

## 1 Introduction: Magic as a Crossroads

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This book will approach magic as a kind of crossroads where different pathways in medieval culture converge. First of all, it is a point of intersection between religion and science. Demonic magic invokes evil spirits and rests upon a network of religious beliefs and practices, while natural magic exploits “occult” powers within nature and is essentially a branch of medieval science. Yet demonic and natural magic are not always as distinct in fact as they seem in principle. Even when magic is clearly nondemonic it sometimes mingles elements of religion and science: a magical cure, for example, may embody both herbal lore from folk medicine and phrases of prayer from Christian ritual. Secondly, magic is an area where popular culture meets with learned culture. Popular notions of magic were taken up and interpreted by “intellectuals” – a term used here for those with philosophical or theological education – and their ideas about magic, demons, and kindred topics were in turn spread throughout the land by preachers. One of the most important tasks in cultural history is working out these lines of transmission. Thirdly, magic represents a particularly interesting crossroads between fiction and reality. The fictional literature of medieval Europe sometimes reflected the realities of medieval life, sometimes distorted them, sometimes provided escapist release from them, and sometimes held up ideals for reality to imitate. When this literature featured sorcerers, fairies, and other workers of magic, it may not have been meant or taken as totally realistic. Even so, the magic of medieval literature did resemble the magical practices of medieval life in ways that are difficult but interesting to disentangle.

In short, magic is a crossing-point where religion converges with science, popular beliefs intersect with those of the educated classes, and the conventions of fiction meet with the realities of daily life. If we stand at this crossroads we may proceed outward in any of various directions, to explore the theology, the social realities, the literature, or the politics of medieval Europe. We may pursue other paths as well, such as medieval art or music, since art sometimes depicted magical themes

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and music was seen as having magical powers. Because magic was condemned by both Church and state, its history leads into the thickets of legal development. Indeed, magic is worth studying largely because it serves as a starting-point for excursions into so many areas of medieval culture. Exploration of this sort can reveal the complexity and interrelatedness of different strands in that culture.

Humor and seriousness also converge in the magic of medieval Europe. Many of the recipes for magic that we will encounter in this book may strike a modern reader as amusing or frivolous, and may indeed have been written in a playful spirit, but it is seldom easy to know for sure whether a medieval audience would have been amused or shocked by such material. Some of the magic that medieval people actually employed may now seem merely inane, but the judges who sentenced magicians to death did not take it lightly.

In a further and rather different sense, magic represents a crossroads. The ideas about magic that flourished in medieval Europe came from various sources. Magical beliefs and practices from the classical culture of the Mediterranean regions mingled with beliefs and practices of Germanic and Celtic peoples from northern Europe. Later on, medieval Christians borrowed notions about magic from the Jews in their midst or from Muslims abroad. It is sometimes hard to distinguish precisely where a specific belief first arose, but to understand the overall patterns of medieval magic we must be aware of these borrowings from diverse cultures. The study of magic thus becomes an avenue toward understanding how different cultures relate to one another.

### Two Case Studies

What all of this means can perhaps best be clarified by looking at two fifteenth-century manuscripts in which magic plays an important role: a book of household management from Wolfsthurn Castle in the Tyrol, and a manual of demonic magic now kept in the Bavarian State Library in Munich.

The Wolfsthurn handbook shows the place magic might hold in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Its compiler was an anonymous woman or man involved in running a large estate. Perhaps he or she lived at Wolfsthurn, or came from nearby. At any rate, the book is in the vernacular language, German, rather than in Latin, and the compiler was probably a layperson rather than a priest or monk. The work reflects all the practical concerns

<sup>1</sup> Oswald von Zingerle, "Segen und Heilmittel aus einer Wolfsthurner Handschrift des xv. Jahrhunderts," *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 1 (1891), 172–7, 315–24.

of a household. People on the estate were constantly prey to illness. The fields needed cultivation and protection from the elements. Rats had to be driven from the cellar. Much of the knowledge required for these tasks could be kept in one's head, but a literate householder might usefully write down some of the details to ensure that they remained fresh, and the book was a convenient place to record such information. It contains instructions for almost every aspect of running a household. It tells how to prepare leather, make soap or ink, wash clothes, and catch fish. Intermingled with such advice are medical prescriptions for human and animal disease. Claiming the authority of Aristotle and other learned men of antiquity, the compiler tells how to diagnose and treat fevers, ailments of the eyes, and other medical problems. Further added to this potpourri are prayers, blessings, and conjurations.

Medieval people who assembled this and other such manuals would never have thought of themselves as magicians, but the book at hand contains elements of what we can call magic. It recommends taking the leaves of a particular plant as a remedy for "fever of all sorts;" this in itself would count as science or as folk medicine, rather than magic. Before using these leaves, one is supposed to write certain Latin words on them to invoke the power of the Holy Trinity, and then one is to say the Lord's Prayer and other prayers over them; this in itself would count as religion. There is no scientific or religious reason, however, for repeating this procedure before sunrise on three consecutive mornings. By adding this requirement, the author enhances the power of science and religion with that of magic. Religion and magic support each other again in the treatment suggested in this book for a speck in the eye. The prescription begins with a story from the legends of the saints, and then gives an adjuration addressed to the speck itself:

[Legend:] Saint Nicasius, the holy martyr of God, had a speck in his eye, and besought that God would relieve him of it, and the Lord cured him. He prayed [again] to the Lord, that whoever bore his name upon his person would be cured of all specks, and the Lord heard him. [Adjuration:] Thus I adjure you, O speck, by the living God and the holy God, to disappear from the eyes of the servant of God N., whether you are black, red, or white. May Christ make you go away. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The legend itself is religious, and the formula has some of the trappings of a prayer, but magic enters in with the notion that the disease itself has a kind of personality and can respond to a command. Similar to this is a cure for toothache that starts with a legend of St. Peter. The saint is suffering from a worm in his tooth. Christ sees him sitting on a rock and holding his hand to his cheek, and cures him by adjuring the worm to depart, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

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This healing act of Christ becomes an archetype, whose power can be invoked to heal one's own dental afflictions. In the Wolfsthurn book, however, the concrete healing procedure is not explicit. Rather, the legend is followed by a few snippets of religious vocabulary ("Ayos, ayos, ayos tetragrammaton"), and then by the unrelated counsel that a person suffering this affliction should write a mixture of Latin and nonsense ("rex, pax, nax in Cristo filio suo") on his cheek.<sup>2</sup>

At times, the liturgical formulas in this handbook are put to patently magical uses. For a woman with menstrual problems, the book recommends writing out the words from the mass, "By Him, and with Him, and in Him," then laying the slip of paper on the afflicted woman's head. Even more clearly magical is a remedy for epilepsy: first one puts a deerskin strap around the patient's neck while he is suffering a seizure, then one "binds" the sickness to the strap, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and finally one buries the strap along with a dead man. The sickness is thus transferred from the patient to the strap, then relegated safely to the realm of the dead so it can cause no further harm in the world of the living.

The Wolfsthurn book recommends not only Christian prayers, but also apparently meaningless combinations of words or letters for their medical value. At one point it says to copy out the letters "p. N. B. C. P. X. A. O. P. I. L.," followed by the Latin for "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." For demonic possession, the book recommends that a priest should speak into the afflicted person's ear the following jumble of Latin, garbled Greek, and gibberish:

Amara Tonta Tyra post hos firabis ficiliri Elypolis starras poly polyque lique linarras buccabor uel barton vel Titram celi massis Metumbor o priczoni Jordan Ciriacus Valentinus.

As an alternative remedy for possession, the book suggests taking three sprigs of juniper, dousing them three times with wine in honor of the Trinity, boiling them, and placing them on the possessed person's head without his knowledge.

Prescriptions containing verbal formulas usually come from Christian liturgy, but other prescriptions contain no spoken words at all and have nothing religious in them. To ward off all forms of sorcery, for example, one should carry the plant *artemisia* on one's person. Or to ensure keen

<sup>2</sup> *Hagios* (given here in corrupt form) is Greek for "holy;" Christian liturgy often uses it (or the Latin *sanctus*) in threefold repetition. The Tetragrammaton is the sacred Hebrew name for God, which would have been written in Hebrew without vowels: "YHWH." *Rex* means "king," *pax* means "peace," *in Cristo filio suo* means "in Christ his son," and *nax* does not mean anything.

eyesight by night as well as by day, one should anoint one's eyes with bat's blood, which presumably imparts that animal's remarkable ability to "see," even in the dark. The appeal to ancient authority might indeed seem plausible in such cases: classical writers like Pliny often referred to cures similar if not identical to what we have here. Tracing exactly where the compiler found any particular recipe, however, would be a hopeless task, leading down labyrinthine byways.

Indeed, little if anything in this compilation is altogether original; much of its material echoes ancient formulas or at least those of other medieval compilations. The cure for toothache beginning with the legend of St. Peter, for example, is a commonplace. Essentially the same formula occurs in many different manuscripts, from early medieval England and elsewhere in medieval Europe.

Not surprisingly, material of this sort could raise eyebrows. Marginal comments added to the Wolfsthurn manual in slightly later handwriting indicate that the manuscript came before disapproving eyes. One passage that gave offense was the above-mentioned cure for menstrual problems. A later reader wrote beside this prescription, "This is utterly false, superstitious, and practically heretical." Indeed, certain pages were excised from the compilation, perhaps by this same reader. Because of this censorship, some of the author's formulas are badly mutilated, such as the instructions for making oneself invisible, while others have been lost altogether. At another point, however, the book evoked skepticism rather than disapproval: a reader commented beside a particularly dubious passage, "This would be good – if it were true!"

In short, the Wolfsthurn handbook raises a series of questions regarding the history of magic: how does it relate to religion? How does it relate to science and to folk medicine? What role does the tradition of classical antiquity play in medieval magic? How and why did Christian liturgical formulas get used in magic? To what extent was magic an activity of the laypeople? To what degree did it involve the clergy, such as the priest whose aid is invoked for exorcism? How would a philosopher or theologian such as Thomas Aquinas have reacted to the magic in this book? All these questions will recur in later chapters. The point for now is merely to see how the magic of the Wolfsthurn handbook could serve as a starting-point for exploration in various directions, or as a crossroads in medieval culture.

The second manuscript raises a somewhat different set of questions.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Wolfsthurn book, the Munich handbook involves

<sup>3</sup> The manuscript in question is Clm 849 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich), fols. 3<sup>r</sup>–108<sup>v</sup>. For brief discussion, see Lynn Thorndike, "Imagination and magic: Force of imagination on the human body and of magic on the human mind," in *Mélanges Eugène*

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straightforwardly demonic magic, or what came to be known as necromancy. Also unlike the Wolfsthurn book, the Munich manual is in Latin (though some vernacular material is appended to it), and the author and owner probably belonged to the clergy. On practically every page, this handbook gives instructions for conjuring demons with magic circles and other devices, commanding the spirits once they have appeared, or compelling them to return after they have been dismissed. The purposes served by this magic are many. It can allegedly be used to drive a person mad, to arouse passionate love, to gain favor at court, to create the illusion of a mighty castle, to obtain a horse that can carry the magician anywhere he wants to go, or to reveal future and secret things. The magic of this handbook involves elaborate paraphernalia. Apart from the magic circles, the magician needs wax images of the people he wishes to afflict, or rings, swords, and other objects. In some cases, the handbook requires that he sacrifice a hoopoe to the evil spirits,<sup>4</sup> or burn certain herbs so that the smoke can serve as a magical fumigation. Like the Wolfsthurn book, the Munich handbook draws from the riches of Christian liturgy, but it does so much more fully. Rather than merely borrowing short fragments and familiar prayers, the Munich handbook takes over lengthy passages from the Church's ritual, and in other cases uses new formulas clearly modeled on Christian precedent.

Other elements in the work resemble Jewish or Muslim magic. Some formulas involve magical incantation of names for God, as in Jewish magical practice, while the recitation of names for Christ is, in effect, a Christian version of the same thing. Indeed, a great deal of Jewish and Muslim magic seems to have revolved about the basic notion that by magical formulas one can compel the demons to come and do one's bidding. An important Arabic magical text, well-known in the later medieval West under the title *Picatrix*, also contains formulas similar to some in the Munich handbook. Furthermore, certain passages in the Munich manuscript presuppose at least a crude knowledge of that astrology which later medieval Western culture had taken over from Arabic sources.

The magic in this Munich handbook is often quite complex. One section, for example, tells how to obtain the love of a woman. While

*Tisscrant*, 7 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Vaticana, 1964), 356–8; for a full account, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997; University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> The hoopoe is an extraordinary crested bird that figures prominently in magic and in folklore generally. Ulysse Aldrovandi, in his *Ornithologia*, vol. 2 (Bologna: Nicolaus Tebaldinus, 1634), 709, exclaims that he will not record the superstitions that have arisen regarding this bird, but then he does so anyway.

reciting incantations, the magician takes the blood of a dove and uses it to draw a naked woman on the skin of a female dog. He writes the names of demons on various parts of this image, and as he does so he commands the demons to afflict those parts of the actual woman's body, so that she will be inflamed with love of him. He fumigates the image with the smoke of myrrh and saffron, all the time conjuring the demons to afflict her so that day and night she will think of nothing but him. He hangs the image around his neck, goes out to a secret place either alone or with three trustworthy companions, and with his sword traces a circle on the ground, with the names of demons all around its edge. Then he stands inside the circle and conjures the demons. They come (the handbook promises) in the form of six servants, ready to do his will. He tells them to go and fetch the woman for him without doing her any harm, and they do so. On arriving she is a bit perplexed, but willing to do as the magician wishes. As long as she is there, one of the demons takes on her form and carries on for her back at home, so that her strange departure will not be noticed.

The compiler of this manual had further mischief up his sleeve. He tells, for example, how to arouse hatred between two friends by using a complex ritual in which two stones are buried beneath the friends' thresholds, then unearthed and cast into a fire, then fumigated with sulphur, left three days in water, and smashed together. As the magician fumigates them he conjures forth "all hateful demons, malignant, invidious, and contentious," by the power of God. He demands that these demons arouse between the friends as much hatred as exists among the demons, or as much as existed between Cain and Abel. While striking the stones against each other he says, "I do not strike these stones together, but I strike X. and Y., whose names are carved here." Finally, he buries the stones separately. The handbook warns that the details of this ceremony must be kept secret because of its ineffable power. In case the magician should wish later to undo his damage, he should dig up the stones, heat them, crush them, and cast the fragments into a river.

Another section of the book tells how to become invisible. The magician goes to a field outside of town and traces a circle on the ground. He fumigates the circle, and sprinkles it and himself with holy water while reciting Psalm 51:7. He kneels down and conjures various spirits, compelling them in the name of God to come and do his bidding. The spirits suddenly appear within the circle and ask what he wants. He requests a "cloak of invisibility." One of them goes and procures such a garment, and gives it to him in exchange for his white robe. The ritual is not without its hazards: if the magician does not return to the same place



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three days later, retrieve his robe, and burn it, he will die within seven days.

The author of this book is not squeamish about conjuring “demons” or “evil spirits.” Sometimes he invokes them by name, as Satan, Lucifer, Berich, and so forth. Even when the ceremonies do not explicitly identify the spirits who come as demonic, the intent is usually clear, and certainly no inquisitor would have thought about the question for more than a moment.

The materials in the Munich handbook, like those in the Wolfsthurn manuscript, are not entirely original. Parallels can be found in other manuscripts, from other parts of Europe, as well as in Arabic and Jewish traditions. Medieval European examples are rare, since whenever possible the inquisitors and other authorities consigned such stuff to the flames. Enough manuscripts escaped this fate, however, to give an idea of the genre.

This handbook, like the first one, raises a series of important questions: how does this magic relate to religion? (Very differently from that of the Wolfsthurn manual!) Precisely how does this material resemble that found in Jewish and Muslim magic, and how does it differ? What historical links can be established between this magic and Jewish or Muslim precedent? What sort of person was likely to own such a book? Did the owners really practice these rituals, or was it all an elaborate game or fantasy? If the owners did actually carry out such magic, how did they resemble the magicians depicted in medieval sermons, or the sorcerers in medieval romances? Once again, these are questions that will arise later in this book, and for now the point is simply to show how magic can lead to such wide-ranging inquiry.

### Definitions of Magic

The most fundamental question for present purposes is how to define “magic.” If a person rubs bat’s blood into his eyes, is that magic, or is it a kind of primitive medical science? How can we define the border between magic and science? Even if we want to say that there are instances that lie near or on the border, it seems that we must be able to define the border itself. So too, we must be able to indicate how “magic” relates in principle to “religion,” even if we want to acknowledge many cases where they resemble each other closely. Still further complications arise. Some people, for instance, would want to say that conjuring a demon merely to foretell the future is not magic, since magic



involves practical manipulation of things in the world – making people ill, gaining favor at court, and so forth – rather than simply learning about predetermined states of affairs.

What would medieval Europeans have said about these questions? Most of them, perhaps, would have given them little thought. There were people who tried to use knowledge such as that in the *Wolfsthurn* or *Munich* handbooks, others who worried about it being used against them, and still others who made it their business to keep it from being used; but few of these people would have asked themselves whether the term “magic” applied to these practices. They might have said that the *Wolfsthurn* book contained “charms,” “blessings,” “adjurations,” or simply “cures,” without calling them specifically “magical.” They might have called the *Munich* handbook a book of “necromancy” or “sorcery” rather than of “magic.” Only the theologically and philosophically sophisticated elite bothered greatly about questions of definition. When the intellectuals attended to such matters, however, they were reflecting on contemporary practices, and often they were articulating explicitly what other people merely took for granted. By looking at theological and philosophical notions about magic, we can at least take an important step toward understanding how medieval people thought about the subject.

Broadly speaking, intellectuals in medieval Europe recognized two forms of magic: natural and demonic. Natural magic was not distinct from science, but rather a branch of science. It was the science that dealt with “occult virtues” (or hidden powers) within nature. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but rather a perversion of religion. It was religion that turned away from God and toward demons for their help in human affairs.

The key question was the source of power employed: demonic magic, virtually everyone in medieval Europe agreed, could work because it invoked demons; if a practitioner or observer recognized angelic magic as distinct from demonic, that person saw angels as the sources for a particular kind of magic power; officially approved religion could be effective for material as well as spiritual ends by appealing to God and other beneficent spirits; natural magic, for those who recognized that category, worked because it exploited “occult virtues” or hidden powers within nature; and ordinary science made use of manifest powers in the natural order. To be sure, not everyone recognized all these distinctions, and the boundaries may have been more often murky than clear. A manuscript might juxtapose Latin liturgical formulas and prayers with Old English charms to aid in beekeeping and to counteract theft, making no clear distinction between religious and magical, clerical and lay,

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Christian and pagan or folkloric material.<sup>5</sup> A practitioner might be unsure in practice whether the use of a herb, along with recitation of a particular charm, was natural or demonic magic, or whether the charm was actually a kind of prayer. If the question arose what sources of power lay behind the healing efficacy of a herb or a verbal formula, people might disagree. Still, there were conceptual categories available that could be invoked: it was possible to assert and perhaps persuade others that wondrous effects could be ascribed to God (in which case, the category “religion” might seem to everyone appropriate), to demons (which would lead many to speak of “magic,” or perhaps “sorcery” or “bewitchment”), or to mysterious powers within nature (which some, but not all observers would call “natural magic”).

One might quickly conclude that the magic of the Wolfsthurn handbook exemplifies natural magic, and that of the Munich manuscript represents demonic magic. From the viewpoint of the practitioners, this conclusion might be essentially correct. But from the vantage point of medieval theologians, philosophers, preachers, and inquisitors, matters were not so simple. Many of these observers would have suspected demonic magic even in the Wolfsthurn book. The unintelligible words that it prescribed might contain names for demons. The use of a deerskin strap to remove a case of epilepsy might be seen as a signal or sacrifice to the demons. If artemisia had power to ward off sorcery, the knowledge of that occult power might have been imparted by demons. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, the person who used the Wolfsthurn handbook might be engaged in demonic magic. The people who went out to gather apparently innocent herbs, or the midwife who seemed blameless and helpful might turn out to be in league with demons (Fig. 1). Indeed, for many writers in medieval Europe, all magic was by definition demonic; not everyone agreed that there was such a thing as natural magic. For such writers, the material in the Wolfsthurn handbook could be called magical only because it seemed likely to rely on the aid of demons. But the term “magic” has a history, and understanding what it meant at a given time requires some knowledge of that history.

In classical antiquity, the word “magic” applied first of all to the arts of the magi, those Zoroastrian priests of Persia who were known to the Greeks at least by the fifth century B.C. Some of them seem to have migrated to the Mediterranean world. What, precisely, did these magi

<sup>5</sup> Karen Jolly, “On the margins of orthodoxy: Devotional formulas and protective prayers in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 41,” in Sarah Larratt Keefer and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr., eds., *Signs on the Edge: Space, Text and Margins in Medieval Manuscripts* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 135–83.