

## Philosophy in Review



# Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (eds.), "The Routledge History of Medieval Magic."

Alessandro Giostra

Volume 40, Number 4, November 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074031ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074031ar>

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Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Giostra, A. (2020). Review of [Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (eds.), "The Routledge History of Medieval Magic."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40 (4), 156–158. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074031ar>

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**Sophie Page and Catherine Rider, eds.** *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*. Routledge 2019. 568 pp. \$250.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781472447302).

**Note:** This review was based on an electronic version of the book that lacks page numbers. As a result, citations are to entire chapters.

This collection of essays written by specialists in Medieval magic reflects the complexity of the topic. In their Introduction to the volume, the editors say that it has two goals: ‘First, it offers an overview of the work that has been done since the 1990s, exploring historiographical trends and the lively debates that now exist in many areas of medieval magic studies. Second, it aims to act as a guide for future research, setting out what still needs to be done.’ Each contribution in the volume ends by exhibiting the main trends in research on its topic, and these considerations give an idea of the difficulties experts in that field face.

Although magic is present in different Medieval cultural expressions, formulating a precise definition of that discipline would be problematic. A classification of the various kinds of magic implies the exclusion of some meaningful practices aiming at producing some sort of alteration of reality. In the mind of Richard Kieckhefer, the author of the first contribution (‘Rethinking how to define magic’), the problem with magic lies in its being an ‘aggregating term’ involving several doctrines and their difficult combinations. Divination magic was strongly rejected by the Roman Church, even if both the beliefs in a transcendent God and in occult theories can be deemed mystical. In other words, orthodox religion and occultism exerted a profound influence upon natural investigation, and authors drawing inspiration from both those forms of knowledge were very common in that historical phase. Astral divination played a major role in Medieval magic; the impossible distinction between astrology and astronomy renders the boundaries of magical activities impossible to define exactly. Most Medieval scholars focused on the causes of heavenly motions and their effects on terrestrial phenomena. That is the main reason clearly dividing the mere interest in knowing the cosmos and the search for occult phenomena is not possible. It is significant that the use of mathematics in natural philosophy could be seen as the outcome of a biblical perspective of nature, but also of the belief in hidden powers acting in the universe.

Medieval magic resulted from different backgrounds and a cross-cultural interchange of various traditions. The process of discovering and translating the Greek philosophical corpus represented a turning point for the Medieval thought, and, more specifically, for magic doctrines. The *Corpus Aristotelicum* included genuine works, but also some Greek commentaries and pseudo-Aristotelian texts inspired by Neoplatonism, which contributed to an animistic conception of natural reality. In divinatory terms, Neoplatonic celestial emanation affirmed a sympathetic interaction, a ‘Great Chain of Being’ linking the cosmos in a spiritual interconnectedness, resulting from the action performed by the perfect spirituality of the divinity. In Jewish culture, celestial emanation led some scholars to defend prophecy as a fundamental part of theology. In the Spanish Jewish milieu, indeed, magic practices for medical purposes were widely cultivated. Despite the monotheism of the Torah and the presence of a rationalist current in Medieval Jewish thought, Kabbalistic theories deeply influenced natural philosophers. That evidence poses many questions to researchers investigating Jewish magic because, as Katelyn Mesler declares in ‘The Latin encounter with Hebrew magic: Problems and approaches,’ ‘Kabbalah is the philosophical tradition raising the most difficult problems.’

Among the different practices belonging to Medieval occultism, special attention should be devoted to necromancy. Broadly speaking, it was classified as black magic, as its main goal consisted in summoning spirits, which is why it met a fierce opposition by ecclesiastical authorities. Since the beginning of the thirteenth century, the summoning of demonic entities was also found in Arabic and Judeo-Christian sacred texts and liturgies; furthermore, this tendency interacted with the methods and contents of natural sciences. So the relationship between that practice and the visions about the structure of the world still represents a challenging topic, due to all the elements connected to the Medieval natural paradigm. Dealing with this specific topic, Frank Klaasen highlights the reasons for further study, and a relevant detail emerges. Given the fact that the existence of demons is recognized by Christian theology, it would be necessary to know how necromantic authors drew their rituals from orthodox liturgy. The contributions in the Third Part of the collection analyze the role of some protagonists of the history of Medieval magic. It would be important to mention Cecco d'Ascoli (1269-1327), whose necromantic commentary on the *Sphere of Sacrobosco* was the probable motive of his condemnation at stake. Cecco's case is quite emblematic of the complexity of this kind of study. He was the author of four main works, and it would be enough to say that the necromantic contents forming part of his own commentary on the *Sphere* are not present in his poem, *L'Acerba*, nor in his commentary on Alcabitius' *Introduction to Astrology*. Another curious figure was John of Morigny (fl. c. 1301-1315), whose rituals aimed at providing people with Marian and angelic visions. According to the French writer of the *Liber Visionum*, celestial intelligences mediate between divine and human knowledge and that mediation makes possible a balancing of liberal arts and theology. The fact the works of such an important Medieval cultivator of magic were recently discovered demonstrates that a big part of Medieval magic remains unknown. Moreover, his drawing inspiration from theology proves that a clear distinction between magic and religion is not suitable for an understanding of Medieval occultism in all its subtleties.

In part IV the contributors illustrate some peculiar aspects of Medieval magic. In his essay, Steven Marrone introduces the magic-natural philosophy interaction, showing the high level of complexity inherent in that topic. For example, the astrological discipline is indicative of how Greek, Latin and Hebrew influences overlap in a sort of dynamic synthesis. Medieval astrologers based their theories on the existence of rays emitted by celestial and terrestrial bodies. In their views, light caused the world to be an animated reality, connecting human microcosm with universal macrocosm. That theory mainly originated from Al-Kindi's writings, in which the world as a whole constituted a unified structure, made of bodies transmitting rays, which determine a universal interconnection of nature. Furthermore, Islamic, Jewish and Christian theologies consider light as the means through which God operates and transmits the universal wisdom to humanity.

The idea of creation as a diffusion of light was largely supported in Medieval culture. Thus, the action of light could be understood in pantheistic or monotheistic terms, rendering the limit between occultism and natural study very difficult to establish. The theoretical and experiential tradition of alchemy characterized disciplines, such as medicine and pharmacology, in a broad association of practices. The transmission of Arabic alchemy to Latin Europe brought about an increase in experiments performed to extend life or transform metals into gold. A vast alchemical literature started circulating in Latin and many European philosophers tried to integrate its contents with Aristotelian physics. Medieval alchemy made a substantial contribution to the development of the experimental method and it paved the way to chemistry, although it would be necessary to specify that the influence exerted by alchemy on modern science is one of the most debated questions among historians of scientific thought. Medieval books of experiments contain a wide range of practices,

including recipes for necromancy and astrological predictions. Those distinctive suffice to show how their contents provide a starting point for further investigation.

Part V concerns 'Anti-magical discourse in the later Middle Ages.' The different social contexts in which magic was practiced do not allow simplistic reconstructions, and limiting our discussion in the reconstruction of inquisitorial proceedings would be an inappropriate oversimplification. Cultivators of occult doctrines were often welcomed in courts or academic circles. In this area of inquiry, summaries written by anti-heretical writers or the acts of tribunals often offer a precious source to understand the role of magic in the Medieval world.

In sum, the study of magic is a relatively recent phenomenon. That fact, in addition to the complexity and the interdisciplinary dimension of the subject, proves that more work is still needed. Overused clichés, such as a sharp division between learned and popular magic, are no longer suitable paradigms. 'Since the 1990s, scholars have demonstrated that a wide range of people were engaged in magical activities from all groups in society, and that a great variety of magical texts were in circulation' (Introduction). This collection of essays succeeds in giving a valid support to this consideration.

**Alessandro Giostra**, Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Marche, Ancona