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La puissance des mots – “Virtus verborum”: Débats doctrinaux sur le pouvoir des incantations au Moyen Âge (review)

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Abstract

For all that magicians sometimes employed signs, symbols, gestures, stones, or herbs, spoken spells still comprise the most pervasive magical device in Western culture. The very ubiquity of verbal formulas in many forms of magical operation make words a difficult subject for scholars to grasp. In this impressive study, Béatrice Delaurenti takes a carefully limited approach. As her subtitle indicates, she examines intellectual debates about the power of words in the Middle Ages. In fact, she focuses on a period of intense debate that lasted, in her analysis, from around 1230 to around 1370. These dates mark important "parentheses," as she will ultimately term them in her conclusion, that bracket an era in which some authorities gave serious consideration to the potential natural power contained in incantations.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Medieval History | Other History

Comments

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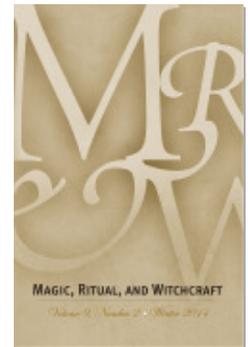
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would label ‘magic’” (p. 141), since medieval authorities typically reserved the term “magic” only for the operation of demonic, not strictly natural, powers.

The issues at the heart of each of these chapters could easily be (and have been) the focus of lengthy monographs. Bartlett succeeds in finding straightforward approaches to often very knotty issues, but he does not strip them of their complexity. None of the chapters present neat and tidy solutions to the problems they examine. Neither is there any concluding chapter that attempts to tie all of the natural and the supernatural up in a single elegant package. Needless to say, in so short a treatment of such large matters, major areas no less deserving of attention than those illuminated here are left in darkness. The book’s usefulness is as a point of entry, not a final destination. The routes it opens are marvelous indeed.

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BÉATRICE DELAURENTI. *La puissance des mots—“Virtus verborum”: Débats doctrinaux sur le pouvoir des incantations au Moyen Âge*. Paris: Cerf, 2007. Pp. 579.

For all that magicians sometimes employed signs, symbols, gestures, stones, or herbs, spoken spells still comprise the most pervasive magical device in Western culture. The very ubiquity of verbal formulas in many forms of magical operation make words a difficult subject for scholars to grasp. In this impressive study, Béatrice Delaurenti takes a carefully limited approach. As her subtitle indicates, she examines intellectual debates about the power of words in the Middle Ages. In fact, she focuses on a period of intense debate that lasted, in her analysis, from around 1230 to around 1370. These dates mark important “parentheses,” as she will ultimately term them in her conclusion, that bracket an era in which some authorities gave serious consideration to the potential natural power contained in incantations.

The standard Christian position on the “power of words” that dominated most of the European Middle Ages was that words were essentially powerless. They were only signifiers that conveyed commands or supplications to powerful entities. Prayers, obviously, petitioned God or his saints; magical spells, intentionally or not, invoked demons. A third potential category beyond the divine/demonic binary appeared in the thirteenth century, however. As Western Europe was flooded with Arabic texts containing Greek and Hebrew learning (and of course extensive Muslim commentary on that learn-

ing), Christian intellectuals began to consider the possibility of “natural magic.” This development has long been recognized, and has been explored in some detail particularly in the area of astrology and astral magic. Heavenly bodies self-evidently emanated natural energies toward the earth. If magicians could accurately chart their effects and possibly learn to control or direct them, they might be able to perform wonders without any illicit recourse to demonic entities. Theories of natural power also developed for words, sounds, and spoken incantations, however, and this area of potentially natural magic has been much less explored.

Because less basic work has been done on incantatory magic than on astrology, because the intellectual arguments involved are complex and detailed, and because she wants to cover a fairly long period, Delaurenti focuses in depth on only a few sources. Working through discussions of incantations in law, medicine, and theology, she gives substantial attention to William of Auvergne, Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Pietro d’Abano, and Gentile da Foligno, while touching on numerous other authorities who informed their work (Avicenna, Averroes, Constantine the African, Isidore of Seville, and so forth). Her analysis culminates with Nicolas Oresme, whom she considers to be the most radical medieval theorist of the natural power of words, and she concludes with Jean Gerson, whom she sees as falling outside the “parentheses” she has drawn.

These men approached the power of words from somewhat different perspectives, developed different arguments, and certainly never established anything like a generally accepted theory of the natural power of incantations. Delaurenti therefore exposes her readers to the various ways in which medieval minds might conceive of words having power. Sounds could exert a physical force, for example, transmitted via the air. They could transmit some of the force (*virtus*) of the speaker’s soul, properly conditioned to be channeled through words, or they could affect the hearer’s soul. There was no doubt that sounds could affect the human body or mind. Music might soothe or rouse a listener, for example. Questions concerned how far such influence might extend, and whether such power rested only in sounds or whether particular meaningful combinations of words could also produce such effects. Authorities also debated whether demons might still be involved, but now there were questions about whether certain words might naturally compel demons or whether they always represented a submissive supplication of evil entities.

As Delaurenti rightly asserts, all of this analysis and debate was caused by the great revival of Aristotelian thought in Western Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In an Aristotelian worldview, natural forces

operated by physical contact. Natural operations that occurred at a distance therefore aroused considerable interest. Theories of optics became important models for trying to understand potentially occult natural operations. So too did considerations of the possible natural workings of sounds and words. Oresme pressed this new reasoning to its fullest extent, completely rejecting the standard Christian interpretation that much of the power of words lay in their status as signifiers, in the context of magical operations conveying either deliberate or tacit instructions to demons. For him, if words had any power (beyond the power to convey meaning to human intellects), it had to be natural power, which strictly limited the possibly real effects of incantations. Oresme's position would not carry the day, however. Rather, he represents, for Delaurenti, the closing of the parentheses that opened in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. By the early fifteenth century, Jean Gerson was articulating the mainstream intellectual position that words carried no natural force and that incantations, when they operated, did so by invoking demonic power.

Beside guiding us through thickets of scholastic argumentation about the possible powers of words, Delaurenti's book develops a powerful argument for an important, ultimately failed movement in elite Western European magical/scientific thought. She adds her voice to a number of studies that have identified a sea-change in European thought around 1200 with the massive influx of Aristotle and his Arabic commentators into the schools of Europe. There is no doubt that elite understanding of natural science and of magic changed dramatically at that time. But I closed this book wondering both how important and how failed the stream of thought Delaurenti traces really was. She herself admits that the assertion of the natural power of words was a somewhat "marginal" element of the great Aristotelian revolution. Even in the midst of her "parentheses," the most widely held intellectual position, consolidated in the mid-thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas, was that incantations remained primarily linked to demonic rather than natural power. Gerson in the early fifteenth century did not represent some great counterrevolution in thought; rather he represents the clear victory of what had always been the dominant position. Yet this victory did not end debate about the natural power of sounds or words. By the end of the fifteenth century, Renaissance humanists were picking up such arguments and carrying them forward into the world of the Scientific Revolution. Delaurenti nods to this in her conclusion. She also rightly points out that while medieval authorities who argued for the natural power of words were prelates and theologians seeking to change the official ecclesiastical position from within, Renaissance humanists were to some extent challenging the church's intel-

lectual artifice from outside. Still, I am not sure we should draw such hard lines between “scholastic” and “humanist,” between “medieval” and “early modern.”

Delaurenti has produced an important and fundamental book. Her main purpose is to trace medieval thinking about the power of words through a few of its major articulators. She also has clear ideas about where the thought she traces fits into the larger historical trajectory of European magic (and science). All scholars working in these areas will want to read and consider this book.

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JOHN HARVEY. *Photography and Spirit*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007. Pp. 176.

Using photography to record supernatural events, especially the practice known as “spirit photography” in which ghosts or spirits of the dead are somehow captured on film, has suddenly become a hot topic. More than a decade ago I wrote an essay on the subject for Patrice Petro’s anthology *Fugitive Images from Photography to Video* (1995). Other than a few discussions aimed at collectors, I could not find a single essay on the topic that was not primarily engaged in defending or disputing the veracity of such images and their status as evidence of survival after death. Since that time there has been a veritable explosion of such articles and books, culminating in the recent 2005 exposition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (imported from Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris), whose catalogue, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, offers the most thorough account of this practice. Other recent publications, all of them beautifully illustrated (and several serving as catalogues for exhibitions) include Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*; Martyn Joly, *Faces of the Living Dead*; Mark Durant and Jane Marsching, eds., *Blur of the Unworldly*; Alison Ferris, ed., *The Disembodied Spirit*; and Corey Keller, ed., *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible* (which nicely places such photographs in the context of early scientific photography), as well as the publication reviewed here.

These recent works do not focus on the rather tiresome discussion of the veracity of such photographs, fully aware of the many cases of demonstrated fraud and of the often quite apparent techniques of superimposing, collage,