

Jennifer Hemphill, Ségdae Richardson-Read, and Solveig Marie Wang, eds, *Performing Magic in the Pre-Modern North: Practice and Transgressions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). Hardcover, 294 pp., £ 129.99, ISBN: 9783031612046.



Review

This volume explores the performance of magic in a wide variety of pre-eighteenth-century Northern European literary, historical and archaeological sources. It is based on the first Performing Magic in the Pre-Modern North conference, which took place online on 8–9 December 2021, and consists of ten chapters, organised around three strands. The volume’s interdisciplinary breadth is balanced by its thematic focus on magic, performance and transgression, which brings together the otherwise diverse subject matter of the contributions. From Viking Age cremation burials to early modern Danish witchcraft trials, the volume’s chapters explore the relationship between realism and magic, social conformity and transgression, acknowledging the fluidity of these concepts and, in some cases, exploring the impact of contemporary expectations on scholars’ interpretations of magical performance. Ann Sheffield, for example, argues that although the process of fermentation is now well understood and considered mundane, this was not the case in the Middle Ages (p. 103), while Luthien Cangemi explores the ways in which magical performance intersects with religious belief in an Icelandic medical manuscript (pp. 29–58).

The volume does not offer a definition of the term 'magic', nor does it discuss the meaning of the term in depth, although several of the individual contributions engage with the question of terminology, especially in relation to the translation of terms relating to magical practices and to the opposition between the 'magical' and the 'ordinary' or the 'real'. The contributors are thus able to discuss the use of magic in a diverse and flexible sense but such an approach is not entirely conducive to the aim of the volume as formulated by Jennifer Hemphill in the Introduction 'to provide a comprehensive exploration of magical practices that transcends traditional boundaries' (p. 2). The volume's focus on transcending boundaries and diverse approaches is somewhat at odds with the idea of a comprehensive handbook; the volume does not cover all areas, time periods and disciplines of pre-modern and early modern Northern Europe. Nevertheless, its interdisciplinary and comparative approach provides a valuable contribution to research on magic in Scandinavia and Northern Europe before the late modern period, both in its focus on neglected areas of scholarship and in its effort to spotlight marginalised elements in literature and society.

The volume's first strand, 'Magic in the Sources', focuses on textual depictions of magic and contains two chapters. In the first, Solveig Marie Wang examines portrayals of Saami magic in medieval Scandinavian texts, concluding that the reception of Saami magic is varied, often resulting in positive effects for texts' protagonists although sometimes being described in negative terms. Wang also

addresses the question of terminology, considering the term 'shamanism' to be obsolete, but expressing reluctance to use alternative Saami terms such as *noaidevuohhta* or *eamioskkoldat* on the basis that these terms are not documented before the early modern period. The second chapter in this strand, by Luthien Cangemi, examines the extent to which medicine can be considered 'magical' in a medieval Scandinavian context, focusing on the fragmentary fifteenth-century Icelandic manuscript AM 434 a 12mo. Cangemi argues that healing as presented in this manuscript includes a magical dimension that involves 'the conjuration of spirits, symbolic manipulation, the countering of directly efficacious volition, and the exploitation of hidden powers' (p. 34), stressing the fluidity of the healing process and the intersections between religion, magic and medicine which lead to unconventional renditions of liturgical ritual and language.

The volume's second strand, 'Magical Acts', focuses on specific instances of performing magic; its first chapter, by Fiorella Di Fonte, explores the depiction of curses in Old Norse saga literature. Di Fonte notes that there is no specialised vocabulary denoting curses, defining a curse as 'a magical practice with a purpose to cause harm to someone' (p. 61). Di Fonte finds curses to be present predominantly in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, concluding that while many of the curses appear to conform to 'what must have been the daily reality of medieval Scandinavia' (p. 91), they also function as literary devices. Ann Sheffield's chapter addresses the magical dimension of brewing ale, arguing that brewing was generally

performed by women and that the fermentation process 'might have been perceived as having a supersensory aspect in medieval Scandinavia' (p. 105). The boundary between the 'ordinary' and the 'magical', according to Sheffield, would have been porous in this period, meaning that activities such as brewing could have incorporated both mundane and magical aspects. The next chapter, by Jennifer Hemphill, examines portrayals of weather magic in medieval Scandinavian textual sources and speculates about the degree to which this may have reflected historical practice. Hemphill argues that portrayals of weather magic in saga literature 'must have originated from a longstanding oral and written tradition' (p. 148) and that the spoken word played a key role in the performance of this type of magic. The final two chapters of this strand concern themselves with the role of the devil in early modern Danish witchcraft trials. Maria Østerby Elleby examines the extent to which the devil played a role in the court records of three witch trials that took place in 1664, 1686 and 1692. Elleby finds that although the judges in these trials were generally dismissive of the devil's supposed role in facilitating witchcraft, there was a degree of folk belief in such phenomena, likely as a result of 'demonological exchange between England and Denmark' (p. 171). Louise Hauberg Lindgaard, meanwhile, focuses on the period between 1589 and 1660, describing the magical practices that were criminalised during the Danish witch trials of this time. Hauberg Lindgaard argues that most Danish magical practice of the time can be divided into 'protective magic' and 'counter-magic', which was mostly benevolent but with

occasional cases of malevolent practices, and that magical practices in Denmark were similar to the surrounding protestant world.

The volume's final strand, 'The Magic of Transgression', contains three chapters; the first, by Gaïa Perreaut, focuses on the portrayal of old age in relation to magic in medieval Scandinavian literature, arguing that magic as a literary motif functions as a discourse of othering in relation to the social status of women, especially single women and widows. The second, by Ségdae Richardson-Read, takes a queer theoretical approach to analysing two tenth-century cremation burials from Öland, using a combination of literary and archaeological sources. On this basis, Richardson-Read argues that individuals who perform *seiðr* have fluid identities and occupy a queer space, 'defying heteronormative assumptions of their identity' (pp. 255–6). Basil Arnould-Price, in the volume's final contribution, argues that the binarism drawn between the 'realism' of earlier *Íslendingasögur* and the 'fantasy' of the late *Íslendingasögur* does not reflect the reality of the texts and that magic was considered neither fully distinct from reality nor fully integrated into it, and that magic is queer because it operates in opposition to dominant social norms.

Overall, the volume shows a high degree of thematic coherence, although the length of time and the range of disciplines spanned by its contributions does diminish the depth to which any single area or time period can be treated (except for medieval Icelandic saga literature, which features heavily throughout the volume). There is little reflection within the volume on the extent to which portrayals of magic

in different areas and time periods can be meaningfully compared, or on the pitfalls of using literary sources as evidence for historical practice. In terms of developing understudied areas in Scandinavian studies such as portrayals of the Saami or the use of gender and queer theory for pre-eighteenth-century texts, however, the volume is an important contribution to knowledge and the individual chapters are highly innovative in their approach to their subject matter.

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