

Book Reviews

RICHARD KIECKHEFER, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. x, 219, illus., £20.00/\$39.50, £6.95/\$9.95 (paperback).

Magic in the Middle Ages is meant to be a general textbook on anything covered by the term “magic”—defined in the most generous sense as a cultural form—in Europe between the years c. 500 to 1500. It succeeds admirably.

Beginning with a general discussion, the author moves from “the classical inheritance” through the popular tradition of medieval magic to the Arabic-stimulated revival of occult learning, and the witchcraft trials at the close of this period. Along the way there are valuable sidelights on the late survival of Norse and Irish paganism, magic in courtly literature, and some original work on clerical necromancy.

This material bears out the promise of Kieckhefer’s starting premises—so important in determining where one ends up, and so often skewed in such a Whiggishly-bedevelled field. He views magic as essentially a crossroads, where religious/scientific, popular/learned and fictive/experiential beliefs and practices meet. The sensitivity this approach permits is paired with pragmatism: magic is defined as either natural (a branch of medieval science) or demonic (a “perversion” of religion). The combination enables Kieckhefer to cast a wide net without losing sight of the central importance of how “magic”, as a category, is not discovered but created.

For example, he follows the crucial Christian redefinition—and thereby demonization—of pagan practices and beliefs which had hitherto possessed a deeply ambiguous character. Instances are divination, which Augustine ruled was not impossible, but indeed only possible by the assistance of demons; and the elimination of any category of morally neutral spirits. (Both moves reveal the tyrannical potential of monotheism, although he tactfully refrains from pointing this out). From the fourth through the twelfth centuries, then, an essentially demonic view of magic obtained among both those who deplored it and those who took to it.

From the early thirteenth century, however, the steadily increasing flood of Arabic learning, especially translations of Greek texts, initiated something of a revolution. The idea of natural magic—that is, the non-demonic manipulation of occult forces in nature—began to hold increasing sway in both learned and popular variants. In particular, the stimulus to astrology and astral magic, always equally ambiguous in relation to the categories of science and art or craft, was tremendous. These subjects now exercised some of the finest minds in Europe (e.g., Pico and Ficino).

The later Middle Ages saw more changes, as necromancy (ecclesiastical as well as popular) renewed widespread fears about the diabolical potential, if not nature, of magic. Advocates of natural magic were thus obliged to exercise supreme circumspection and discrimination if they were to avoid becoming tainted. Of course, such discussion as this, which an introductory textbook entails (let alone a brief review), must necessarily involve generalizing. But Kieckhefer deftly avoids doing so sweepingly or crudely.

Personally, I would have liked to see more attention given to the dynamics of social classes in the historical definition and redefinition of magic. “Superstition” offers a superlative opportunity for following this process, and Roger Chartier has now given us a methodology that avoids the over-polarized and reified categories of “élite” and “popular”. I would also caution the author, in his discussion of astrology, not to conflate zodiacal signs with constellations; although sharing the same names, they are quite different entities, and considerable unnecessary confusion can result. And doubtless refinements from recent research would be possible. (It is a pity that Stuart Clark’s on demonology is not included). But these are quibbles. This book can be highly recommended.

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JOHN HENRY and SARAH HUTTON (eds), *New perspectives on Renaissance thought: essays in the history of science, education and philosophy in memory of Charles B. Schmitt*, London, Duckworth and Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, 1990, 8vo, pp. xi, 324, illus., £42.00.

Charles Schmitt was a pioneer in various fields of Renaissance intellectual history through extensive bibliographical work and solid historical scholarship. The very existence of Renaissance Aristotelianism, universities, arts, philosophies, and sciences as legitimate areas of