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Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present

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Contents

	Acknowledgments	ix
	Introduction	1
Chapter 1	Roots in the Ancient World	9
Chapter 2	The Rise of Christianity and Early Medieval Europe to the Year 1000	43
Chapter 3	Varieties of Magic in the High and Late Middle Ages, 1000–1500	77
Chapter 4	The Medieval Condemnation of Magic, 1000–1500	107
Chapter 5	Witchcraft and Witch Hunting in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800	141
Chapter 6	From Renaissance to Enlightenment, 1450–1800	179
Chapter 7	Magic in the Modern West from 1800	215
	Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading	249
	Index	263
	About the Author	275



Introduction

At the beginning of one of the most famous literary depictions of magic and magicians in Western culture, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749–1832) brilliantly driven and dissatisfied Faust laments that he has thoroughly studied all the major areas of learning as categorized in his day—philosophy, jurisprudence, medicine, and theology. Yet he declares himself, for all his effort, to be “only so wise as I was before,” not having achieved any of the deep knowledge he desires. For this, he will turn to magic, summoning the demonic spirit Mephistopheles and demanding that he reveal the secret truths of the world. The arrogant Faust wagers his soul that his full desire will never be satisfied. Two centuries earlier, Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) had presented his *Dr. Faustus* as lusting not just after knowledge but also after power. In the “lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters” of necromantic texts he believes he can find such magics that “All things that move between the quiet poles / Shall be at my command.” Even kings and emperors will lack the power, indeed the “omnipotence,” that he will wield.¹

Based on an actual historical figure (who will be mentioned briefly in chapter 6), the legendary character of Faust serves to illustrate how for centuries, indeed for most of European history, magic could be a serious subject for serious men (Goethe, admittedly, was writing after this time had largely passed). Although it stood outside all accepted avenues of inquiry and behavior, it promised knowledge and power greater than any other human pursuit might provide. Magic was often considered dark and sinister, indeed demonic; yet it was also intriguing and alluring. Learned authorities, even when they did not pursue magical practices themselves, sought to understand their operations. Philosophers debated whether occult magical properties existed in nature, and if so, how and to what ends these could be exploited.

Physicians considered magical causes for disease. And, particularly during the era of the great European witch hunts, judicial authorities put suspected magicians to death because theologians told them that magic almost always involved terrible pacts made with the devil.

Magic continues to fascinate modern minds, and it remains the object of considerable academic and scholarly investigation. Those drawn to study the subject today typically no longer regard magic as a fearful threat to society, nor do they intend their works to be used as weapons in a war aimed at extirpating perceived magical practices and those who might perform them. Nevertheless, just as authorities in the past, modern scholars seek to understand and explain magic and superstition—topics that have always been regarded as inherently mysterious, murky, and in all senses occult—in ways that will be clear, meaningful, and enlightening to their contemporaries. This, certainly, is the goal of the present book. My approach is not philosophical (that is, theoretical) or scientific; still less is it legal or theological. Rather, it is historical, seeking to trace the development of magic and superstition in Europe from antiquity to the present. Covering such a long span of time, especially in a brief book, carries limitations, risks, and unavoidable detriments, but it also affords the opportunity to present the full historical trajectory of magic, albeit synoptically, at least in the West. This picture might then prove useful as a basis for further, more detailed investigation.

Any general inquiry into the realm of magic must begin with the fundamental question: what is magic, exactly? For much of European history, educated authorities defined magic mainly in terms of human invocation of demonic powers in opposition to divine will and directed against the stability and proper order of Christian society. In the modern world, such a definition no longer suffices, but magic is still often conceived in contrast (if no longer in direct opposition) to religion. That is, rites or actions that seek to access and manipulate supernatural powers—spirits, demons, cosmic forces—but that are not contained within some established and widely recognized modern religious system might be described as magic. Another opposition, perhaps even more essential for the modern world, exists between magic and science. Any attempt to control or affect the physical world or the human psyche that does not conform to modern scientific principles or operate through scientifically understood chains of causation can be described as magic. If one does not believe that such actions will produce any real or direct effects, they can also be termed superstitious.

These modern distinctions are generally not applicable in a historical context, however—certainly not in Europe before the Scientific Revolution

and Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is not because premodern people did not distinguish between religion and magic or between science and magic, although the manner in which they understood these categories could be quite different from those common in the modern West. Rather, it is most basically because the premodern world distinguished much less clearly between religion and science. By this I mean that no absolute boundaries were believed to exist between the supernatural and the natural; indeed, the natural world was conceived as a direct manifestation of supernatural order. Spiritual forces, divine or demonic, infused material creation and were active in the operations of the physical world. Thus human attempts to control or affect events in the world could proceed along what most modern Westerners would regard as purely natural lines, along purely spiritual ones, or, as was often the case, could combine elements of both, since contemporaries recognized no fundamental disjuncture between these approaches. The sharp separation of the spiritual world and religious belief from the physical world and scientific rationalism, which is such a fundamental feature of modern Western culture, is a relatively recent product of Europe's movement toward modernity. It is in fact a cornerstone of what is perceived as "modernity," although an absolute separation between these spheres of reality is by no means universally accepted even in the West today.

While medieval and early modern Europeans did not understand religion or science in fully the same way as modern Westerners typically do, educated authorities did distinguish *magia* (magic) from *scientia* and certainly from proper *religio* or *fides* (faith), although of course still not in ways precisely identical to those most common in the modern West. The situation is similar with *superstitio* (superstition). Magic and superstition have never been identical categories, yet they often overlap. A superstition need not entail belief in or attempted recourse to magic, but many magical practices can be regarded as superstitious. This has been equally true, although for very different reasons, in both the modern and premodern eras. In modern parlance, superstition is most often set in stark opposition to science and scientific rationalism. A superstitious belief is one held without proper scientific grounding, and in the scientific worldview superstitious acts produce no real effects, although credulous minds yearn to believe that they do. Religious systems themselves may be regarded as superstitious by those who do not hold any faith in them. In medieval and early modern Europe, on the contrary, superstition was the direct opposite of proper religion. All superstitious actions, authorities held, were grounded in some sort of basic error in belief

or ritual action. They were not, however, necessarily regarded as irrational or inefficacious. For example, a magical incantation would be regarded as superstitious if it was deemed to draw on the power of demons rather than on the virtuous power of Christ or his saints. It might still produce a very real effect, however, since demons were believed to have real power in the world, and educated authorities could explain their abilities in systematic, rational, and—in the understanding of that period—entirely scientific ways.

This is not to say that medieval and early modern people, even learned authorities, had absolutely clear or stable ideas about the precise boundaries of magic or superstition. These categories were always somewhat vague and their connotations could change significantly over time. Precisely because they were so bound up with a multitude of ways in which premodern people interacted with, understood, and attempted to shape their world—ways that modern Western culture might label as either religion or science—magic and superstition were often hotly contested categories. As terms, they almost always carried a negative connotation, set in contrast to officially approved knowledge or belief, or legitimate rites or actions. Few people in any premodern era would ever have labeled their own actions magical or superstitious. Rather, magic and superstition were almost always what other people did and believed in, whether those others were from a foreign culture or from another social or perceived intellectual level within a given society. Yet the definition of otherness is an essential element of the definition of one's own self and society, as well as of gradations and divisions within a society. Even when certain groups—be they elite, learned Renaissance mages, or modern neopagan Wiccans—have declared that some of what they do is indeed magic, it has usually been part of an attempt to separate themselves from the established intellectual and cultural norms of their times and to add their voices to a redefinition of certain aspects of their society.

Magic and superstition, then, far from being exotic or marginal issues in European history, have always been integral aspects of Western societies and cultures. Their greatest importance lies precisely in their deployment as categories of anything from mild condescension to virulent condemnation intended to define the limits of acceptable belief or action in any number of areas—health and healing, the achievement of good fortune and success, the attainment of love or friendship, control over one's personal destiny, or the acquisition of wealth and power, to name just a few. This book traces the history of that deployment, exploring how magic and superstition were understood and used over the course of European history. Rather than defining magic and superstition as theoretical abstractions and then looking to

see whether and to what degree these existed in the past, I approach the development and use of these categories as important historical phenomena. My most basic criterion for determining what beliefs and practices to include in my exploration is whether a society or some significant segment within it—usually but not necessarily intellectually or judicially powerful elites bent on condemning—would have considered a given set of beliefs or practices to be magical or superstitious. Since authorities often disagreed on the exact limits of these categories, however, and since more popular understandings could be extremely fluid, I am fairly capacious in my conception of the topic.

Applying contemporary, historical definitions of magic and superstition will not resolve all problems of categorization, as such definitions have always been sharply contested, and just as often ignored, by various groups at various times. In antiquity, for example, a multiplicity of cultures, and above all a multiplicity of religious cults, created exceptionally slippery concepts of magic and superstition. What one society considered wholly legitimate cultic rites, their neighbors would explicitly label “magic.” In medieval Europe, as Christianity became hegemonic, theoretical definitions of magic and superstition could become more stable and uniform. Christian theology clearly separated demonic from divine power, and magic, for the most part, was conceived as drawing on the former. Yet in practice, whether a given healing or protective rite, or even a harmful curse, invoked the power of demons or of the deity could be terribly difficult to determine. In the absence of clear, authoritative pronouncements on the provenance of some particular act (and often even after such pronouncements were made), many people continued to engage in traditional rites. It is unlikely that they considered their own actions to be “magic.” Yet others considered them so, and for the purpose of this study, such practices cannot be ignored.

Although this book treats magic and superstition broadly across an extended period of time, nevertheless it aims to provide a concise overview of this enormous topic. Brevity in all areas will be the cost, as will the necessary imposition of certain limitations of scope. The first of these will involve the scope of “Europe” itself, which here will almost always mean western or west-central Europe. As a geographical entity, Europe is easily enough defined as the landmass north of the Mediterranean and Black seas and west of the Ural Mountains. Throughout most of history, however, these boundaries have had little political or cultural meaning. In antiquity, Greek and Roman civilization occupied certain areas of the European landmass, but these cultures were essentially Mediterranean, sharing far more in common with North Africa and the Near East than with the Celtic and Germanic

peoples who also inhabited much of the European continent. Each of these cultures' conceptions of magic and superstition, as well as those of ancient Jewish culture, will be treated here as providing essential foundations for later European understandings of magic.

The main focus of this book will extend from the political, intellectual, and cultural ascendancy of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when concerted efforts were undertaken to excise Christian religion from other areas of European thought and political life. Since throughout this period magic and superstition were defined primarily by Christian authorities and within an essentially Christian culture, Europe itself will be defined largely as Western Christendom, the boundaries of which fluctuated but generally centered on western Europe. Much will be lost by this definition. Medieval Byzantium and the whole rich culture of Eastern Christianity, including its traditions of magic and condemnations of superstition, will be excluded. Islamic traditions of magic will be considered only insofar as they influenced Western Christian ones, despite the fact that Muslims ruled over most of the Iberian peninsula for centuries during the Middle Ages and over most of the Balkans during the early modern period. Likewise, Orthodox Russia will be discussed only briefly to present a contrast to Western patterns of witch hunting. Within Western Christendom, Jewish magical traditions will not be given the independent attention that, in a longer treatment, they would certainly deserve. Rather, as with Islam, Judaism will be examined mainly for its influence on the overall historical development of magic in Europe.

Magic and superstition occupy a very different place in the modern Western culture that Europe has spawned than they have in any previous society. The German sociologist Max Weber argued at the beginning of the twentieth century that a central facet of modern Western culture was its "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*, literally, "removal of magic"). This had largely occurred, he thought, during the Protestant Reformation and its break from medieval Catholic "superstition." Later scholars, recognizing that the world of Reformation Europe was still profoundly concerned with magic—the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the era of the major European witch hunts, after all—pushed disenchantment back to the Scientific Revolution and then to the Enlightenment, when magic and superstition, along with much of religion itself, were excluded from a modern worldview that would now be grounded in scientific rationalism. Of course, this disenchantment never took full hold, and so the history of magic hardly ends in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Magical traditions persist in the modern

West and continue to draw, sometimes in historically very inaccurate ways, on medieval and early modern roots. Moreover, magic continues to play its historical function as a category through which, by defining otherness, essential aspects of modern society and Western culture—above all the very notion of “modernity” itself—can be defined or challenged.

Ever since the Enlightenment, when progressive philosophes produced diatribes against “medieval superstition” (by which they meant organized churches and religious ritual as much as magic), the history of magic has had a place in Western thought. In the last decades of the twentieth century the subject became a truly burgeoning field. A survey such as this would not be possible without a wealth of detailed studies on which to draw, at least for most of the areas covered. Above all, the topic of early modern witchcraft and witch hunting has been examined extensively, indeed, far out of proportion to other areas of magic and superstition, and one of the goals of this work will be to set the phenomenon of diabolical witchcraft more appropriately in its larger context. The tendency to focus only on a single period, or subperiod, and often only on a single aspect of magic within the long stretch of Western history is certainly understandable and indeed necessary, given the historical complexity and cultural specificity of the issues involved. Nevertheless, I hope that a concise and coherent overview of European magic and superstition generally, with all the necessary limitations and omissions, will prove useful for both students and scholars, not only those interested in some specific aspect of magic covered here, but also those concerned with understanding magic itself as a vital aspect of larger European history. Beyond this, I hope that an account of the development and deployment of concepts of magic and superstition across European history may help inform scholars working in fields other than history and studying cultures other than those of Europe. Above all, I hope that this book will provide access to anyone—professional academic, student, or general reader—who wants to know more about magic as a vital and perennial aspect of human society, human culture, and human nature itself.

Note

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part I*, lines 354–59; Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*, lines 50–56.