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REVIEW ARTICLE

Magic in Historical Theory and Practice

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The Cambridge history of magic and witchcraft in the West. From antiquity to the present. Edited by David J. Collins. Pp. xi + 798 incl. 65 figs. New York–Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. £95. 978 0 521 19418 1

Collected essays are a popular and useful way of throwing light on their proclaimed subject matter or period, and of bringing recent research to a more general audience. They are, of course, inevitably limited in their scope, although this does not necessarily imply that they are at all parochial. 'Europe' is a frequent and obvious geographical limitation imposed upon matter dealing with magic and witchcraft, and 'early modern' a common chronological set of termini. Thus, the recent *Oxford handbook of witchcraft* (2013) declares itself confined – a very broad confinement – to early modern Europe and Colonial America. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark's earlier *Athlone history of witchcraft and magic in Europe* (1999–2002) again takes Europe as its principal theatre, although its spread over six volumes allows the editors to begin with the ancient Middle East and extend chronologically to the twentieth century. By adding 'in the West' to the title of his collection, Collins therefore appears to be confining himself geographically (although 'the West' is remarkably large), while 'from antiquity to the present' extends to his contributors a brave allowance of time in a single volume. This volume, then, more or less follows an established pattern for this kind of scholarly work. How far does it succeed in matching the endeavours and achievements of its predecessors?

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Studies of magic and witchcraft have long been bedevilled (if that is the right word) by the modern habit of compartmentalising knowledge. False distinctions, and therefore oppositions or rivalries, have been set up between magic, religion and the sciences, or magic, religion and the sciences have been treated as though the first led to and was supplanted by the second, and the second developed into the third, by some kind of Darwinian process of natural evolution. A second major problem in the field (indeed, in historical studies generally) is the equally mischievous failure to differentiate between the present and the past, and to judge the past by assumptions favouring the present. This frequently reveals itself in the unspoken conviction that when it comes to magic and witchcraft, people in the past suffered from ignorance (for which read 'stupidity' or 'gullibility') in comparison with the enlightened present. Brave efforts, however, are often being made by recent scholars to avoid both these snares, and it is to the credit of this collection that several of its contributors set out not only to avoid them, but to go beyond them in pursuit of a clearer and more generous understanding of our past.

Problems, however, still abound. The words 'magic' and 'witchcraft', for example, are actually difficult to define, even though they give the impression that they are immediately and easily comprehensible. But fortunately this is a question which several of the scholars here are careful to address, and this may count as a second virtue of the book. A third is Collins's emphasis on both magic and witchcraft's being seen in their historical context and place, with continuity rather than periodisation also being regarded as important to interpretation of both phenomena. (Kimberley Stratton, 'Early Greco-Roman antiquity' at pp.84–6, Kyle Fraser, 'Imperial Rome', at pp.134–5, David Collins, 'Learned magic', at pp. 333–4, and Margaret Wiener, 'Colonial magic: the Dutch East Indies' at pp. 482–3, are particularly helpful and lucid on these points.) While this may seem to be a fairly obvious approach to adopt, it is remarkable how many writers on magic and witchcraft still seem to feel the need overtly to distance themselves from their subject matter, with the result that a jarring and unhistorical disjunction interrupts and undermines their conversation with the past and with their reader.

There are twenty essays altogether, along with an introduction which sets out the aims and principles of the whole. These essays are divided into six parts: (I) 'Antiquity', covering the period from Sumeria and Babylonia to Hellenistic Greece and Rome; (II) 'The Early Latin West', from Imperial Rome to the end of the sixth century; (III) 'Parallel Traditions', which refers to Byzantium, the early Islamic period, and the Jewish tradition in magic; (IV) 'Old Europe', encompassing the Middle Ages and the early modern period; (V) 'Colonial Encounters', referring largely to Central America, British North America and the Dutch East Indies; and (VI) 'The Modern West', which deals principally with the nineteenth and twentieth

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centuries. The intended scope of these contributions is very wide and thus potentially offers a rich interweaving of traditions, examination of which should not only illumine what is fairly well known of these places and periods already but, by the very juxtaposition of such disparate studies, throw fresh light on the known, and suggest the existence of parallels or connections that the reader has not thought of, or had not fully appreciated, before. This, of course, is why Collins included contributions on Middle Eastern and Eastern colonial magic in his collection, and prefaced a study of 'the West' with an entire section dealing with the ancient Near East. Nevertheless, with seven of the twenty essays falling into one or other of these 'comparative' categories, it does raise the small point of whether the title should not have referred to magic and witchcraft 'and', rather than 'in', the West. 'The West' is also a potentially troubling term here, in as much as it is so very comprehensive. It is noticeable, for example, that neither the Scandinavian countries, nor Scotland, nor Canada are included, in spite of their having rich occult traditions worthy of individual study, and this raises a question about the balance of the essays included. Two are devoted to Sumeria-Babylonia and Egypt, one to the Dutch East Indies, and one to Puerto Rico. A little judicious cutting could perhaps have created room for at least one or two of the omissions. It is also possible to have reservations about one or two of the illustrations. Three chapters lack any at all, and one can suggest that perhaps those on pp. 492, 505, 595, 613, 618, 642 and 648, which are of marginal interest to their texts, could have been omitted in favour of others somewhat more informative, either with respect to the chapters lacking illustration, or to the material aspects of magic, which the pictures in chapters vii, viii and ix on Byzantium, Islam and Judaism are so helpful in pointing out.

Such editorial decisions are, to be sure, difficult and it is impossible to include everything. There are, however, still one or two questions relating to the balance of the collection as a whole. Remove those essays not immediately concerned with 'the West', and the volume is quite heavily skewed towards America, when it might be reasonable to expect a slightly more even balance between America and Western Europe (which the inclusion of Scandinavia, for example, would have helped to address). One or two contributions – Helen Parish, principally on English Protestant reformers' views on the 'magic' of the mass, or Margaret Wiener on Indonesian magic and the fetish, for example – are very interesting in themselves, but highly circumscribed in their material, and tend to raise a question about the intended readership of the volume as a whole. Again, one needs to be fair about this. Daniel Schwemer's essay on the ancient Near East, and Friedhelm Hoffmann's on ancient Egypt, are highly specialised, too. But while it is clear that their contributions are directly relevant to the history of the later development of a magical tradition which made its way into the West, it is not quite so clear how, except in a very narrow

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sense, English Protestant polemic on the mass, or Indonesian magical practice, contribute to a reader's broader understanding of the historical flow which brought certain key aspects of magic and witchcraft into the Western hemisphere. It would also have been useful to have had a separate contribution on the material objects – amulets, physical apotropaics, dolls, deposits and so forth – used as instruments of magical intention. The *corpora* are often passed over, either briefly or entirely, in discussions of magic and witchcraft, and yet their role was clearly one of major importance, and one much in need of closer attention, as is illustrated by the problems that archaeologists, folklorists and historians often have in interpreting these objects. Again, judicious cutting or shortening – Raquel Romberg's essay on magic in the postcolonial Americas, for example, is both interesting and novel, but has been given a somewhat generous spread – could have created space for such a topic.

Comparisons may be odious, but there is some virtue in seeing how, *mutatis mutandis*, Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen deal with a set of comparative essays in their *Early modern European witchcraft: centres and peripheries*. Eighteen essays are divided into four groups. The first gives Catholic and Protestant theological background to the subject matter; the second concentrates on the Sabbat; the third covers countries from Sweden in the north to Portugal in the south; and the final two contributions contrast Sweden and New England, and the changes in approach to the writing of witchcraft history. The reader comes away with an impression of the coherence and cohesion of the collection as a whole, and the pitch of the essays is towards the knowledgeable, but not necessarily specialised scholar. Collins's collection is undoubtedly learned and informative, but while it has the wholly admirable aim of bringing its readers up to date with what Collins calls 'the insurmountable accumulation of new scholarship', while avoiding 'the siloing of scholarship within ever narrowing disciplines and sub-disciplines' (p.1), the book teeters uneasily between two stools because, on the one hand it has a learned or specialist readership in mind, and on the other, it is not quite sure whether to address itself exclusively to that restricted audience or spread itself beyond those confines and run the risk of being interesting but a touch banal.

There can be no cavilling at the overall quality of the separate essays, however, for in general they follow the briefs that they have been given admirably and informatively with a great deal of flair and thoughtful reflection. This applies particularly to the essays by Daniel Schwemer and Friedhelm Hoffmann, whose contributions I have mentioned already, and to those by Travis Zadeh and Gideon Bohak on early Islamic and Jewish magic respectively. Catherine Rider, given the very difficult task of trying to summarise popular magical practice in medieval Europe, manages successfully to address the wider readership to which her subject-matter may appeal. David Collins himself writes on learned

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magic, including astral magic, divination and alchemy, just as the sixteenth-century doyen of magical studies, Martin Delrio, did in his immense *Disquisitiones magicae*. Michael Bailey's contribution is on diabolic magic and summarises, with a remarkable amount of pertinent information, the complex historical process which saw the rise of the diabolic witch, the years of intense prosecution, and the eventual decline of official concern with the phenomenon. When it comes to magic and witchcraft in modern times, however, one is slightly surprised not to see a contribution from someone such as Ronald Hutton, whose body of published work contains outstanding investigations into the rise and development of the modern witch. An essay from him would have enhanced the volume as a whole, and provided an enlightening counterpart to David Allen Harvey's piece on élite magic in the nineteenth century; and while Sabina Magliocco's chapter on New Age and Neopagan magic very usefully illuminates the difference between the two, the reader of the *History* is left with an uneasy gap between Harvey's study and hers, which really should have been filled.

Does the volume fulfil the intentions that Collins outlines in his introduction? These, he says, are (a) to provide a wider context for the subject by extending consideration of magic to European encounters with non-Mediterranean and non-European cultures; (b) to establish the period between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries as a coherent and distinctive epoch in the history of Western magic; and (c) to throw particular emphasis upon the practitioners of magic as practitioners, rather than as victims of the period of intense prosecution. By and large, the collection does indeed fulfil these aims. The first, of course, raises the question of British involvement in India, and therefore its encounters with the extensive magic of the sub-continent, neither of which is dealt with here. The volume is substantial, but would an extra fifteen or twenty pages have made it over-burdened? But Collins makes a good case for seeing his chosen seven centuries as being coherent enough to constitute a distinctive 'period' in magical history, and his emphasis on practitioners has the entirely beneficial effect of restoring a greater balance between the sexes, a balance often lost in the more frequent study of the centuries of gendered prosecution. In the main, therefore, while the volume has touches of the curate's egg about it, there can be no doubt that it is a welcome addition to magic and witchcraft studies since it offers a refreshing number of departures from tired *clichés*, and invites the reader to think about magic beyond the boundaries of western Europe. The remarkably difficult job of trying to assimilate east European and non-European magic into our view of their western counterpart, and gauge whether other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, folklore and gender studies have serious contributions to make to our historical studies remains to be done. But both Collins and his contributors are to be congratulated on their ambition for this volume, and its individual accomplishments.

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