

Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (eds), *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 550 pp., £190 (HB) ISBN 9781472447302, £114 (ebook) ISBN 9781315613192.



*Review*

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“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less”.<sup>1</sup> This line from *Through the Looking-Glass* might be used to succinctly describe the problem of medieval magic. What exactly do we mean when we refer to ‘magic’? What did ‘magic’ mean in the Middle Ages, and how was it different from ‘religion’ or ‘science’? The answer would depend on whom you asked. Fortunately, this problem of definitions and concepts is acknowledged in Part I of this timely volume, edited by Sophie Page and Catherine Rider, titled ‘Conceptualizing magic’. This section – a kind of round-table-by-correspondence - consists of short essays and a response chapter by four scholars of medieval intellectual history and magic: Richard Kieckhefer, Claire Fanger, Bernd-Christian Otto and David d’Avray, each with different, but often intersecting, approaches to the problem. D’Avray uses an etic approach to set out four Weberian ideal types which he calls ‘magic’, ‘a religious system’, ‘non-magical religion’ and ‘superstition’. Otto takes a discursive approach, arguing for an analysis of the terms used in historical texts to think about the concept of magic. Kieckhefer and Fanger both take an emic approach, looking at definitions from the perspective of medieval thought.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (Raleigh, NC: Hayes Barton Press, 1872), p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Etic and emic are anthropological concepts first coined by Kenneth Pike in 1967. Etic refers to the perspective of the observer – so in this case, our concepts and categorisations of magic as present-day scholars of the Middle Ages. Emic denotes the perspective of the studied social group – so, how those involved in medieval magic conceived of their practice. See Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior* [Janua Linguarum, series maior 24], second edition (The Hague: Mouton, 1967).

Part I's display of the different approaches to the category of 'magic' is in line with the two main purposes of the current volume, as set out in the co-written Introduction. The first is a round-up of scholarship carried out on various aspects of medieval magic since the 1990s; the second is to offer suggestions for future directions of scholarly inquiry. So, this volume is not intended as a 'final word' on the topic of medieval magic; rather, it is an important summary of the current state of the field and an outline of what might happen next. The sheer breadth of the field in question is demonstrated in the chapters that follow Part I: Part II, 'Languages and dissemination', contains chapters on magic from Arabic, Latin, Romance, Central and Eastern European, Celtic and Scandinavian contexts. Part III, 'Key genres and figures', consists of chapters on genres of magic - Hermetic, natural, Solomonic and necromantic - and individuals: John of Morigny, Cecco d'Ascoli and Antonia da Montolmo, Beringarius Ganellus, Jerro Torrella and Peter of Zealand. Part IV, 'Themes (magic and...)' has chapters on natural philosophy, medicine, illusion, court, gender, literature, music, archaeology, visual culture and magical figures. Part V, 'Anti-magical discourse in the later Middle Ages', contains chapters on scholasticism, pastoral care, superstition and sorcery, and witchcraft. Finally, the epilogue by Alejandro García Avilés on cosmology and magic neatly ties up many of the themes and concepts discussed in preceding chapters.

This structure is useful in thinking about the different ways of approaching medieval magic: linguistic, geographical, thematic, personal, and, not least, the viewpoint provided by Part V: that of anti-magical discourse. Texts listing what authorities and denouncers thought magical practitioners were getting up to are as important as those texts outlining practices. The contributors to the volume are from a wide range of disciplines including history, literature, archaeology, theology, history of art, philosophy and classics. In line with the aims set out in the Introduction,

most chapters have a ‘future directions’ section at the end, suggesting potential avenues for upcoming scholarship.

One omission seems worth mentioning. Part II contains, as outlined above, essays on four key categories of medieval ritual magic. However, there are no chapters dedicated to divination or alchemy. There are no references to divination in the index, although Benedek Láng’s chapter on Central and Eastern Europe contains a discussion of the popularity of certain forms of divination in manuscripts from this region. Alchemy has several references in the index from various chapters. Nevertheless, given their important status as occult practices and popularity in surviving evidence, essays dedicated to the divination and alchemy would have been useful.

The breadth of this volume – geographical, linguistic, chronological and disciplinary – is a huge feat, and *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic* is an important addition to existing scholarship. The sections entitled ‘Future directions’ are perhaps the book’s most important component, providing a way forward for future research in a field that offers so much, standing as it does, in the words of Kieckhefer, at a ‘kind of crossroads where different pathways in medieval culture converge’.

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