Magic and the Classical Tradition (review)

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Abstract
The Warburg Institute of the University of London is dedicated to the study of the classical tradition and its influence on all areas of European culture. For many years, the position of magic in that complex tradition has been one of its major areas of focus. D. P. Walker was a Reader in Renaissance Studies at the Warburg, and Frances Yates was an honorary fellow. Charles Burnett is currently “Professor of the History of Islamic Influences in Europe,” and William Ryan was until recently chief librarian. Both are, of course, known for their important contributions to the history of magic. Given the Warburg’s great prominence in the field of Renaissance studies, one might have expected that a volume on “Magic and the Classical Tradition,” arising from a colloquium of the same title held at the Institute in May 2000, would focus on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Instead the essays here focus on medieval Europe (up through the fifteenth century) and Byzantium, with some forays into the world of Islam and the Russian east, as well as a consideration of the composition of the Jewish Talmud.

Disciplines
Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Other History

Comments

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well-chosen images, careful endnotes after each essay, and a short guide to further reading on the subject.

JENNIFER KOLPACOFF DEANE

*University of Minnesota, Morris*


The Warburg Institute of the University of London is dedicated to the study of the classical tradition and its influence on all areas of European culture. For many years, the position of magic in that complex tradition has been one of its major areas of focus. D. P. Walker was a Reader in Renaissance Studies at the Warburg, and Frances Yates was an honorary fellow. Charles Burnett is currently “Professor of the History of Islamic Influences in Europe,” and William Ryan was until recently chief librarian. Both are, of course, known for their important contributions to the history of magic. Given the Warburg’s great prominence in the field of Renaissance studies, one might have expected that a volume on “Magic and the Classical Tradition,” arising from a colloquium of the same title held at the Institute in May 2000, would focus on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Instead the essays here focus on medieval Europe (up through the fifteenth century) and Byzantium, with some forays into the world of Islam and the Russian east, as well as a consideration of the composition of the Jewish Talmud.

Scholars of medieval magic will not be surprised at the amount of classical influence, typically transmitted via Byzantine or Arab sources, on magical thought in later medieval centuries. Much of the magic under discussion in this volume is necessarily elite, learned magic derived from tomes written by men who had direct access to the surviving traces of the classical tradition. But there are also interesting efforts to show the continued influence of ancient traditions on more popular beliefs and practices, such as W. F. Ryan’s own fine contribution on Russian demonic beliefs and antidemonic rites. The editors, as conveners of the colloquium, deliberately refrained from giving the participants any strict definitions either of the “classical tradition” or of “magic” (p. vii), thereby affording contributors full freedom to delineate their own topics. As a result, while all the essays clearly deal with magic and the classical tradition in recognizable forms, they vary considerably in their approach, in the scope of their focus, and in the technical natures of their
arguments. Some seek to make fairly broad points about the lasting effects of the classical tradition, while many are much more narrowly focused, often dealing with specific texts and the classical references made in them (a number of the articles provide editions or extensive textual commentary).

This is a volume into which experts will want to dip for the chapters touching on their particular expertise or areas of research, and especially for scholars working in areas of learned medieval magic there will be many riches to be found here. The collection’s value to the more general reader seeking some kind of introduction to the theme of classical influence on medieval magic will invariably be less. Some contributions raise broad points. William Ryan’s chapter has already been mentioned in this regard. Richard Kieckhefer also contributes a masterful distillation of the ways in which the “Renaissance” magic of Ficino or Pico della Mirandola did and did not differ, in its use of classical sources, from “medieval” magic. And, of course, even the most focused and technical of the chapters illustrate or illuminate certain broad points. Sophie Page, for example, notes a “precociously” early example of Neoplatonic influence in an English magical text, while Jan Veenstra effectively illustrates the variable nature of angelology by contrasting two texts. Yet in giving their contributors such a free hand, the editors have produced a volume of fine parts that, short of the overarching focus provided by the title, does not especially cohere into a complete whole.

As it was explicitly the editors’ intent to give their contributors broad freedom, rather than force them into procrustean beds of some stricter framework or organization, I hardly intend this as a criticism. I mean simply to let readers know what they will find in this volume, and what they will not. That a volume in the Warburg colloquia series would be aimed more at a specialized audience than a general readership will hardly be surprising. Neither will be the fact that such a volume contains gems of detailed and precise scholarship.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
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This is a broad and deeply researched study, but also a carefully limited one. Bernadette Filotas wants to examine popular religion and culture across