

Everyday Magic in Early Modern Europe edited by Kathryn A. Edwards

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Everyday Magic in Early Modern Europe edited by Kathryn A. Edwards

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Historians have long known that the efforts of religious reformers, both Catholic and Protestant, to challenge the magical beliefs of ordinary people in early modern Europe met with limited success, and that a rich stratum of unorthodox supernatural beliefs survived well into the 18th century. This welcome collection of essays addresses the negotiations and compromises between official religion in its various forms and the vibrant world of popular magic during the “long Reformation”.

The study of magic has often meant the study of witchcraft. Inevitably perhaps, many of the contributors to this book draw on the records and historiography of witch trials, and often with illuminating effect. The treatment of witches was an important area of tension (and accommodation) between religious authorities and the magical assumptions of ordinary people. But this collection seeks to move beyond the European witch trials to examine the larger and generally less dramatic “lived experience” of early modern magic. In this enterprise it achieves considerable success.

One obvious point of divergence between official and folkloric assumptions about the occult arose from the practical nature of magic. For many ordinary people, the effectiveness of magic was at least as important as its nature. In a fascinating discussion of the “magical lives” of villagers in Catalonia, Doris Moreno Martínez observes that a witness in a case of alleged healing magic in 1649 did not know, or greatly care, whether the healer derived her power from God or the Devil. Elsewhere, ordinary people were careful to defend magical traditions that had practical utility, though they were mindful of the need to stay within the accepted boundaries of religion. Raisa Maria Toivo suggests that communities in 17th-century Finland negotiated the

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border between legitimate and illicit magical activities with the Lutheran authorities, often preserving local customs in the process.

In perhaps the most memorable essay, Johannes Dillinger considers the activity of magical treasure-hunters in early modern Europe. Again, the practical context of their supernatural work appears to have been crucial. Despite the interaction with demons that was often part of their business, treasure-hunters did no harm to others, and were seldom condemned for witchcraft as a result. Also their operations did not involve the transfer of wealth to themselves from the rest of the community, as the fortunes they sought were otherworldly. In a strangely haunting detail of the kind that characterizes the collection as a whole, Dillinger adds that the success of magical digs depended on the solemn silence of their participants.

Two other essays explore attitudes towards divination and dreams. Jason Coy considers the hostility of many Protestant thinkers to fortune-telling of all kinds—apart from the reading of special providences practised by the reformed clergy. In contrast, Jared Poley surveys more sympathetic ideas about the interpretation of (possibly) predictive dreams. In the process, he offers a fascinating glimpse into the dream literature of Tudor and Stuart England. The nature of various kinds of spirit, and the proper human attitude towards them, has recently received much scholarly attention. Here, the essays by Antoine Mazurek and Kathryn A. Edwards make valuable contributions. Mazurek considers the delicate status of guardian angels in early modern Catholicism. Edwards offers a penetrating analysis of the haunting of the house of the Huguenot minister François Perrault in 1612. She observes that Perrault moved between an orthodox Calvinist interpretation of the spirit as a demon and wider, folkloric understandings of its nature. This ambiguity, she suggests, was probably common among even devout people faced with such supernatural encounters.

Linda Lierheimer also notes the belief in deceiving spirits in the context of “false sanctity” in 17th-century French convents. But she observes that cases of spiritual imposture were often attributed to fraud or the vivid imagination of young women, and dealt with quietly within their institutions. In the final chapter, Sarah Ferber explores the relationship between “everyday magic” and more extreme (or notorious) events within late medieval and early modern Catholicism. She notes the crucial role of the church as an arbiter of acceptable varieties of “magic”, and the considerable porousness between legitimate and illicit activities.

This collection will be welcomed by scholars and students of the supernatural in the period. In the range and subtlety of their work, the writers make an important contribution to an already rich and exciting field.