Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages

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It happened once in Paris that a certain sorceress impeded a man who had left her so that he could not have intercourse with another woman whom he had married. So she made an incantation over a closed lock and threw that lock into a well, and the key into another well, and the man was made impotent. But afterwards, when the sorceress was forced to acknowledge the truth, the lock was retrieved from the one well and the key from the other, and as soon as the lock was opened, the man became able to have intercourse with his wife.[1]

This story, told in c.1216, illustrates the link between magic and impotence as it was most commonly presented in the Middle Ages. Today we might suspect that the man's impotence had a psychological cause, but for medieval observers, this was a typical case of harmful magic, *maleficium*. Many societies have made similar links between impotence and magic, but the subject received a great deal of discussion in Europe from the twelfth century onwards because of the way in which medieval university teaching worked. Each generation of students commented on the same textbooks, and because impotence caused by *maleficium* appeared in the textbooks of three academic disciplines, canon law, theology and medicine, it appeared regularly in the commentaries that followed. There are also a number of references to the subject in other sources, such as magical texts, priests' manuals, and even a few trial records.

Because so many different sources talk about magically-caused impotence, it is possible to examine how ideas about it passed between 'popu-

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lar' and 'learned' culture, and this has been the subject of my research. The relationship between learned and popular culture has interested many historians of late medieval magic because it is related to the origins of early modern beliefs about witchcraft, which saw witches not just as doers of harmful magic but as members of a devil-worshipping sect. Arguing against earlier writers who saw these beliefs as evidence of a surviving pagan cult, Richard Kieckhefer and Norman Cohn have shown that the image of the witch was a learned construction that was derived partly from the earlier medieval stereotype of the clerical magician who invoked demons.[2] However, many of the academic commentators in my study took a different view of magic. While a few writers quoted magical texts in ways that anticipated the later image of the witch, many others seem to have recorded popular magical practices relatively accurately.

The first academics to discuss magical impotence were canon lawyers, who dealt with it as an impediment to marriage. Their commentaries were based on a single source, a paragraph beginning with the words *Si per sortiarias* (If by sorceresses…), from a work by the ninth-century archbishop Hincmar of Rheims. Hincmar stated that if a man was bewitched and made impotent, he should first go to confession, pray, fast, give alms and use other unspecified 'ecclesiastical medicines'. However, if these measures did not work, then the couple could separate and

both partners could remarry.[3] The canonists who commented on this text had two main concerns: should magical impotence be dealt with in the same way as non-magical impotence? And how could claims of bewitchment be proved?

Some canonists also mentioned events outside the university. Hostiensis said that priests could hear about magical cures for impotence in confession, if they asked diligently. He also mentioned a case where a count was bewitched so that for thirty years he was impotent with every woman except his wife; surprisingly, Hostiensis concluded that this magic was good, 'because adultery is avoided'.[4] Roffredus of Benevento, a civil lawyer who worked at the papal court, listed cures that he claimed women used, including making the unfortunate man wear his trousers on his head for a day and a night. But some later writers found Roffredus's list frivolous: Joannes Andreae called its contents 'trivial things' (*truffas*).[5] Despite the canonists' interest in magical impotence, however, cases are rare in the records of the church courts which deal with marriage litigation.[6] This may be because couples had to wait three years before seeking an annulment, as it seems likely that many found more effective solutions before this time had passed, such as confronting the suspected bewitcher (as in the story above) or using cures like those listed by Roffredus. If the impotence had a psychological cause, both of these might have acted as placebos, helping to remove the man's anxiety.

In 1155-8, the theologian Peter Lombard included *Si per sortiarias* in his *Sentences*, which became the universities' main theology textbook. The first *Sentences* commentators drew heavily on canon law, but in the 1240s, the scientifically-minded Dominican Albertus Magnus mentioned image-magic texts that had recently been translated from Arabic. For example, when he raised the question of whether magic could cause impotence, he replied that certainly it could and that 'this is clear to everyone who knows something about necromancy and making images'.[7] He also mentioned an image included in a *Book of Images* which made a man impotent with all women, and discussed whether it was legitimate to use counter-magic to lift a spell.

Albertus's interest in magical texts was unusual, however. Instead, in the 1250s, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure turned to more theoretical questions about how impotence magic worked. Bonaventure was particularly interested in the role of demons in magic, describing how a magician (a specifically female *sortilega mulier*) might work impotence magic through a personal relationship with a demon: the impotent man 'is impeded by a demon (who is present and attacking him at the request of a sorceress, who obtains this by the merit of her unfaithfulness, just as faith obtains God's presence to do miracles).'[8] This idea that the sorceress's relationship with a demon was on some level the same as a devout person's with God reappeared much later in the image of the witch who wor-

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shipped the devil. Other writers described magical practices: Duns Scotus mentioned that impotence magic could be done with 'a bent needle, or something of this kind.'[9] However, in the fourteenth century, many theologians lost interest in questions like these relating to marriage, preferring instead to concentrate on more abstract philosophical issues.

Medical discussions of magical impotence were very different from those of the canonists and theologians. For doctors, it was not an impediment to marriage, but an illness that could be cured. They also drew on different sources, notably an eleventh-century medical encyclopaedia, the *Pantegni* of Constantine the African, which listed various non-physical ways of causing and curing impotence.[10] The causes ranged from placing a cock's testicles and blood under the victim's bed, to breaking an acorn and putting the two halves on opposite sides of a road where the couple would walk. The cures were equally varied, including removing any magical items that might have been planted in the house and having a priest write biblical verses for the couple to wear as amulets. These recipes are very different from those that Constantine usually recommended, and the sources for many of them have not been traced.

Constantine was not the only medical writer to list cures from unknown sources. Gilbertus Anglicus, who wrote a *Compendium of Medicine* in c.1240, said that impo-

tent men and sterile women could be cured by gathering herbs in silence on St John's eve, and using their sap to write the words '*The Lord said Increase + Uthiboth + and multiply + Thabechay + and fill the earth + Amath +*' on a slip of parchment. The parchment was then worn as an amulet; if the man wore it, the couple would conceive a boy, and if the woman, a girl.[11] Gilbertus's contemporary Thomas Aquinas condemned charms which contained strange words because they might be the names of demons,[12] but Gilbertus does not seem to have seen anything wrong with this cure – an indication that not everyone accepted the theologians' clear-cut definitions of magic.

Unlike the theologians, the medical writers did not lose interest in magical impotence after the thirteenth century. A number of fourteenth-century physicians mentioned the subject, often quoting Constantine, Gilbertus or the *Thesaurus Pauperum* of Petrus Hispanus.[13] In the fifteenth century, when the image of the devil-worshipping witch emerged, several physicians noted the change in attitudes to magic. Giovanni Michele Savonarola (grandfather of the famous Florentine preacher) was probably thinking of devil-worshipping witches when he denounced those who caused magical impotence as 'bad women or men who, despising nature and God, serve the devil'.[14] Two other writers, Antonio Guainerio and Jacques Despars, expressed scepticism about demonic witchcraft, arguing that the old women who offered 'magical' cures were not really trafficking

with demons. However, Guainerio noted that even if he put no faith in such 'magical' remedies, recently many women had been burned for using them.[15] Magical impotence, and its cures, were now very serious business indeed.

When the image of the witch appeared in the fifteenth century, then, it affected medical discussions of magical impotence. Before that time, however, only a few theologians like Bonaventure had associated it with ideas that later became part of the image of the witch. The canonists and medical writers, and even many theologians, were more interested in concrete questions such as how magical impotence related to marriage law, or how it could be caused or cured. Many of them drew examples and anecdotes from everyday life, not from the developing stereotypes of witchcraft. Thus, although the image of the witch undoubtedly was built more on learned fears of demonic magic than on popular practices, the discussions of magical impotence show that not all medieval academics subscribed to these fears. When they encountered laymen in impotence cases as patients, parishioners or legal clients, many learned writers recorded the daily reality of magical practices, and not the myth of demonic witchcraft.

Notes
[1] 'Contigit quandoque Parisius quod quedam sorciaria impedivit virum qui eam reliquerat ne posset coire cum aliqua quam superduxerat. Fecerat enim incantationem super quamdam seram clausam et miserat illam seram in unum puteum et clavem in alium puteum, et factus est vir ille impotens coire. Postea vero cum coacta esset sorciaria cognoscere veritatem, extracta fuit sera de puteo uno et clavis de alio, et statim

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cum aperta esset sera, factus est vir ille potens coire cum uxore sua.' Thomas of Chobham, *Summa Confessorum*, ed. F. Broomfield (Louvain, 1968), 184; all translations are mine.

[2] Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (3rd edn., London, 1993); Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture* (London, 1976).

[3] Hincmar of Rheims, *De nuptiis Stephani et filiae Regimundi comitis*, MGH *Epistolae* 8 (Berlin, 1939), 105.

[4] 'Et si illa uxor sit, bonum videtur tunc sortilegium, cum adulterium vitetur.' Hostiensis, *Summa Aurea* (Lyons, 1548), 214r. Confessions: Hostiensis, *Lectura*, London, British Library MS Arundel 471, 177v.

[5] Roffredus Beneventanus, *Libelli Iuris Canonici* (Avignon, 1500, repr. Turin, 1968), 352; Joannes Andreae, *Additiones ad Speculum Gulielmi Durandi* (Strasbourg, 1475), 284v-285r.

[6] Richard Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1974), 87-8, found impotence cases, but no magic.

[7] 'Hoc patet etiam omnibus illis qui de necromantia et de factis imaginum aliquid noverunt.' Albertus Magnus, *Opera Omnia* vol. 30, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris, 1894), 336.

[8] 'Sed quia demoniaco impeditur – qui assistit et se obiicit secundum petitionem sortilegae mulieris, impetrante hoc merito infidelitatis, sicut fides impetrat, ut Deus assistat ad facienda miracula...' Bonaventure, *Opera Omnia* vol. 4 (Quaracchi, 1889), 773.

[9] 'Acus curvata, vel aliqua hujusmodi.' Duns Scotus, *Opera Omnia* vol. 19 (Paris, 1894, repr. Farnborough, 1969), 403.

[10] The text is in Gerda Hoffmann, 'Beiträge zur Lehre von der durch Zauber verursachten Krankheit und ihrer Behandlung in der Medizin des Mittelalters', *Janus* 37, 1933, 129-44. Monica Green argues that the *Pantegni* may have been completed after Constantine's death: 'The Re-creation of *Pantegni*, Practica, Book 8', in Charles Burnett and Danielle Jacquart, ed., *Constantine the African and Alī ibn al-Abbās al-Maǧūsī* (Leiden, 1994), 121-60.

[11] 'Dixit Dominus crescite. +. Uthiboth. +. et multiplicamini. +. thabechay. +. et replete terram. +. amath. +.' Gilbertus Anglicus, *Compendium Medicinae* (Lyons, 1510), 287r, quoted in Hoffmann, 181.

[12] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by the Dominican Friars from the English-Speaking Provinces, (London, 1968), vol. 40, 82-3.

[13] For example John Gaddesden, *Rosa Anglica* (Pavia, 1517), ch. 17, 98v; Gulielmus Brixiensis, *Practica* (Venice, 1508), ch. 111, f. 139r; Petrus de Argellata, quoted in Hoffmann, 187.

[14] 'Deinde loquar de remediis fiendis contra fascinationes et machinamenta malarum mulierum aut virorum, qui naturam et deum despicientes diabolo serviunt.' Joannes Michael Savonarola, *Practica* (Venice, 1497), 239r.

[15] Danielle Jacquart, 'Le regard d'un médecin sur son temps: Jacques Despars (1380?-1458)', *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* 138, 1980, 63; Antonius Guainerius, *Practica* (Lyons, 1525), 150v.

Notes and Queries

The Idea of Magic in the Occultist Current in England, 1875-1947

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A doctoral thesis under the supervision of Antoine Faivre, Department of Religious Studies, École Pratique des Hautes Études. Defended June, 2004

The historical context of my research is the diffusion in England of alternative forms of religiosity between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth centuries – a time when the majority of Christian denominations were undergoing a period of crisis and profound transformation. In this period, phenomena such as spiritualism, psychical research and occultism first made their appearance in the Anglo-Saxon world. Among these various cultural and religious currents, occultism is the one that can most properly be considered as belonging to the newly developing field of the historical study of Western esotericism. My thesis proposes to examine one of the most interesting aspects of Anglo-Saxon occultism, namely the idea of magic.

In the first chapter, I attempt to tackle some of the essential methodological questions raised by this study. On the one hand, I look at the domain in which this research was conducted, namely the history of Western esoteric currents; on the other, I attempt to clarify as much as possible what should be understood here by "magic" and "occultism" (terms whose sense often varies in significant ways from author to author). Regarding the problem of magic, I have opted, in

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the wake of the work of Ernesto De Martino and Randall G. Styers, for a "deconstructionist" approach that does not seek to elaborate abstract definitions of magic but rather examines the historical evolution of the various ideas associated with it. Regarding "occultism," I show that the best way to use this term, in the context of historical research, is by applying it to a specific current of Western esotericism which takes shape from the middle of the 19th century, at first mainly in France, and after that in other European countries.

In the second chapter, I have tried to locate the intellectual origins of the occultist discourse on magic, taking as a point of departure certain currents of animal magnetism during the first half of the 19th century. I also analyze the work of two authors who exercised a fundamental influence on English occultism: Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse-Louis Constant, 1810-1875) and Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873).

In the third chapter, I sketch out a picture of the cultural and religious situation in England at the moment when occultism is in the process of taking shape there. It seems important to emphasize the fact that occultism is not a phenomenon that develops in a void. While it is true that occultists represent a small minority of the British population at the time in question, it is a very socially active minority, in some cases deriving from the intellectual stratum of society and involving lettered men and women whose influence on the culture of their time is far from negligible. Indeed, no fixed boundaries exist between occultism and the society surrounding it. This remark may appear banal in its obviousness, but it is an aspect historians of occultism sometimes forget, and which it therefore seems necessary to point out.

In the following chapters I have tried to lay out my material in chronological order as much as possible, from the first generation of English occultism to the last important representatives of this current in the period between the two wars. Chapter four is thus devoted to the group of authors I have termed the "earliest English occultists." In this phase, occultism is still in the process of forming its identity, particularly through a confrontation – often polemical – with spiritualism. Additionally, the activities of these authors may be situated, in most cases, in a masonic context (or, to use the expression of historian Ellic Howe, in the context of what he calls " fringe masonry"). In the fifth chapter I examine the Theosophical Society and the work of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, which constitutes a particularly important moment in the history of Anglo-Saxon occultism. I highlight two problematic aspects of the history of the Theosophical Society at its origin; that is, the contrast between its doctrinal and practical teachings, and the contrast between its adopted Oriental esoteric traditions and Western esotericism. The sixth chapter is devoted to the initiatic orders of occultism which took shape in England in the 1880s, in particular the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. These groups can be situated in the context of a "Hermetic reaction" (i.e. "Occidentalist reaction"), which opposed itself to the "Orientalist" vision of the esoteric tradition being developed in the same period by the Theosophical Society. Magic, in the initiatic orders, became an experience of collective practice and took on new meanings: here, the goal of magic is seen as the successful conclusion of a spiritual path, termed by the Golden Dawn the "union with the Higher Self." In the seventh chapter, I focus on the occultist who undoubtedly devotes the most space in his work to a discourse on magic: Aleister Crowley (1875-1947). Through Crowley's work, I examine the attempt to integrate new cultural tendencies of the time into the occultist tradition. Crowley's influence on later occultists is fundamental. The eighth and final chapter is devoted to two particularly important occultists

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We are looking for essays of 1500-2000 words covering recent research in the history of magic and related topics. Essays may be bibliographic in orientation but need not be. We are interested in writing which engages magic in tension or dialogue with other rhetorical and ritual constructions; we would particularly welcome essays on topics such as magic and the law, sorcery trials and accusations, medicine and magic, magic and religion.

We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column; news about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries or other such items are all welcomed. Proposals for essays, smaller pieces, or notes on all topics of potential interest to members of the Societas Magica will be welcome. Please contact Lea Olsan at olsan@ ulm.edu.

belonging to the generation following Crowley: Dion Fortune (Violet Mary Firth, 1890-1946), and Israel Regardie (1907-1985). With these authors, the process of "psychologisation" of magic, set in motion by Crowley, is pushed to its logical limits. With Regardie in particular, we see a complete loss of interest in the existence of superhuman entities (which were always a problematic element in the Western magical tradition) and an emphasis uniquely on the interior (or psychological) development of the "magician."

My research enables me to highlight certain particularly interesting aspects of the occultist vision of magic. The most important of these is undoubtedly the clear continuity between the magical theories of the Renaissance (which have already been the object of a number of important scholarly studies) and those of the occultists. Elements of occultist thinking which previously characterized the Renaissance theories include the idea of subtle fluid, the importance of certain psychological faculties such as imagination and will, and the notion of correspondences. These ideas seem to have been transmitted to occultism primarily through the intermediary of animal magnetism, set in motion by F.A. Mesmer towards the end of the 18th century.

Mesmer's influence is important in part because of what it contributes to the (perhaps unsuspected) richness of occultist ideas about magic. Previous studies have had a tendency to concentrate mainly on the presence of a tradition of "ritual magic" in occultism, which was based primarily on the literature of medieval grimoires. This may have led in turn to scholarly neglect of the fact that one often finds an occultist discourse also centered on the idea of "natural magic," whose immediate origin is to be found in the influence of magnetist currents on occultism in the first half of the 19th century. Through examination of these and other aspects of the occultist discourse on magic, I clarify how, in the course of the period under discussion, occultist ideas about magic undergo an evolution which recognizes important cultural developments occurring in English society, and more generally in European societies, at the turn of the 20th century, including those contributing to the increasing process of secularization.

Sessions sponsored by the *Societas Magica* at the Fortieth International Congress on Medieval Studies, at Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 5-8, 2005

I. Magical Figures and Diagrams I

Word and Image in Kabbalistic Diagrams
Marla Segol, Carleton University

A Magical Aesthetic: Visual Elements in Jewish Magical Texts
Michael Swartz, The Ohio State University

Ars Notoria *Figures and the Medieval* Ars Memorativa
Sarah Anne Smith, Indiana University

II. Magical Figures and Diagrams II

Holy Images or Necromantic Figures? Two Drafts of John of Morigny's Liber Figurarum
Claire Fanger, Independent Scholar

Medieval Magic Diagrams, Cosmology, and Ritual
Sophie Page, University College London

Through a Glass Darkly: A Medieval Model of the Cosmos as Reflected in Scrying Devices and Practices
Robert Mathiesen, Brown University

III. Texts and Manuscripts of Magic

Precedents for Ficino's "Personal Daemon" in Medieval Magical and Devotional Texts
Frank Klaassen, University of Saskatchewan

Remembering Sappho: Female-female Erotic Spells in Egypt
Marguerite Johnson, University of Newcastle

Liber de angelis/Secreta astronomie/Figure septem planetarum: *Hindsight, the Academy and the Value of Editing Texts*
Juris Lidaka, West Virginia State University

IV. Approaches to Teaching the History, Practice and Material Culture of Magic: A Roundtable on Pedagogy

Moderator: Amelia Carr

Participants will include Richard Kieckhefer, Robert Mathiesen, Pat Aarkhus, Geoffrey McVey, Marguerite Johnson, David Porreca.

The annual general meeting will be held noon, Saturday, May 7, 2004.

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