



Accessus:

A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media

Accessus

Volume 6
Issue 2 *Magic, Religion, and Science*

Article 1

2020

Magic, Religion, and Science: A Special Issue

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Recommended Citation

Salisbury, Eve (2020) "Magic, Religion, and Science: A Special Issue," *Accessus*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol6/iss2/1>

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Magic, Religion, and Science: A Special Issue

The inspiration for this special issue of *Accessus* arose from a combined conference of the Medieval Association of the Pacific (MAP) and the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS) held in Scottsdale in February of 2019. Entitled “Magic, Religion, and Science in the Global Middle Ages and Renaissance,” the conference brought together medieval and early modern scholars working on areas of study too often considered to be separate from one another and bound by disciplinary constraints. The essays in this fourth special issue of *Accessus* challenge that presumption by addressing the innovative work of four prominent writers and demonstrating how magic, religion, and science, when considered together, had the capacity to generate new ideas and innovative ways of thinking.

From the rhetorical magic of John Gower, the hermetic readings of Elias Ashmole, the occult philosophy of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, and the onstage illusions of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, the four essays featured in this special issue unveil some of the most mesmerizing aspects of magic in the late medieval and early modern era. Bold in their challenges to perceived reality and relentless in their pursuit of meaning, the writers whose works are addressed here reveal how the magic of words, the enchantment of objects, and the mysteries of alchemical practices could be harnessed and used to access the hidden forces of the universe. Writing at a time not often considered to be one of exploration, experimentation, and innovation these writers pursued ways to reshape perceptions of the natural world whether through verbal prestidigitation, revising ancient practices, or exploiting the transformative potential of the stage. Taken together they offer us a view behind the curtain that exposes the workings of magic and contributes to what we know about the past.

In her essay entitled “John Gower’s Magical Rhetoric,” Georgiana Donavin cites the many references to magic in the *Confessio Amantis* that create the illusion of authority for Genius who “compares love’s labors to alchemy, provides *exempla* of necromancers who trick their lovers, or lists authorities such as Zoroaster whom the priest believes Amans should know.” Juxtaposed with “discussions of rhetoric” that emphasize the ethical principles of Ciceronian speech, species of magic defined simply at the time as “white” and “black” become more clearly demarcated as do differences between how truth is constructed and how falsehood could take on a life of its own. Differing views of magical rhetoric are revealed in two of the *Confessio*’s *exempla*: the manipulations of language by Ulysses and Nectanabus, both of whom seek to advance themselves and their own desires. In her riveting analysis Donavin contrasts the truth-telling rhetoric of the Word with examples of powerful men like these who abuse their positions for personal gain. Gower’s use of rhetoric for exposing the machinations of self-interested manipulators of language through Genius’s storytelling, encourages Amans, and all readers by extension, to recognize the differences between truth and deceit.

Curtis Runstedler’s article, “Transmuting John Gower: Elias Ashmole’s Hermetic Reading of Gower’s Jason and the Golden Fleece,” addresses Elias Ashmole’s provocative interpretation of one of the most intriguing of Gower’s tales as well as the poet’s knowledge of alchemy. Beginning with Book IV of the *Confessio Amantis*, Runstedler outlines Ashmole’s resurrection of Gower’s work for a seventeenth-century audience and the poet’s use of alchemical magic to “make moral points about human fallibility and practice.” Gower’s secret knowledge of the natural world and its “three alchemical stones” to Ashmole’s way of thinking earns the poet a place among the hermetic philosophers in his *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, a fact that sets the stage for Runstedler’s enlightening discussion of the Philosopher’s Stone.

Runstedler goes beyond an exclusive focus on Jason, expanding his explication of the quest by including a reading of Medea, her magical rejuvenating skills, and her fierce response to Jason's betrayal. That the subject of alchemy permeates these narratives to such the extent is revealing in and of itself; that Rundstedler expands our understanding of how Gower's work was received by Elias Ashmole, encouraging research that continues to bring magic, science, and poetry together is virtually transmutational.

Likewise, in her overview of Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*, Allison Kavey reveals what too often remains hidden in Agrippa's work, even to researchers. In an essay aptly entitled, "Reading Agrippa von Nettesheim's *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*: Textual Structure and Central Arguments," she argues that this is a text that "must be taken on its own terms" in order to understand its significance in the world of Renaissance magic. Agrippa's methods of introducing materials and supporting evidence, his ways of thinking about relations between "God and humans, the macrocosm and the microcosm, and the role of magic and systems of sympathy" revivify a work that actualizes Agrippa's desire to return adepts to "the forces that motivated the Creation." While Book I foregrounds the arguments of the work as a whole, Book II expands those assertions by offering a comprehensive explanation of how "magic moves among the natural, starry, and divine realms," a notion supported by astrological and numerological evidence. Agrippa's restatement of this complex idea in Book III, which he supports with "an array of theological arguments," drives the point home. The same may be said about an overview of Agrippa's work that augments appreciation for this pivotal thinker.

Rana Banna's reading of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in a piece entitled "Alchemical Word-Magic in the Winter's Tale," pulls back the curtain on how recombinant science, magic and rhetoric are deployed throughout the play. She positions her discussion within a context that

acknowledges the kinship between theology and science and the prevalence of magic before the New-Scientific revolution, making an “alchemical” understanding of word-magic discernible, especially in relation to the “fertile semiotics” at the heart of the play. With her emphasis on the fertility of Hermione’s language use, Banna reveals the tensions between what may be understood as true and what is to be discounted as untrue. She makes us think about the “hermeneutics of distrust,” and its challenges to the veracity of meaning, especially when articulated by women. In the end, the once suspect and “inexplicable powers of feminine speech” are recognized “as a permissible, natural form of magic,” and Shakespeare’s efforts to “renew our faith that the art of language itself is nature” are successful. In Banna’s reading Shakespeare bridges “the chasm between the merely referential word and its referent, to make present—as if by magic—the absent signified.” A statue is brought to life, after all, and the effect is magical.

In the thought-provoking analyses offered in this special issue, we, as twenty-first century readers living in a world in which credible and in-credible rhetoric factor into everyday life, are given a view behind the magical word-curtain by these scholars and the writers whose work they illuminate. Looking to the writings of the past to reveal the magic of words, to recognize the transformative effects of objects, the enchanting illusions of the stage, and the benefits of imaginative scientific exploration provide insights for shaping a future in which veracity can always trump lies and honest actors can prevail.

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