its views are harder to reconstruct. Popular and learned mentalities were sometimes alike and sometimes different, and to see the relationship between them we must read the evidence carefully, case by case.

What we will discover, particularly in comparing popular with learned notions, is that the history of magic is above all a crossing-point where the exploitation of natural forces and the invocation of demonic powers intersect. One could summarize the history of medieval magic in capsule form by saying that at the popular level the tendency was to conceive magic as natural, while among the intellectuals there were three competing lines of thought: an assumption, developed in the early centuries of Christianity, that all magic involved at least an implicit reliance on demons; a grudging recognition, fostered especially by the influx of Arabic learning in the twelfth century, that much magic was in fact natural; and a fear, stimulated in the later Middle Ages by the very real

exercise of necromancy, that magic involved an all too explicit invocation of demons even when it pretended to be innocent. But at this point we are getting ahead of our story.

PLAN FOR THIS BOOK

One of the clearest distinctions between high and popular culture in medieval Europe is that intellectuals derived many of their conceptions of magic from their reading of classical literature. Before we can understand how classical and medieval notions related to each other, and how writers around the thirteenth century began to cast off the classical mantle, or at least wear it differently, we must examine this inheritance from antiquity. That will be the task of Chapter 2, which will deal with the period up to about A.D. 500; the rest of the book will deal with magic in western and central Europe from about 500 to around 1500.

If the classical culture of the ancient Graeco-Roman world was one major source of medieval magic, the traditional culture of the Germanic and Celtic peoples was another, and we will turn to this in Chapter 3. Because we know much less about the magic of these northern European cultures, however, this presentation will be relatively brief.

Chapter 4 will argue that certain forms of magic were so widespread that they formed a "common tradition," found among both clergy and laity, among both nobles and commoners, among both men and women, and (with certain qualifications) among townspeople and country people, in later medieval Europe. This is not to say that such magic was always and everywhere the same, but its basic forms were essentially similar wherever it occurred.

In Chapter 5 we will look at the notions of magic prevalent in the courtly culture of later medieval Europe. The chronological focus here will be the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, when courts had become established in many parts of Europe as major cultural centers. Geographically, this chapter will center mostly on France and on other countries influenced by French culture. The point, however, will not be simply to examine a particular region but to analyze a distinctive attitude toward magic that seems to have become prevalent around the twelfth century: a more or less romantic and at times quite fanciful notion of magic.

Something else was happening around the twelfth century: the importation of Arabic learning into western Europe, which brought with it new conceptions of the occult sciences, including astrology, alchemy, and related areas of natural magic. By the thirteenth century the material

brought in from Arabic culture was so widespread and so influential that intellectuals had to undertake fundamental reconsideration of their views on magic. We will trace this development in Chapter 6.

Again, at about the same time a more sinister magic began to take hold in certain corners: the explicitly demonic magic of necromancy, which seems to have flourished mainly in a kind of clerical underworld. This will be the subject of Chapter 7. As we will see, this is not unrelated to the rise of the new learning derived from Muslim culture, yet it is not simply an offshoot of that development.

At every stage we will try to relate the theory and practice of magic to its various cultural contexts. Doing so will inevitably involve some artificiality, since society cannot be divided neatly into different cultural settings. The same individual might be a courtier and also a member of that intellectual avant-garde that was importing Muslim forms of magic. Or he might be a courtier and also a figure in that clerical underworld that practiced necromancy. Historians can set up all the conceptual walls they want, but they should not be surprised when medieval people pass through them freely, like ghosts. Nonetheless, the categories can prove useful even if they are not mutually exclusive.

Finally, in Chapter 8, we will see how Church and state reacted to all these forms of magic. We will survey the moral condemnations by theologians and preachers, the prohibitions enacted by legislators, and the prosecution by both ecclesiastical and secular courts. It might be interesting to deal with these matters within each chapter: to show how the authorities reacted first to the "common tradition" of magic, then to the each of the new developments in the twelfth and following centuries. Yet the authorities who condemned and prohibited magic tended in so doing to conflate its various forms, and the judges who prosecuted people for magic often charged them with different kinds of magical offense in the same trial. To see how different types of magic became confused with each other in condemnation, legislation, and prohibition we must reserve all this for the final chapter, which will serve to sum up what we have examined elsewhere.