

## Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment

**Review Number:** 1999

**Publish date:** Thursday, 29 September, 2016

**Author:** Brian Copenhaver

**ISBN:** 9781107070523

**Date of Publication:** 2015

**Price:** £66.58

**Pages:** 612pp.

**Publisher:** Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:** <http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/history-ideas-and-intellectual-history/magic-western-culture-antiquity-enlightenment?format=HB>

**Place of Publication:** Cambridge

**Reviewer:** Francis Young

Frances Yates' seminal book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), which established a longstanding scholarly orthodoxy that Renaissance magic derived from interpretations of the *Hermetic Corpus*, has been challenged in its details by Bruno scholars and others. However, it is not until now that a complete revisionist account of the history of Renaissance magic has appeared that can compete with the scope and authority of Yates' masterpiece. Brian Copenhaver's *Magic in Western Culture* is a towering achievement in the field of intellectual history that is evidently the product of years – or decades, one suspects – of its author's immersion in the primary sources. In spite of its focus on the history of magic, this book is in fact essential reading for students of the history of ideas, the history of philosophy, the history of medicine, the history of science and even students of art history, since Copenhaver places great stress on the significance of images in both the development and the dismemberment of the western magical tradition. It would be a shame if the book's readership were confined to historians of magic, since its significance is so much more far-reaching.

Copenhaver's book is important because it tackles head-on one of the thorniest of all problems in western historiography – namely, when and how the western world became 'modern' and, therefore, 'disenchanted' of its former magic. Copenhaver declines to define 'magic' except in genealogical terms – aligning himself, in this regard, with the 'exemplary' approach of early anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard (p. 439). The scope of Copenhaver's study, as its subtitle suggests, takes us back into late antiquity, but this book is not a narrative history of magic. Rather, it is a meticulous and thorough effort to elucidate the origins of Renaissance magic and, in order to do so, it is necessary for Copenhaver to delve into the world of late antiquity from which Renaissance thinkers drew their ideas. After all, it was Renaissance scholars' 'compulsion to cover the classics exhaustively' (p. 41) that drew them, in spite of any distaste or religious anxieties, again and again into the presence of Graeco-Roman magic. Late antique and Renaissance magic cannot therefore be considered apart from one another.

The book is concerned not so much with the practice of magic (whether in the fourth or 15th centuries) but with the development of theoretical foundations for claimed magical phenomena. Copenhaver hammers home the case for the Neoplatonic roots of Renaissance magic whilst firmly – yet politely – rejecting Yates'

'Hermetic' interpretation as a wilful distortion of the evidence to fit a theory. 'To find the philosophical and scientific roots of Renaissance magical theory', Copenhagen insists, 'the muddled pieties of Hermes Trismegistus are not the place to look. Better to search the Neoplatonists' (p. 90). After setting out the historiographical and methodological foundations of his argument in part one, Copenhagen devotes the second part of the book to a detailed exposition of the magical theory of Marsilio Ficino, followed in the third part by a fresh analysis of the influence of the *Hermetic Corpus* on Renaissance thought. Part four, entitled 'Magic revived and rejected' explores the fate and influence of the Renaissance's revival of learned magic.

No scholarly book on magic can avoid the problem of working within some definition of what magic is, and Copenhagen tackles this difficult issue early on via an extended discussion of the modern historiography of magic, beginning with J. G. Frazer. Copenhagen is critical of scholars who insist on an 'anthropological' approach to magic. According to this interpretation, tinged with Frazerian assumptions and still often accepted uncritically in the academy, '[ancient] magic ... is like the magic of primitive peoples in its nature and principles; hence, the study of primitive magic shows what ancient magic was like' (p. 18). The shortcoming of this approach is that it assumes the 'primitiveness' of magic and seems to rule out *prima facie* the idea that magic could be part of the Classical tradition; yet magic was an integral part of the high culture of the Renaissance.

At the heart of Copenhagen's argument is the case that Ficino, the original Renaissance magus, and those who followed him drew their understanding of what magic was from the Neoplatonists of late antiquity rather than from the Hermetic writings. Ficino – priest, physician and magus – is at the very centre of the history of learned magic in Copenhagen's account, as a figure who looked back to Greece and Rome as well as anticipating the thought of Descartes, Leibniz and Newton. The significance of Ficino's medical practice to his other interests emerges clearly in this study, and Copenhagen shows that Ficino's understanding of magic was subtle and nuanced, recognising the possibility of fraud as well as the possibility of the effectiveness of both good and bad magic (helpfully represented by a diagram, p. 248). Ficino's *De vita coelitis comparanda* was 'a tour de force of caution and evasion' (p. 262), in which the Neoplatonist walked a knife-edge between licit speculation and illicit magic. Copenhagen judiciously observes that Ficino gets away with it because his 'bolder accounts of magic' are 'hidden in dense thickets of astro-mythological metaphysics' (pp. 267–8). In other words, Ficino made it impossible for his critics to see the wood for the trees.

Copenhagen positions himself firmly in the historiographical tradition of D. P. Walker, arguing that Walker's major achievement was to perceive that Renaissance mages like Ficino advocated a magic based on 'theoretical foundations' that were essentially philosophical (p. 24). The chapter on the influence of Scholastic philosophy on Ficino's magical theory (pp. 102–26) is especially important, showing that many of Ficino's theoretical foundations derived from such an impeccably orthodox source as Thomas Aquinas; the thought of the Florentine mage was closer to the mainstream of 15th-century Scholasticism than is often assumed, because Scholasticism itself was a profoundly adaptable intellectual system capable of containing within itself the possibility of magic. Indeed, Copenhagen does much in this book to redress the balance in favour of Aristotelian Scholasticism as a source as well as an opponent of the occult tradition. He shows that Ficino not only drew on the thought of Aquinas but even held back from using the Angelic Doctor as freely as he might have done to support his claims in favour of natural occult powers (p. 257).

It is a key argument of the book that Aristotelianism was not destroyed by 'scientific' challengers; rather, 'the Peripatetic fortress ... collapsed under the strain of its own subversive naturalism' (p. 342). In other words, it was attempts by self-professed Aristotelians (such as the Dutch Protestant Franco Burgersdijck and the Jesuit Francisco Suarez) to strain the Aristotelian system to explain *everything* that brought the system down (see pp. 367–71). The collapse of magic was, to a greater or lesser extent, the collapse of the Aristotelian philosophy that (in its medieval and Renaissance form) sustained the coherence of the idea (p. 366). Yet the Renaissance instinct of even such radical thinkers as Giordano Bruno was to co-opt and adapt Aristotelian ideas; it was not until 1658 that Pierre Gassendi openly attacked Aristotle as a cuttlefish

squirting ink to conceal the emptiness of his own ideas (p. 384).

The difference between medieval and Renaissance magic, for Copenhaver, was not the content of the information but the way in which it was organised. Medieval books contained lists and descriptions of all kinds of magical objects, 'But there was no good way to organise the data as long as the most enthusiastic voices of magical theory, the ancient Neoplatonists, remained faint' (p. 288). The contribution of the likes of Ficino, Giovanni Pico de Mirandola and Pietro Pomponazzi was to unearth the Neoplatonists of Late Antiquity and thereby legitimise a kind of magic as part of the indispensable Classical inheritance.

Copenhaver does not neglect Ficino's Renaissance and Enlightenment successors. Pomponazzi, the philosophically conservative, doctrinaire Aristotelian who was nevertheless a radical sceptic and occultist represents a particularly paradoxical figure who undermines any facile attempt to cast the Renaissance as an age of rationalism (pp. 272–84). Ultimately, Copenhaver argues, magic was kept alive for so long by a 'reflexive deference to antiquity' (p. 287) that began to disappear as soon as the observed world began to replace the textually described world in importance. As Copenhaver puts it, 'erudition left magic intact', and as long as scholarly enquiry did not progress beyond textual criticism, 'the best philology could do was to expose errors in the texts' (p. 292). In some cases, of course, the consequences of erudition were devastating, such as the exposure of the *Hermetic Corpus* as a Hellenistic rather than an archaic text.

There is irony in the fact that some of the keenest Renaissance innovators, determined to reject the doctrine of 'action at a distance' as occult nonsense, ended up making scientific errors. Thus Galileo rejected the idea that the moon was the cause of tides – although in doing so he proposed another radical theory that happened to be true, namely that the earth is in motion (p. 361). Furthermore, rejection of occult powers by leading thinkers did not, in and of itself, make for modern science, since figures such as Galileo, Bacon and Mersenne were still mired in what Copenhaver calls 'aimless curiosity' (p. 381), a mania for collecting miscellaneous facts and experimenting in an unsystematic way. 'Aimless curiosity' was the undoing of the reputations of otherwise methodical and brilliant natural philosophers such as Kenelm Digby and Joseph Glanvill, now remembered respectively as the advocate of the notorious 'weapon-salve' and the father of ghost hunting (pp. 394–9, 398–405).

Furthermore, Copenhaver shows that advocates of innovation tended to defend natural magic to the hilt – partly because they were keen to discredit all *other* kinds of magic, and partly because the reality of natural wonders justified determined investigation of nature through a burgeoning scientific method. Not only Gabriel Naudé but also Francis Bacon were guilty of this (pp. 344, 352), and by so doing they prolonged the intellectual life of magic into the 17th century. Nevertheless, Copenhaver argues that even if Bruno had not been burned at the stake in 1600, his philosophy would soon have been regarded as obsolete by his contemporaries – as happened to Tomaso di Campanella, a man who outlived his own philosophy (p. 329).

Leibniz famously accused Newton of advocating an 'occult quality' in the form of gravity. Copenhaver shows that, by the age of Newton, the term 'occult', as used by natural philosophers, had come to refer to the microscopic or currently invisible rather than the intrinsically unintelligible (p. 392). The movement from ancient to modern thinking about the natural world boils down, for Copenhaver, to the transition from qualities to quantities, perhaps best exemplified by the case of ground glass. Whereas Renaissance physicians detected a 'deleterious faculty' in ground glass that made it harmful to ingest, Robert Boyle put forward a mechanical explanation: 'the sharp points and cutting edges ... wound ... the stomach and guts' (pp. 408–9).

Ironically, however, it was not mechanistic philosophy (the theory that all effects can be explained by contact between invisible microscopic particles) that ultimately ushered in the Enlightenment, but rather the return of 'occult' qualities in Newton's *Principia* – since the great physicist was unable to account for the mechanism by which gravity acted (p. 416). The apparent reversion to occultism in physics especially troubled Leibniz, who for Copenhaver closes the book on the role of magic in mainstream philosophy by definitively disenchanting the cosmos (p. 424). Leibniz's anxiety that science might inadvertently offer

solace to supernatural belief has not altogether vanished even today; many 20th-century physicists recoiled from Big Bang theory owing to its similarity to religious accounts of *ex nihilo* creation, while contemporary occultists still regularly appeal to popular scientific understanding of quantum theory to justify claimed supernatural phenomena.

Because this book is not a narrative history of magic from antiquity to the Enlightenment, its subtitle has the potential to mislead readers who may be interested in medieval magic. A better subtitle might have been *Antiquity, Renaissance and Enlightenment*. Copenhaver includes a brief excursus on medieval ritual magic (pp. 264–7), drawing on the scholarship of Richard Kieckhefer, but his purpose in doing so is to contrast Ficino's caution with the excesses of medieval necromancers rather than to explore the reasoning behind medieval magical practice. Given the size of the book, Copenhaver's reluctance to engage with the intellectual foundations of medieval magic is understandable, but it certainly had intellectual foundations and was rooted in late antiquity, even if it lacked the erudition of the Renaissance magi.

Copenhaver's magisterial grasp of the magical traditions of the ancient world and the Renaissance is second to none, and his distinctive contribution in this book is to insist on attending to the detail of philosophical debates on the theoretical foundations of magic. These debates are so often overlooked by those who assume that magic is primitive, and that attempts to justify it philosophically are mere window-dressing of a visceral human universal best understood via anthropology. Copenhaver shows that magic – or at least the high magic of the Renaissance – has a deserved place in the pantheon of intellectual traditions of western culture, and that appreciating this is crucial to understanding the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the development of what we know as science.

The author would like to say that he is very grateful to Dr. Young for his thoughtful and thorough review. He too wishes that time, space and his own information had allowed him to say more about the Middle Ages.

#### **Other reviews:**

New Books Network

<http://newbooksnetwork.com/brian-p-copenhaver-magic-in-western-culture-from-antiquity-to-the-enlightenment-cambridge-up-2015/> [2]

Spectator

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/12/a-journey-through-magic-across-three-millennia/> [3]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1999>

#### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/165249>

[2] <http://newbooksnetwork.com/brian-p-copenhaver-magic-in-western-culture-from-antiquity-to-the-enlightenment-cambridge-up-2015/>

[3] <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/12/a-journey-through-magic-across-three-millennia/>