Winter 2011

Grimoires: A History of Magic Books (review)

Michael D. Bailey
Iowa State University, mdbailey@iastate.edu

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Grimoires: A History of Magic Books (review)

Abstract
This “history of magic books” might equally well have been subtitled a “history of magic through books.” Not all forms of magic, obviously. Davies is quick to recognize that large areas of magical practice exist entirely in oral culture. Yet one of the most important points he makes in this book is that “grimoires” are not just rare and expensive tomes available only to elite, learned magicians. At least from the time of the printing revolution, magic books were making their way into the hands of simple cunning folk (the subject of a previous book by Davies), and this trend only increased as time went on, culminating here in Davies’s fascinating chapter on “pulp magic.” So what is a grimoire, exactly? It does not have to be a long, complex, or erudite text, but neither can it be so simple as a single spell or written amulet. It is, rather, a compilation containing “conjurations and charms, [or] providing instructions on how to make magical objects such as protective amulets and talismans” (p. 1). Yet not all magical books are grimoires. Davies excludes esoteric texts that purport to deal with occult forces in the natural world, such as works on alchemy or astrology. The distinction is not absolute, of course. Books of astral magical rites and conjurations, such as the famous medieval Picatrix, definitely fit the category of grimoire, and occult books of secrets are treated at various points, if not as grimoires themselves, then for elements that they contributed to the grimoire tradition. Davies’s study of this tradition is, then, a survey of a broad and diffuse but still particular kind of magic—not “learned,” necessarily, but literate and by definition bookish.

Keywords
grimoires, history of magic books, printing, occult publishing, pulp publishing, Necronomicon, H.P. Lovecraft, Book of Shadows, Gerald Gardner

Disciplines
European History | History of Religion | Other History | Social History

Comments

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Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 6, Number 2, Winter 2011, pp. 212-214 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/mrw.2011.0024

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Reviews


This “history of magic books” might equally well have been subtitled a “history of magic through books.” Not all forms of magic, obviously. Davies is quick to recognize that large areas of magical practice exist entirely in oral culture. Yet one of the most important points he makes in this book is that “grimoires” are not just rare and expensive tomes available only to elite, learned magicians. At least from the time of the printing revolution, magic books were making their way into the hands of simple cunning folk (the subject of a previous book by Davies), and this trend only increased as time went on, culminating here in Davies’s fascinating chapter on “pulp magic.” So what is a grimoire, exactly? It does not have to be a long, complex, or erudite text, but neither can it be so simple as a single spell or written amulet. It is, rather, a compilation containing “conjurations and charms, [or] providing instructions on how to make magical objects such as protective amulets and talismans” (p. 1). Yet not all magical books are grimoires. Davies excludes esoteric texts that purport to deal with occult forces in the natural world, such as works on alchemy or astrology. The distinction is not absolute, of course. Books of astral magical rites and conjurations, such as the famous medieval *Picatrix*, definitely fit the category of grimoire, and occult books of secrets are treated at various points, if not as grimoires themselves, then for elements that they contributed to the grimoire tradition. Davies’s study of this tradition is, then, a survey of a broad and diffuse but still particular kind of magic—not “learned,” necessarily, but literate and by definition bookish.

Davies surveys this tradition in “the West,” that is, Europe and its overseas colonies. Islamic magical texts are mentioned only for their influence on medieval European magic, and again later for their prevalence in French West African colonies that were largely Muslim. Traditions from South or East Asia are mentioned only insofar as they get appropriated into works of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European occultism. This is not a study of esoteric books of any kind, but specifically of magic books, and magic, already difficult enough to define in Western European culture, becomes even more problematic a concept when applied around the globe.

*Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* (Winter 2011)
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Probably for similar reasons Davies has little to say about ancient pre-Christian magical texts in the West. In a later chapter, he will discuss how the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphs in the nineteenth century allowed for various ritual texts, such as the famous *Book of the Dead*, to be translated into Western European languages and to influence Western occult traditions. But in their own era, such texts were as much “religious” as they were “magical,” a troublesome enough distinction in Christian culture, but virtually inescrutable in antiquity. In his treatment of the antique world, Davies is less concerned with ancient texts in their own right, and more so with the origins of supposedly ancient textual traditions on which later European grimoires would draw, such as the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus; various books attributed to Solomon; or the supposed sixth, seventh, and subsequent Books of Moses (beyond the first five that went into the Torah).

The first real grimoires, for Davies, appear in the early Christian centuries, certainly by the fourth century CE, although they of course claimed more ancient roots. In the remainder of his first chapter, he examines medieval tomes of astral spirit magic, angel magic, and more straightforward demonic magic—*Picatrix*, the *Claricula salomonis*, the *Almandal*, and the various texts of the *ars notoria*. In his second chapter, he covers the early modern period, discussing first the great texts of Renaissance magic, and their incorporation of Hermeticism, Kabbalah, and other elements. He also discusses the effects of printing and the “democratization” of magical texts as inexpensive chapbooks made their way into the hands of cunning folk, healers, and diviners of various sorts. The sort of people most typically accused of witchcraft in this era were not literate, and the sort of magic—simple *maleficium*—that underlay most accusations was decidedly not bookish, but Davies can still recount a few cases of accused witches who possessed books, and more importantly he examines how authorities constructed witchcraft and the supposed practices of witches through demonological texts, and conceived of witchcraft in a way as a bookish transgression via the notion of the “devil’s book,” in which Satan carried the signatures or marks of all the witches who had sworn loyalty to him.

While the medieval and early modern periods might be thought of as the classic age of the grimoire, in fact the great majority of Davies’s book focuses on the modern period. He stresses that far from “disenchanting” Europe, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment actually saw a steady increase in magical texts, as literacy rates climbed and Europe’s publishing industry expanded. When thinking of modern grimoires, one is likely to think first of Enlightenment occultists, nineteenth-century spiritualists, and proponents of bourgeois ritual magic like Éliphas Lévi, Aleister Crowley, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Such men and movements receive attention, to be sure,
but Davies points out how limited such circles ultimately were. The far
greater and more fascinating story of modern grimoires is their widespread
distribution in relatively cheap formats, such as the French *Bibliothèque bleue*,
which began to circulate in the eighteenth century and continued to great
success for well over a hundred years. Not only were such books sold in
Europe, but they flooded Europe’s New-World colonies, where they circu-
lated not only among transplanted Europeans (in British North America, the
Pennsylvania Dutch were great consumers of occult literature) but also
among native and African-American populations. Exploring these corners of
the occult book market takes Davies into territory rarely explored by scholars
of magic. With the advent of pulp publishing in the early twentieth century,
magic books attained yet a new level of distribution, and again the market
included Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, as well as the United
States and Europe. Davies notes that even to this day, the products of one
occult publisher, Delaurence Scott and Co., remain officially banned from
Jamaica by that country’s customs office.

Davies concludes with fictional grimoires from the later part of the twenti-
eth century. These include the *Necronomicon*, invented by H. P. Lovecraft as
an element in several of his stories, and only later actually written, in several
versions, by devoted fans, or simply those who sensed a market. The other
great example is the Wiccan *Book of Shadows*, composed initially by Gerald
Gardner, but expanded by others, and now published in several forms. Such
works are in no way “false” grimoires, in Davies’s estimation, since from the
time of early Christianity, grimoires standardly have asserted false authorship,
claimed greater antiquity than they actually possessed, willfully blended ele-
ments from multiple traditions as suited their purposes, and circulated in mul-
tiple variations.

Davies covers an enormous amount of territory in this book, much of it
having to do with some significant but less studied corners of the history of
magic. As such, his arguments, while always reasonable, are not always as
fully developed as one might wish. From the *Bibliothèque bleue* to twentieth-
century “pulp magic,” for example, he stresses the broad diffusion and popu-
laritv of magical texts. Only occasionally does he have solid publication fig-
ures to support this. Undoubtedly such books were popular, but to gauge
exactly to what degree, we need not only data on their own print runs, but
also comparative numbers for other kinds of books. Such points, however,
are hardly criticisms of a book that opens up so many new and fascinating
areas in the history of magic.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
Iowa State University