Introduction

The history of magic is intimately entwined with political history. The connection is embedded in the very language we use to talk about politics. Politicians are practitioners of the 'dark arts' and form 'cabals', while an individual politician might be a 'Svengali', a 'prince of darkness' or a 'witch'. Probing deeper into the language of politics, the Latin word *coniuratio* has the double meaning of a political conspiracy and a magical conjuration, while the Bible itself warns that 'rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft' (1 Samuel 15:23). But magic is far more than just a source of political metaphors; in past centuries – and even in more recent years – concerns about magic routinely impinged on political decision-making. As one historian has observed, 'Precisely because there was a mystical dimension to politics ... there was a political dimension to magic; both were modifications of the same world of thought'.[1] That world of thought had both negative and positive expressions, based on both fear and hope, and throughout British history the idea of a wise royal magical adviser based on the legendary figure of Merlin has been a persistent theme, while more than one ruler has aspired to the occult wisdom of King Solomon. Yet the political histories of England, Scotland and Great Britain have

[1] Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 552.

not hitherto been comprehensively examined in association with the occult beliefs and behaviours of the actors in that history. Just as it is crucial to understand the religious beliefs and ideological commitments of people in history, so it is important to understand the influence of belief in (and fear of) magic and other occult arts. In an effort to restore that missing piece of the puzzle of British history, this book examines the relationship between the occult arts and politics in Merlin's realm – the island of Great Britain – from the dawn of recorded history to the present day.

Merlin's Magic

In the twelfth century new and dangerous forms of knowledge were beginning to trickle into medieval Britain. At first, they were confined to a small, learned elite. The new knowledge included secrets about the formulation of life-prolonging elixirs and the transmutation of base metals into gold; precise understanding of the movements and occult influences of the heavens, giving a lucky few advance notice of future events; and even methods that claimed to enable someone to summon and control immensely powerful and intelligent spiritual beings. All of these new forms of knowledge had in common a 'hidden' or occult character, requiring initiation into difficult specialist skill sets. Originating in the Islamic world (often mediated through French and Iberian cultural translations before reaching Britain), these occult traditions deeply unsettled the cultural status quo of a world based on reverence for the Christian faith and the memory of ancient Greece and Rome. An enterprising

Welsh writer, Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1095 to c. 1155), created a pseudo-historical character who embodied this dangerous revolution of learning: Merlin the prophet and artificer, 'the magus of the twelfth-century renaissance'.[2] Crucially, Merlin was a figure who belonged to an imagined British past, giving Geoffrey the opportunity to plant occult knowledge not only in the present, but also in a fabricated British past.

Yet magic and occult knowledge were hardly new to medieval Britain. As early as the first century BCE, the Roman author Pliny the Elder reported that the British rivalled the Persians in their addiction to magic. In the early Middle Ages, Britons, Gaels and the early English alike practised traditional forms of natural magic and divination, drawing on the supposed occult powers of plants and stones and the signs of the natural world. In the twelfth century, however, something changed; magic became more than just a technique for healing cattle or protecting crops with charms. In the character of Merlin, occult knowledge became a tool of high politics and began to promise almost limitless power. And, as might have been expected, this promise attracted the attention of the powerful – both with the desire to profit from magic and to suppress occult knowledge as a danger to the realm.

There is ample evidence that Britain's monarchs, from the Plantagenets to the Stuarts, 'sought wondrous help in moments of social and cosmic drama', including the assistance of magicians and diviners.[3] There is also overwhelming evidence that monarchs and their counsellors

[2] Lawrence-Mathers, *True History of Merlin*, p. 5.
[3] Lawrence-Mathers, *True History of Merlin*, p. 125.

also feared harmful magic as a major threat to their reigns.[4] This book reappraises the political significance of magic and the occult tradition to the kingdoms of England and Scotland, arguing that the entanglement of occult traditions with politics from the twelfth century onwards was a key factor in enabling rulers to manage political change. Both the portrayal of political opponents as engaged in harmful magic (or even vain 'magical thinking'), and the use of occult symbolism to project political power were ways in which historical actors drew on the power of magic. From the civil war of Stephen and Matilda to the twenty-first-century crises of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of magic (quite apart from any questions about whether magic is really effective) exercises a cultural power every bit as impressive as the supernatural powers claimed by magicians themselves.

While the phrase 'magical thinking' is usually deployed as a pejorative today, it is not without its advantages for politicians. The vaguest and most unrealisable promises and proposals often seem to have the greatest popular appeal. Magical thinking, far from preventing any change from occurring, can be the way in which change is effected – not through actual magic, but by promoting enough faith in the inexplicable power of rulers to accomplish the preposterous that they encounter little difficulty in pushing through more modest changes. In cultures where the efficacy of occult practices is widely accepted – such as medieval and early modern Britain or

[4] On the theme of harmful political magic see Jones, 'Political Uses of Sorcery', 670–87; Kelly, 'English Kings and the Fear of Sorcery', 206–38; Young, *Magic as a Political Crime*.

contemporary Africa – it can serve rulers not only to propose vague and unrealisable policies but also to articulate them in explicitly magical terms.

It is often impossible to have any certainty that magical acts were ever actually attempted in the past, but rumour invariably clusters thickly around the idea of magic and the possibility that politics and the occult are entangled. Magic occupies a cultural space where real practices shade almost imperceptibly into smears and slurs; the invocation of magic or the occult in propaganda was often enough to achieve a desired political effect. This book is therefore focussed as much on political representations of magic as on magical acts (whose historical reality is often difficult to demonstrate). It is the argument of the book that occult beliefs need to be considered alongside more conventional religious beliefs, ideological commitments and personal ambitions as important factors in political decision-making and events. Traditions of occult knowledge guided the decisions and actions of both monarchs and of rebels. Fear of harmful magic and witchcraft produced paranoia and unease, while magic also lent monarchs a powerful set of symbols for projecting majesty. Some English monarchs even saw themselves as participants in the occult tradition, whether as magi, alchemists, demonologists or fulfillers of prophecy.

According to one definition, occult traditions represent 'a coherent intellectual stream' that attempts to make sense of the world via 'a complex structure of connections, sympathies and affinities', where some or all of the knowledge required to apprehend the truth is hidden from the senses. The occult tradition is accompanied by a conviction that knowledge of occult truths somehow enables the

supernatural manipulation of reality – the set of practices we might call magic.[5] Until the eighteenth century, the word 'occult' simply meant 'hidden', and did not always carry supernatural connotations – although the Enlightenment natural philosopher's pursuit of 'occult qualities' was in many respects a direct continuation of medieval and early modern natural magicians' search for the occult virtues (or 'powers') of nature. The occult tradition was 'a type of thinking, expressed either in writing or in action, that allowed the boundary between the natural and the supernatural to be crossed by the actions of human beings'.[6] It is important to bear in mind that the occult is a modern category applied to the past, just as the term 'supernatural' has changed its meaning over time to refer to unexplained phenomena in general rather than just the workings of God.

History and Occult Traditions

There is a long tradition in England of arguing that occult and magical beliefs are essentially irrelevant to history. In 1584, Reginald Scot noted that magicians seemed unable to influence politics or war, in spite of the great power ascribed to them by demonologists:

> [I]f that . . . should be true in those things that witches are said to confess, what creature could live in security? Or what needed such preparation of wars, or such trouble, or charge in that behalf? No prince should be able to reign or live in the land. For (as Danaeus saith) that one Martin a witch killed the

[5] Katz, *Occult Tradition*, pp. 1–2.
[6] Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts*, p. 5.

Emperor of Germany with witchcraft: so would our witches (if they could) destroy all our magistrates. One old witch might overthrow an army royal: and then what needed we any guns, or wildfire, or any other instruments of war? A witch might supply all wants, and accomplish a prince's will in this behalf, even without charge or bloodshed of his people.[7]

Scot went on to argue that, if magic were really effective, princes would not scruple to make use of it in warfare – since they displayed no reluctance to violate other precepts of the Christian religion in time of war.[8] Scot was saying, in effect, that all the theological handwringing about magic in his own time was a fuss about nothing, because deep down no one really believed that magic could influence the course of events. If they did, then they would be even more frightened of witches and magicians than they really were. One possible conclusion to draw from Scot's argument was that rulers who did not really believe in magical power promoted the persecution of witches and magicians for cynical political reasons rather than out of genuine concern for national security.

In 1978, the historian Edward Peters complained that 'political sorcery' was 'badly understood by most political historians'.[9] Little has changed since then. Although supernatural beliefs have been a major area of enquiry in social, intellectual and medical history since the 1970s, no corresponding shift has yet taken place in political history, with few political historians being willing to consider the impact of occult beliefs, real or ascribed. The relegation

[7] Scot, *Discovery of Witchcraft*, p. 34.
[8] Scot, *Discovery of Witchcraft*, p. 35.
[9] Peters, *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law*, p. xvii.

of occult traditions to the margins of political history is all the more surprising in light of the central place now occupied by religious belief in political histories of medieval and early modern England. The insights of church historians routinely inform and permeate broader historical discussions about medieval and early modern Britain, and no one would now seriously maintain that religious disputes were a façade that merely provided convenient cover for social and political agendas. Yet supernatural beliefs not easily placed under the umbrella of conventional religion have been treated as 'curious exotica scattered through the more humdrum narrative of kings, battles and ecclesiastical affairs'.[10] Where the occult tradition impinges on politics, it often serves merely as a reminder of the distance between the worlds of the past and the present, meriting little discussion or explanation.

In the 1920s the pioneering anthropologist, Sir James Frazer, described the persistence of belief in magic in modern societies as 'a solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society',[11] an assessment based on his belief that magic was religion at a 'savage' stage of evolution. Although Frazer's approach has been thoroughly discredited by anthropologists, the notion that magical and occult beliefs are 'barbaric' and therefore in some way unworthy of historical study may be one reason why historians consciously or unconsciously avoid discussing them. Furthermore, supernatural beliefs beyond (or even within) the sphere of conventional religion are difficult to make sense of from inside a contemporary materialist

[10] Watkins, *History and the Supernatural*, p. 3.
[11] Quoted in Stone, 'Nazism as Modern Magic', 205.

worldview, and when we look back to eras when magical thinking suffused all aspects of thought, it can become very hard to distinguish occult from non-occult beliefs. In response to the difficulty of comprehending occult supernatural beliefs, it is easy to succumb to temptation and assume that everyone in the past was hopelessly credulous; the study of esoteric belief is, on this view, a futile attempt to comprehend nonsense. Another temptation is to follow in the footsteps of Carl Jung by treating belief in magic and the occult as 'a universal category', a kind of anthropological constant that cannot and should not be studied historically because it is present in every human society. Universalising the occult in this way allows us to abdicate responsibility for considering seriously the specific historical significance of occult traditions in a particular time and place.[12]

Yet another temptation is to adopt a 'functionalist' approach to magic and the occult. This usually involves assuming that belief in magic and the occult somehow served a symbolic or theatrical social or political function, sometimes accompanied by the assumption that members of elites did not actually think magic 'worked' – they simply used the idea of magic as a tool to achieve their purposes. Likewise, those who favour a Marxist interpretation of history as class struggle may choose to see political magic as a last resort of the powerless against the powerful – or, in a feminist reading of history, as an act of resistance by women against patriarchal power. Much of the entanglement of politics and the occult was indeed about propaganda and misrepresentation. Yet there is also

[12] Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts*, p. 2.

convincing evidence that governments sometimes made use of magical rites and imagery, or showed excessive fear of magic, when they felt vulnerable or under threat. Belief in magic might be written off as part and parcel of the paranoid outlook of medieval and early modern rulers, but it is also clear that rulers sometimes regarded occult claims in a more positive light. The idea that occult beliefs and practices were little more than a form of performance is just not credible, given the volume of evidence that survives for well-developed and coherent popular supernatural belief, as well as the effort that went into acting on those beliefs.

There is an element of truth in functional interpretations of occult beliefs; this is why such explanations are so enduring. People did deploy the idea of magic for other purposes. However, anthropological explanations in terms of function tend to make most sense in studies of small communities, and falter when the use of accusations of magic 'as a lever for statecraft and social control' is taken into account.[13] Furthermore, as one historian of magic has observed, arguing that rulers used accusations of harmful magic as an excuse to persecute marginalised groups is like arguing that health inspectors use the presence of rats as a pretext for closing down restaurants. Just as health inspectors close down restaurants because they consider rats bad, so medieval rulers considered harmful magic bad because they genuinely believed that its practitioners were in league with demons.[14] If accusations of magic were just an instrument of political control, and

[13] Zhao, 'Political Uses of Wugu Sorcery', 135.
[14] Kieckhefer, 'Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic', 829–30.