

Magic in the Modern World: Strategies of Repression and Legitimization

Review Number: 2210

Publish date: Thursday, 11 January, 2018

Editor: Edward Bever
Randall Styers

ISBN: 978-0-271-07777-2

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £57.95

Pages: 216pp.

Publisher: Pennsylvania State University Press

Publisher url: <http://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-07777-2.html>

Place of Publication: Pennsylvania

Reviewer: Francis Young

Since the turn of the millennium it has become increasingly common for general histories of magic and witchcraft to include a section on the phenomenon of magic in the contemporary western world, but the precise relationship between contemporary manifestations of magical belief and their historical antecedents is rarely explored. This book, part of Pennsylvania State University's important 'Magic in History' series, aims to put that right. It adopts an unusual 'two track' approach that examines both the 'disenchantment' of the modern world from the seventeenth-century onwards and the 're-enchantment' of modernity offered by revivals of magic. The two sections of the book, 'Magic and the Making of Modernity' and 'Magic in Modernity' aim to accomplish these two aims, and the book's 'two track' approach is also unusual in combining a study of historic critiques of magic with scholarship on more recent attempts to defend it.

The book engages with a recent trend in historiography that rejects the Weberian conflation of modernity with disenchantment (with the concomitant implication that the persistence of magic is a 'problem' to be solved), in favour of a view of magic as part of modernity. Bever and Styers accept neither the Weberian nor the post-Weberian approach uncritically, but endeavour instead to capture the 'complex double gesture at the heart of modernity' that both rejects and embraces magic (p. 3). The editors advance an overarching argument that choosing to repress or encourage belief in magic implies fundamentally different understandings of the boundaries of the self – with the non-magical self separated and distinct from nature, while the magical self is enmeshed in nature and spiritual powers (p. 4). Magic in the modern world is 'a potent resource conveying a sense of meaning and agency' (p. 10) that persists in spite of continuing efforts to marginalise it, even though magic is always 'inherently unstable' (p. 13).

Randall Styers' opening chapter considers the application of the concept of superstition by both contemporary cognitive scientists and early modern opponents of magic (pp. 17–32). This is a welcome study, since many scientists and philosophers remain wedded to the concept of superstition at a time when historians, archaeologists and anthropologists are increasingly abandoning the term as value-laden or, worse still, lacking in meaning. Although Styers provides a valuable comparative discussion here of a wide variety of contemporary and early modern approaches to superstition, it is regrettable that he does not do more to

critique the appropriateness of scientists' use of the term. The themes of Adam Jortner's chapter on anti-witchcraft polemic in the early American republic link closely with Styers's chapter, since both authors are concerned with changing constructions of superstition as a foil to modernity.

Edward Bever's chapter on Descartes' efforts to reconcile his visionary dreams with an anti-magical philosophical outlook sheds new light on a much discussed subject in the historiography of science, namely whether the originators of the 'scientific revolution' merely replaced one form of 'magical thinking' with another. Bever argues that Descartes' conception of conscious minds as 'sovereign rulers of an inner space that is essentially isolated from the surrounding world' can itself be considered a form of counter-magic, 'like whistling while walking past a graveyard', that serves to protect the self from vulnerability to spiritual forces (p. 45). Descartes was, in this sense, replacing one kind of magic with another.

Continuing the theme of the relationship between magic and the history of science, Benedek Láng's important chapter on the intellectual process by which magicians made sense of the effectiveness of their practice addresses a question that is often the 'elephant in the room' in historical studies of magic, at least for the non-specialist reader: why did people keep copying texts giving instructions on magic when magic does not work? The dominance of contextualist approaches to history has largely led historians to stop asking this question, but Láng argues that the total application of contextualism makes it impossible to use concepts that matter in the present in the study of the past, such as childhood, gender and sexuality (pp. 52–4). Láng contends that it is legitimate to raise *questions* about magic inspired by contemporary knowledge, but not to offer *answers* grounded in hindsight. For Láng, it makes no sense to ask how practitioners of ritual magic (the invocation of angels and demons) dealt with the ineffectiveness of their practices, since their faith in invisible beings was essentially religious (pp. 55–6). In this instance, Láng's analysis is not altogether satisfying, since ritual magicians often adopted a coercive rather than supplicatory approach to spiritual beings and expected definite results, such as an apparition of the spirit. Why did people carry on practising ritual magic if such apparitions did not occur? Did magicians somehow hypnotise themselves and hallucinate, or are the apparitions to be understood as symbolic in some way?

Láng observes that the very nature of magical operations always made it possible to find an excuse for magic's ineffectiveness. Medieval and early modern magicians were typically required to follow a minutely detailed set of rules to the letter, and even when everything was done correctly, failure could still be explained by the unworthiness of the magician (pp. 57–8). Láng argues that a not dissimilar process may take place in experimental science, using the example of an experiment Galileo claimed to have conducted in which wine and water did not mix and formed separate layers in a glass. Experimental evidence appears to suggest that Galileo was wrong and did not actually conduct this experiment, but negative results that fail to replicate Galileo's findings can always be explained away by the addition of 'auxiliary hypotheses' (p. 61). Láng's conclusion is that no such thing as a 'crucial experiment' disproving a previous theory exists, except in retrospect. At the time, a single experiment will not be enough to falsify a hypothesis, and falsification is a much more complex and lengthy process (p. 62). Clearly, this conclusion has important implications for both the history of science and the history of magic, and Láng does a valuable service by applying the same rigour usually applied to the history of science to the field of magic.

Shifting the volume's focus to contemporary traditions of magic, Egil Asprem examines the reinterpretation and evolution of one style of magic in the modern era, so-called 'Enochian' magic, which claims to be based on the angel-conjuring practices of the 16th-century astrologer and mathematician John Dee (1527–1609). Asprem shows that modern 'Enochian' magic, which emerged in the 19th century via the work of occultists such as Kenneth Mackenzie and Samuel Liddell Mathers and was popularised by the late Victorian Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was based on Meric Casaubon's 17th-century critique of Dee rather than Dee's original manuscripts (pp. 96–7). In spite of the fact that these manuscripts were available to the public in the British Museum at the time, occultists relied on printed sources and their interpretation of Dee was therefore a skewed one. Asprem might have added that the Victorian occultists were also oblivious of, or uninterested in, the medieval roots of Dee's conjuration practices, so their use of Dee was taken entirely out of context. What resulted was something quite new that has continued to evolve in contemporary occultism, whose

evolution and internal conflicts Asprem skilfully traces in this chapter. 'Enochian' magic is the narrow channel through which the tradition of ritual magic survived, and Asprem attributes its survival not to 'any single descriptive trait' but rather to 'the cultural flexibility that results from the creativity of individual magicians vying for cultural legitimacy and authenticity among subcultural peers' (p. 114). Asprem makes an important contribution to the internal historiography of occultism, exposing its limitations but also the creativity forced on magicians by the limited sources they choose to rely on.

Continuing the theme of the historic relationship between science and magic, Erik Davis's chapter examines the career of Jack Parsons (1914–52), a pioneer of rocketry who was deeply immersed in the occult subculture of mid-20th-century California, including Enochian magic (p. 126). Davis argues that Parsons, a figure at the forefront of 20th-century scientific progress whose work underpinned the US space programme, is especially useful for understanding the phenomenon of modern magic as something intimately related to, rather than divorced from, science and technology (p. 128). Davis uses the example of Parsons and his milieu to advance the case that modern magic can sometimes manifest as science, sometimes as religion, and sometimes as postmodern pluralism. The pluralistic and pragmatic character of magic, at least as practised by Parsons in the Thelemic tradition of Aleister Crowley, is inherently modern.

Megan Goodwin's study of Neopagan reinterpretations and recreations of the Norse magical tradition of *seiðr* engages with the particularly modern theme of gender. Her interest lies in how men lay claim to a practice traditionally considered 'unmanly' and associated with women. Goodwin aptly characterises the challenge of Neopagan reconstructionism as 'recreating practices from 14th-century post-Christian descriptions of 11th- and 12th-century pre-Christian practices translated into English by 19th- and 20th-century British and American scholars' (p. 158). This has not prevented Norse Neopagans from reinventing *seiðr*, yet the problem of 'negotiating masculinity' in *seiðr*craft exposes the difficulties of relying on a limited number of less-than-reliable sources of information about ancient magical practices. None of the Neopagan *seiðr*workers described by Goodwin adopt the path of simply acknowledging that we do not have enough reliable information on pre-Christian *seiðr*craft to know if its male practitioners were always considered 'unmanly'. In this sense, contemporary magical practitioners who portray themselves as countercultural and transgressive can be surprisingly naïve – and even fundamentalist – in their interpretation of the limited historical evidence.

The final chapter in the volume, Dan Harms's exploration of the 1977 grimoire known as the *Necronomicon*, demonstrates how some contemporary magical practitioners go far beyond literal interpretations of dubious historical evidence and draw their inspiration directly from fiction, in this case the writings of H. P. Lovecraft. Harms argues that the use of fiction is a 'strategy of legitimization' for contemporary magicians in the same way that earlier generations sought to situate their magic within a particular religious context (pp. 171–2). Harms's claim that grimoires made a self-conscious effort to legitimise themselves in relation to religious traditions is one that requires more justification, since it seems to imply that ritual magic was otherwise intrinsically *illegitimate* within religious traditions (a controversial contention). However, this analysis of the *Necronomicon*'s quest for authenticity is an intriguing insight into the construction of a very postmodern text, whose author, 'Simon', was willing to draw on real grimoires, archaeology and fiction together yet still maintained that the *Necronomicon* was a real grimoire (p. 174). It is not enough to dismiss the *Necronomicon* as a hoax, like the Hitler diaries, partly because the constructed nature of the text is transparent, and partly because such fabrication is an inherent part of the magical tradition. Harms recounts one incident when the incantations of a modern coven were exposed as lifted from the poetry of Rudyard Kipling (p. 185). Harms shows that the *Necronomicon* is a text that is simultaneously obviously fictional yet also a genuine reflection of the occult tradition (pp. 189–90), a paradoxical feat that is perhaps possible only in magic.

Overall, this is a significant volume of well-chosen essays that attempt to draw links between scholarship on the history of magic and the burgeoning academic study of contemporary occultism. The reader is left with many questions, however, regarding the extent to which the history of magic informs contemporary magical practitioners. Does history matter to those who situate themselves in the magical tradition, or is history

merely another prop in a sort of spiritual and intellectual ‘cosplay’? Genuine magical texts from the past are more accessible now than they have ever been, yet many magical practitioners seem inseparably attached to relatively recent traditions dating back to the 19th century that are a meagre reflection of the historic richness of magic. This may reveal something important about magic as a practice that requires a tradition (even a ‘spurious’ one) in which to be rooted. Furthermore, the very absence of sources from the past may be empowering for magicians, allowing them to use their own creativity. Flimflam and deception have always been an intrinsic part of the magical tradition; for every earnest John Dee there is a mercurial and untrustworthy Edward Kelley (Dee’s notorious spirit medium), and magic is in this sense an inherently ahistorical practice untroubled by the absence of sources and precedents. For those outside the thought-world of the magician, however, the apparent evidential abyss that separates historically attested magicians and their practices from contemporary practitioners is troubling.

This book does not altogether succeed in bridging that abyss, since it leaves many unanswered questions; but it does effectively present the ways in which contemporary magicians try to link themselves to (as well as differentiate themselves from) earlier practitioners. This is important for anyone interested in the whole history of magic, from ancient times to the present, where it can be easy for the non-specialist to imagine a continuity of tradition where none really exists. Hopefully, this book will be read both by historians of magic and scholars of contemporary magic in the fields of anthropology and sociology. As such, it is a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary study of magic; such interdisciplinary engagement is especially important when dealing with as elusive and controverted a concept as magic.

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