Charms and Charming in Europe (review)

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Abstract
In his introduction to this volume, Jonathan Roper defines charms as “the verbal element of vernacular magic practice” (p. 1). This is a concise and workable definition, and it establishes charms and charming as encompassing, almost inarguably, the most broadly diffused and commonly practiced kinds of magic in European history (only the equally enormous category of divination might give charming a run for its money). Yet as Roper and several of the authors of the articles collected here note, charms and charming have not received anywhere near the scholarly attention that have been lavished on narrower categories, such as maleficent witchcraft or learned Renaissance magic. The problem is one of sources. While learned magi left their own records, and theologians and prosecutors wrote furiously about the suspected evils of witchcraft, charms were so ubiquitous in common oral culture that they were rarely written down. When they were recorded, it was typically unsystematically, at least until the nineteenth century, when folklorists became interested in preserving what they regarded as important elements of popular culture, and of course those records, too, present certain problems as historical sources.

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

Comments

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Charms and Charming in Europe (review)

Michael D. Bailey

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ing quirks, it remains a valuable book, once one has recognized its unusual intentions.

RICHARD KIECKHEFER
Northwestern University


In his introduction to this volume, Jonathan Roper defines charms as “the verbal element of vernacular magic practice” (p. 1). This is a concise and workable definition, and it establishes charms and charming as encompassing, almost inarguably, the most broadly diffused and commonly practiced kinds of magic in European history (only the equally enormous category of divination might give charming a run for its money). Yet as Roper and several of the authors of the articles collected here note, charms and charming have not received anywhere near the scholarly attention that have been lavished on narrower categories, such as maleficent witchcraft or learned Renaissance magic. The problem is one of sources. While learned magi left their own records, and theologians and prosecutors wrote furiously about the suspected evils of witchcraft, charms were so ubiquitous in common oral culture that they were rarely written down. When they were recorded, it was typically unsystematically, at least until the nineteenth century, when folklorists became interested in preserving what they regarded as important elements of popular culture, and of course those records, too, present certain problems as historical sources.

While the tide has begun to turn, as Roper and several other authors indicate, the modern academic study of charms is still clearly in its infancy. This collection is, therefore, an important introduction to a too much neglected subject. Most of the papers gathered here were presented at a conference at the Warburg Institute in London in early 2003. They are divided into two sections, the first dealing with general “Issues in Charms and Charming,” and the second covering specific “National Traditions.” In fact, however, virtually all the articles deal with fundamental and problematic aspects of the study of charms. As the issues are large, and most of the articles are fairly short, they generally serve to introduce rather than resolve various issues or problems, but this seems reflective of the current state of scholarship.

In the first section, on general issues, T. M. Smallwood explores the trans-
mission of English charms from the Middle Ages to the modern era, and in so doing addresses numerous fundamental issues of how charms are recorded, what alterations are introduced, and what old elements are typically sustained when they are written down. David Elton Gay, in an article on “The Christianity of Incantations,” then points out that scholarship too often accepts categorizations of charms that originate in the polemics of earlier Christian authorities against supposed superstition or foolish folk-belief. Henri Ilomäki raises the problem of the self in charming. Many charms address an “I,” and charmers must often construct a particular “self” capable of encountering the supernatural forces they seek to manipulate. Finally, Lea T. Olsan draws on the recorded forms of certain charms to attempt to deduce how they may have been remembered in oral transmission and use. Since her argument revolves around particular “semantic motifs” associated with particular needs or purposes a charm could fulfill, she approaches, in a way, the issue of charm typologies that will dominate the second part of this collection.

While each article in the second section of this collection deals with a particular national tradition, they all focus in large part on the question of how charms are to be categorized, either vis-à-vis other charms or, occasionally, in terms of external factors. Two of the six articles mention typologies explicitly in their titles. Owen Davies, whose piece on French charms begins the section, does not, but deals with typologies of French charms nevertheless, as well as drawing some interesting, albeit brief, comparisons to English charms. W. F. Ryan introduces the Russian charming tradition by focusing primarily on its “eclecticism.” He notes that Russia has enjoyed a bit more scholarship on charms than other European lands, although the overall amount of scholarship is still small, but he laments that many studies have only collected and described charms without applying much analysis. Jonathan Roper takes up this theme in his essay on typologies of English charms. He attempts to move beyond categorizing charms simply by their function, and brings in certain elements of their form and use in practice. Sanda Golopentia then plays off of this approach in her article on typologies of Romanian charms by noting some of the inherent difficulties scholars face in constructing a charm typology. The most basic obstacle is that scholars typically have access only to the record of a charm, rather than its direct practice as they might with a folksong or other custom.

The final two articles in the volume step away from the issue of typologies but still address the difficulties of studying and categorizing charms. Ulrika Wolf-Knuts focuses on the important collector and scholar of Swedish-language charms from Finland Valter W. Forsblom. She examines his methodologies, which she generally finds to be insightful and reliable, although
she also notes the potential biases inherent in his focus on preserving Swedish-language folk-customs in Finland. Finally, Éva Pócs examines the evil eye and attendant practices in Hungary. While the evil eye is a historically well-established category of magical action, she asks why it is so prevalent in certain cultures and not others, and whether it can be usefully separated from other forms of maleficent magical action (she concludes it can).

As mentioned already, all of these articles serve more as introductions rather than definitive statements on the issues they address. Each has its particular limitations. But they play well off one another (a tribute perhaps to the authors, the editor, the organizers of the initial Warburg Institute conference, or all of the above). As a series of separate articles, they obviously do not provide a complete, fully coherent account of charming in European history, but the reader does come away from the collection with a good sense not only of many areas of this enormous field, but of many basic issues within it.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
Iowa State University


The dust jacket of Lyndal Roper’s new book on witchcraft sports a reproduction of Füssli’s “The Three Witches.” The three women all point in one direction. The picture seems to symbolize Roper’s treatment of witchcraft. Witchcraft is essentially about motherhood and fertility. This is clear from the beginning and this remains the focal point of the study.

Following the basic argument of her early work Oedipus and the Devil, Roper attempts to see witch beliefs and witch hunts as motivated by the unconscious. She stresses that the unconscious is not ahistorical. Rather, it is shaped by cultural conditions and expressed in products of culture beyond the purely individual sphere, for example, in the accusations and testimonials of witch trials. Roper concentrates exclusively on source materials from the German heartland of the witch hunts. She focuses on cases from Augsburg, Marchtal, and Nördlingen.

The book consists of nine chapters arranged in four parts. Part One, “Per-