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Exorcism, conjuration and the historiography of early modern ritual magic

Stephen Clucas

This paper draws together some themes in the history of late mediaeval and renaissance thought which have concerned me for nearly two decades. Broadly these themes could be subsumed beneath a single question: what is the relationship between magic and religion in the late middle ages and Renaissance? Still more broadly it is question about the *will to operation* in that period. Does something fundamental change in man's will to operate? Does man's attitude towards nature become more instrumental with the advent of the Renaissance? The question of magic brings this question to the foreground of historical consideration in some rather pointed and emphatic ways, and has the capacity to divide historical audiences at a visceral, pre-logical level in a way that few other controversial subjects within our period do. Another large question I would like to raise is: was magic as transgressive as its theological opponents claimed that it was, and if so, what motivated so many Christian thinkers to put their immortal souls at risk by studying, and even practising magical arts? Many historians of early modern magic have assumed that magic *was* transgressive, and that the magus was someone who deliberately flouted Christian orthodoxy. Where does this assumption derive from? In his magisterial work on demonology, witchcraft and demonic possession, *Thinking with Demons* (1997) Stuart Clark – as a cultural historian keen to preserve the reality of demonic possession as it was perceived by early modern historical actors – stressed the desirability of viewing possession from the point of view of the demonologist, as opposed to modern commentators who seek to reduce the 'reality' of possession to a set of modern medical or psychological phenomena: „[J]udgements about possession“, Clark argued, „[...] necessarily drew on demonological criteria. We may accordingly be able to give a less reductive account of the subject if we look at it through the eyes of the demonological writers.“¹ It is far otherwise, I will argue, with the history of magic, where looking through the „eyes of the demonological writers“ simply reproduces their image of magic as a blasphemous, heretical and diabolic activity utterly separate from orthodox religious beliefs and practices. It is my belief that contemporary historical accounts of magic have been unduly influenced by the demonological literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and have repeated their claims that ritual magic is an impious contamination of

¹ S. Clark: *Idea of Witchcraft*, p. 395, cf. p. 410.

the Christian religion rather than a part of it. In her recent collection of essays *Invoking Angels* (2012) Claire Fanger has spoken of the desirability of „extracting the addressative practices“ of mediaeval magic from what she calls „the demonological complex put in place by medieval theologian“.² I wholeheartedly concur with this sentiment, which has been one of the primary determinants of my own work on John Dee’s angelic conversations which, as I have argued, be seen as continuous with Dee’s devotional piety, rather than a departure from it.³ I would go further – the extraction of magical practices from this „demonological complex“ is the most important issue confronting the history of magic today.

One of the most criticised – and yet most enduring – characterizations of the rise of Renaissance magic was that of the Warburg Institute scholar Frances Amelia Yates. In her influential book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (published in 1964), Yates contrasted what she saw as the essentially passive and contemplative stance of the mediaeval devotant, „the pious spectator of God’s wonders in the creation, and the worshipper of God himself above the creation“ with the Renaissance magus as typified by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, who, for Yates, represents „Man the operator, man who seeks to draw power from the divine and natural order“.⁴ According to Yates what differentiated the magus from the (mediaeval) Christian is their „sense of operational power“,⁵ the movement from mediaeval to modern was, she said, „a matter of will“. The magus „changed the will“ so that it was „now dignified and important for man to operate“.⁶ This contrast between spectator and operator, however, obscures the fundamental continuities between the Christian practices of the patristic and mediaeval periods and the Renaissance, and at the same time creates an artificial division between essentially passive Christian practices and operative magical practices. Is it true that Christian rituals were passive while magical rituals alone were operative? Were Christian prayers meek and supplicatory petitions and magical incantations aggressive (and *transgressive*) operative commands and injunctions? The answers to these questions, I think, are of vital importance for a clearer historical understanding both of the history of magic and of the history of Christianity. My focus in this paper, however, will be on the former. While the history of magic has come a long way since Lynn Thorndike dismissed magical invocations as „gibberish“, and has made huge historiographical advances in the past twenty years (particularly, although not exclusively, in the work of historians associated with the *Magic in History* book series) there is still a tendency – as I see it – to accept the broad

² C. Fanger (ed.): *Invoking Angels*, p. 16.

³ S. Clucas: „Renaissance magic and Mediaeval Theurgy“; S. Clucas: „False illuding Spirits“.

⁴ F.A. Yates: *Giordano Bruno*, p. 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 155–156.

outlines of Yates's contrast as essentially true, and to insist – consciously or unconsciously – on an essential opposition between magical and Christian practices. At a deep level, I will suggest, this is even true of scholars who have begun to acknowledge the profound interdependence of Christian and magical rituals in the late Mediaeval and Renaissance periods.⁷

A typical example of this would be the following from Deborah E. Harkness's book on the angelic conversations of the Elizabethan mathematician and natural philosopher John Dee, published in 1999. For Harkness, Christian prayer and magical invocation are distinct, and distinct precisely at the level of volition:

„Calling upon God through prayer and summoning spiritual agencies through magical invocations are technically distinct [...]. In prayer, the practitioner subjects himself to the will of God. In magical invocation on the other hand, the practitioner subverts the hierarchical arrangement of the cosmos by asserting his or her own will over a spirit and, through a subsequent binding spell, controlling a spirit's actions.“⁸

Harkness seems to assume that submission to the will of God rules out the assertion of will, and that 'conventional' prayer cannot be operative. Is it true that only magical 'invocations' summon 'spiritual agencies'? If we look back into the history of Christian prayer, a more complex picture emerges. In the third century AD when the first systematic treatments of prayer began to be written, both Latin and Greek Church Fathers described prayer in ways which could be seen as operative. Tertullian and Origen classified the various offices and functions of prayer in very similar ways. Prayer consisted of four main elements: Praise, Thanksgiving and Confession, Petition and Intercession, in which those who prayed could ask for their desires to be fulfilled, or for angelic spirits, or the spirits of the departed saints to intercede for them in their requests. Thus Tertullian in the tenth chapter of his *De oratione*, written in the first decade of the third century AD, saw the fulfilment of individual desires as a legitimate part of Christian prayer:

„[S]ince there are things to be asked in view of the circumstances of each individual, they that approach have the right, after dispatching first the regular and standard prayer by way of a foundation, to build on it outside petitions embodying their desires, always remembering, however, the prescribed requests.“⁹

In chapter XXIX of the same work, he expands on the power and efficacy of Christian prayer:

⁷ In this paper I will be restricting my comments to ritual magic – that is to say, magical operations which involved putative contact between human beings and spirits. I will not be considering the equally complex and diverse field of natural magic.

⁸ D.E. Harkness: *John Dee's Conversations with Angels*, p. 120.

⁹ „quae petantur pro circumstantia cuiusque, praemissa legitima et ordinaria oratione quasi fundamento, accedentium desideriorum ius est superstruendi extrinsecus petitiones, cum memoria tamen praeceptorum.“ Tertullian: *De oratione*, vol. 1, p. 564; *Tertullian's Treatises*, p. 28.

„Prayer is the only thing that can prevail with God, but Christ willed that it should work no evil. All the power [*virtutem*] he conferred upon it sprang from good. So it has no power except to recall the souls of the dead from the very way of death, to restore the maimed, to cure the sick, to purge the victims of evil spirits, to open the bars of the prison, to loosen the bonds of the upright. It also washes away sins, drives back temptations, quenches persecutions [...] attends upon the traveller in distant lands, subdues waves, confounds robbers, [and] nourishes the poor [...].“¹⁰

While on one level prayer is aimed at procuring purely spiritual benefits (the avoidance of temptation, for example), it also seems capable of acting on the world: subduing storms, foiling thieves, curing diseases, or exorcising evil spirits.

A few decades later Origen, writing in his treatise on prayer (*Περὶ Εὐχῆς*, c. 231–250 C.E.), also claimed that the prayers of Christians had power (*δυνάμεως*), and specifically a power to destroy evil spirits:

„[T]he words of the prayers of the saints being full of power [*δυνάμεως*], especially when in their prayer they pray with the spirit and understanding [...] dissolve by the power of God the spiritual poison which is instilled by the hostile powers into the mind [...] like a dart from the soul of him who prays with knowledge, reason and faith, it will go forth from the saint wounding to destruction and death the spirits that are hostile to God [...].“¹¹

Origen also believed that prayer involved summoning the aid of spiritual agencies: the places where Christians prayed were, he claimed, attended by angels who sought to minister to the needs of those who prayed.¹² Communicating with spiritual agencies is not then the sole province of the magician, but in the shape of the ministry of angels was an expectation which many Christians saw as warranted by Biblical authority, and by the Church Fathers.

This petitionary aspect of Christian prayer is one which endures right through to the early modern period. The Catholic martyr John Fisher (whose private psalms are frequently used in the angelic conversations of John Dee), notes that one of the three principal „fruites of prayer“ was „the obeyning of the thing which we require of God and pray for“. ¹³ Provided that prayers are „grounded vpon the pyller of humilitie“, he says, the New Testament promises will be fulfilled. Quoting James 2 and Mark 11, he writes:

¹⁰ „Sola est oratio quae deum vincit; sed Christus eam nihil mali voluit operari. Omnem illi virtutem de bono contulit. Itaque nihil novit nisi defunctorum animas de ipso mortis itinere revocare, debiles reformare, aegros remediare, daemónicos expiare, claustra carceris aperire, vincula innocentium solvere. Eadem diluit delicta, temptationes repellit, persecutiones extinguit [...] periginantes deducit, fluctus mitigat, latrones obstupefacit, alit pauperes [...].“ Tertullian: *De oratione*, vol. 1, pp. 583–584; *Tertullian's Treatises*, p. 44.

¹¹ Origen, transl. E.G. Jay, chapter XII.1, p. 114.

¹² Ibid. chapters XI.5, p. 114, and XXXI.5, p. 213.

¹³ J. Fisher: *A godly Treatise*, signatura Cij verso.

„Let him [...] require in a fayth not wavering nor doubtful, and his request shal be graunted vnto hym. And likewyse our Saviour Christ in the Gospel sayth thus, *Quicquid orantis petitis, credite quia accipietis, & fiet vobis*: What thing soeuer ye require by prayer, believe that ye shall obteyne it, and your desire shal be performed.“¹⁴

Such beliefs in petitionary prayer can take on a distinctly operative tenor. The sixteenth-century German reformer and iatrochemist Paracelsus, for example, in his *De rerum natura* saw the New Testament promise of Luke 11, 9 („ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.“) as the foundation of a Christian form of magic:

„Ceremonies therefore, and conjurations are not any longer to be used by us Christians in the regeneration, as the Ancients in the Old Testament, who lived in the first generation used them. For those prefigurations were for us who were to live in the New Testament. Whatsoever things therefore the Ancients that were under the Old Testament, and in the first Generation did doe by Ceremonies, Conjurations, &c. wee Christians of the second Generation, and in the New Testament must doe by prayer, knocking, and seeking, and procure by faith. In these 3 chief points consists all the foundation of the magicall, and Cabalisticall Art, by which we may obtain whatsoever we desire, so that to us Christians, nothing is impossible.“¹⁵

John Dee in his *Protestatio Fidelis* (a prayer-cum-manifesto included in his *Libri Mysteriorum*) also cites New Testament promises as a warrant for his immediate revelation by angelic messengers, and is told by one of his angelic visitors – the Archangel Michael – that „The key of prayer openeth all things“¹⁶, and that he should „Pray and that vehemently, For these things are not reuealed without great prayer“.¹⁷

Despite the fact that many magical arts of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance consist of elaborate prayers to angels, there seems to be a deep-seated resistance to seeing them as part of the same phenomenon as other precatory practices. This resistance seems to be underpinned by a desire to see magic as a transgressive subversion of religion. Thus Jan Veenstra, who has been doing excellent work on mediaeval magic arts such as the *Liber iuratus* of Honorius and the *Ars almadal* or *almandal*, insists in a rather circular argument that magic must be different from religion because it has the characteristics of magic:

¹⁴ Ibid., signatura [Ev] recto-verso.

¹⁵ Paracelsus [1537] 1650, pp. 131–132.

¹⁶ J. Dee: *Libri Mysteriorum*, folio 26 recto.

¹⁷ Ibid., folio 34 recto.

„Despite the similarities between ecclesiastical and magical rituals, which make it impossible to fully distinguish magic from religion, there are nevertheless some grounds for making a distinction between angelic magic and regular orthodox forms of worship. First of all it should be remembered that magic rituals, even those of angelic magic, frequently depart from or subvert orthodox institutionalized rituals; and secondly the texts of angelic magic will always betray characteristics related to the central tradition of learned magic.“¹⁸

The insistence here on „subversion“ is part of a pattern of similar conceptualizations in the history of magic. György Szönyi in his 2004 study of John Dee, *John Dee's Occultism*, for example, claims that Renaissance magic was troubled by „an ambivalence between the sacred and the demonic“, and while he acknowledges that renaissance figures like Dee believed in the legitimacy and piety of their communications with spirits, he insists that magicians were never „entirely free from all dark temptations“.¹⁹

Since D. P. Walker wrote his *Spiritual and Demonic Magic* in 1958, it has been commonplace to distinguish those forms of magic which deal with angels (sometimes called ‘white’ magic or ‘angel magic’), and ‘demonic magic’ (also called ‘necromancy’ or ‘black’ magic). Demonic magic, of course, was clearly open to negative characterization. The magician who commanded evil spirits must obviously be evil. And yet even this is a problematic assumption. First of all it should be pointed out that the majority of the magical arts of the Latin Middle Ages (adapted from Jewish, Byzantine and Arabic sources, and Christianized) claimed to deal exclusively with angels, and often involved elaborate prayers forbidding „unclean spirits“ from intruding into their practices.²⁰ John Dee, in his *Protestatio Fidelis* draws his warrant from Biblical examples of God’s ministering angels sent to aid the faithful, said that he had:

„alwayes a great regard & care to beware of the filthy abuse of such as willingly & wetingly did invoke & consult (in diverse sorts) Spirituall creatures of the damned sort: angells of darknes, Forgers & patrons of lies & vntruthes.“²¹

Dee had been denounced by the Protestant martyrologist John Foxe as an „archconiuror“ – a label he abhorred. „[O]ught any honest Student, and Modest Christian Philosopher“, he fumed in 1570, „be counted and called a *Coniurer*? [...] Shall that man be (in hugger mugger) condemned as a Companion of the Hellhoundes, and a Caller and Coniuror of wicked and damned Spirites?“²²

¹⁸ J.R. Veenstra: „Venerating and Conjuring Angels“, p. 129.

¹⁹ G.E. Szönyi: *John Dee's Occultism*, p. 156.

²⁰ S., e.g., the prayer *Contra demones*, in: *Ars notoria, Harleian MS 181*, folio 21 recto. Such prophylactic elements constitute a kind of structural paranoia in mediaeval and Renaissance magical arts.

²¹ J. Dee: *Libri Mysteriorum*, folio 7 recto–verso.

²² J. Dee: *Mathematicall Praeface*, signaturae Ai verso–Aij recto.

It would be tempting to follow Dee and make a distinction between pious Christians calling on angels with „harty prayers“, and diabolic conjurors of evil spirits. But even those magical arts which do profess to command „damned Spirites“, are not as immediately and obviously transgressive as one might suppose.

Richard Kieckhefer, who blazed the trail for much of the recent work on mediaeval magic with his *Magic in the Middle Ages*, published in 1990, argued there that necromantic magic had clear parallels with the orthodox exorcistic rituals of the Catholic Church.²³ In his recent 1997 study of a fifteenth-century necromancer’s manual *Forbidden Rites* he notes that „the terms ‘conjunction’ and ‘exorcism’ are essentially interchangeable in medieval usage“.²⁴ ‘Exorcise’ and ‘conjure’ are, in fact, etymologically very similar in that they refer to the swearing of an oath. The Greek ἐξορκίζω from which the Latin *exorcismus* is derived means both to administer an oath and to conjure.²⁵ The Latin *iuro*, from which *coniurare* is derived, means to swear an oath. The addition ‘con-’ suggests taking an oath with someone else – which might include, say, a demonic spirit. What makes Catholic exorcism and diabolic magic similar is that both involve the compulsion of evil spirits (by means of a divine authority) to enter into a solemn and binding oath with the exorcist/conjuror. The earliest recorded English usage of ‘Exorcise’ (‘exorcisen’) dates to the mid-fifteenth century, and referred to the conjuring of spirits rather than driving them out – a sense first recorded c. 1450.²⁶

If we look at a popular sixteenth-century manual of exorcism, such as Girolamo Menghi’s *Flagellum Daemonum*, we can see that orthodox Christian ritual and prayer could be very operative and forceful indeed, and in fact uses the very language of conjunction and adjuration that the demonologists used to criticise magical arts:

²³ R. Kieckhefer: *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 73–75.

²⁴ R. Kieckhefer: *Forbidden Rites*, p. 127.

²⁵ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, 1985, p. 598; A. Souter: *Glossary*, p. 138.

²⁶ H. Kurath and S.M. Kuhn (eds.): *Middle English Dictionary*, vol. 3, p. 334.

„I exhort you [*Coniuro vos*], † I contest you and I exorcise you, I drive you away and command you with force [*exorcizo, adiuro, atque viriliter mando*], oh spirits rebellious to God, by means of he who spoke and things were created; by means of him whom all creatures obey; by means of the tremendous day of judgement [...] I command you to speak with me immediately, and with no deceit or falsity, without noisiness, without lying or injury, but obeying my commands and diligently fulfilling what I order [...] by the force of that most holy name, I curse you and cast you down and relegate you to the depths of the abyss till judgement day. Amen.“²⁷

Kieckhefer, however, has a similar problem to that of Veenstra, in that while he points out that „in all [...] essential elements conjurations are analogous to exorcisms“,²⁸ he still ultimately wants to insist that there is a fundamental difference between them:

„If exorcisms were allowed, at least to authorized clergy, while conjuring was prohibited to all, it was because of the one key difference: the exorcist’s intent was to dispel the demons, while the conjuror’s was to summon them [...] there is no other essential difference between this form of magic and religious practices, and [...] it is better to perceive demonic magic as an illicit form of religion than as a cultural phenomenon distinct from religion.“²⁹

Once again magic is kept distinct, held apart from its orthodox counterpart in the name of a subversive, transgressive will to operate, and while Kieckhefer is willing to accept magic as internal to religion, it is only as an „illicit“ phenomenon.³⁰ Not only do exorcists and necromancers both „summon“ (and „conjure“) evil spirits but – as Stuart Clark has pointed out – the expulsion of evil spirits is only one of a range of possible outcomes in any particular exorcism. Rather than seeing it as a kind of spiritual ‘pest control’, Clark emphasises the investigative, knowledge-producing character of exorcism:

„In addition to its function as an ecclesiastical ritual, exorcism was the purest and most rewarding form taken by demonological enquiry. For under its direct threat demons were expected to reveal important truths about their activities that scholars would never otherwise have discovered.“³¹

Properly conducted exorcisms could turn the lies of demons into useful knowledge – they were interrogations and cross-examinations as much as they were expulsions. „[I]n their setting,“ he argues, „demoniacs could become privileged avenues of communication between the godly and their mysterious deity“.³²

Kieckhefer’s arguments have more nuances than I can be expected to do justice to here, and he makes extremely cogent points about the close relationships between ritual magic and

²⁷ G. Menghi: *Flagellum daemonum*, p. 110.

²⁸ R. Kieckhefer: *Forbidden Rites*, p. 127.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³¹ S. Clark: *Idea of Witchcraft*, p. 428.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 433.

liturgy and private devotions,³³ but one concern I have about his characterization of mediaeval magic is his depiction of it as „a sinister threat to orthodox culture“.³⁴ Despite his insistence that there are striking „links between magical practice and orthodox liturgy“,³⁵ he sees magic as a kind of sub-cultural phenomenon. In *Forbidden Rites*, he uses the analogy of the „reverse side“ of a tapestry. He sees magic as the dark underside of orthodox Christianity, and magic ritual as „unofficial and transgressive, related in form to its official counterpart, however sharply it may differ in its uses“.³⁶ In *Magic in the Middle Ages* Kieckhefer placed magic in the context of a „clerical underworld“,³⁷ in *Forbidden Rites*, he talks about magic being situated at „the fringes of the clerical elite“.³⁸ But, as the work of Frank Klaassen and Sophie Page has shown, mediaeval magical arts were largely preserved (and not infrequently used) in perfectly orthodox monastic houses.³⁹ In England it was only after the dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII that Latin magical treatises began to find an extra-ecclesiastical audience, and that audience was one driven by equally pietistic motivations.⁴⁰

I will now turn to what Fanger has called the „demonological complex“. Until relatively recently the study of ritual or ceremonial magic in the Middle Ages and Renaissance has largely concerned itself with its vilification by contemporary detractors, or by the apologetic strategies employed by its supporters. This focus on criticism and defence has become so entrenched in the historiography of the subject that the positivity of Christian forms of theurgical practice has largely been neglected.⁴¹ Historians of Renaissance magic, deflected by the historiographical potency of the idea of the ‘Florentine revival’ of neoplatonism of the late fifteenth century have in fact largely neglected the widespread persistence of mediaeval magical arts into the sixteenth and seventeenth century, preferring instead to concentrate on the neoplatonic revaluation of magic as an ‘occult philosophy’ begun by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.⁴² In his 1958 study *Demonic and Spiritual Magic*, for example, D. P.

³³ R. Kieckhefer: *Forbidden Rites*, p. 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ R. Kieckhefer: *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 151–172.

³⁸ R. Kieckhefer: *Forbidden Rites*, p. 4.

³⁹ F. Klaassen: „English Manuscripts of Magic“; S.L. Page: *Magic in the Cloister*.

⁴⁰ One aspect of the appeal of mediaeval magical arts which is worthy of further exploration is the fact that they contained elements of the Catholic mass. If as Eamon Duffy has argued (E. Duffy: *Traditional Religion*) the traditions of the old religion persisted after the Reformation, then further evidence for this could perhaps be found in the circulation of magical manuscripts in the late sixteenth century.

⁴¹ S., however, the essays in C. Fanger (ed.): *Conjuring Spirits*; id. (ed.): *Invoking Angels*; F. Klaassen: *Transformations of Magic* and the valuable comments of Christopher I. Lehrich on ritual magic in the fourth chapter of his book on Agrippa (C.I. Lehrich: *Agrippa's Occult Philosophy*).

⁴² S., for example, F.A. Yates: *Giordano Bruno* and id.: *Occult Philosophy*. For a critique of Yates’s ‘classicizing’ tendency to downplay the persistence of mediaeval forms of magic in the Renaissance s. S. Clucas:

Walker concerned himself primarily with natural magic and magical practices influenced by neoplatonism (focussing primarily – though not exclusively – on the writings of Marsilio Ficino and Tommaso Campanella). He also devoted a lengthy discussion to the condemnation of magic in the sixteenth century – G. F. Pico, Thomas Erastus, Johann Wier, Jean Bodin, Symphorien Champier, Lefèvre d'Étaples and Martin del Rio.⁴³ In a crucial digression at the end of his chapter outlining a „general theory of natural magic“, however, Walker posed the problem of the relationship between magic and religion in a way which suggests further possibilities for the study of ritual magic. In his view natural magic posed a threat to religion in so far as it dispensed with the need for supernatural agency to produce miraculous effects (its logical consequences, Walker argued, was atheism or deism), Demonic magic was unacceptable to Christians because it constituted a „rival religion“. Some magicians, he noted, „attempt[ed] to achieve a non-demonic magic, in order to escape both the Devil and the obvious unorthodoxy of practising a rival religion“. ⁴⁴ That is, a form of magic which claimed to use proper angelic and divine means, rather than operating through demons. Although these kinds of „non-demonic“ magic were (as Walker notes) often condemned by religious critics as if they *were* demonic, the problem remained of how one could distinguish between the marvellous effects claimed by religious practices and „magical operations producing similar quasi-miraculous effects by similar means“. ⁴⁵ For Walker the historical importance of the „connexions between magic and religion“ are internal to religion:

„The historical importance of these connexions [...] is, I think, that they led people to ask questions about religious practices and experiences which would not have otherwise occurred to them; and by approaching religious problems through magic, which was at least partially identical with, or exactly analogous to religion, but which could be treated without reverence or devotion, they were able sometimes to suggest answers which, whether true or not, were new and fruitful.“⁴⁶

If we examine ritual magic as a positive phenomenon which occurs *within* Christianity, that is to say, as a set of practices which deploy Christian means within a Christian horizon of meaning, then we may be able to locate some of the reasons why it was such a widespread phenomenon in Europe in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It is my contention that there has been too much emphasis on the unorthodox nature of ceremonial or ritual magic in the history of magic. Although the religious proscription of magical practices is in itself an important historical phenomenon and vital to an understanding of the historical reality of

„Renaissance magic and Mediaeval Theurgy“, pp. 236–237. On the persistence of mediaeval arts into the Renaissance s. F. Klaassen: „English Manuscripts of Magic“.

⁴³ D.P. Walker: *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, pp. 145–185.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

magic, it could be argued that to focus on the negative reactions of the Catholic and Protestant churches in various parts of Europe is to ignore the fact that many Protestant and Catholic Christians practiced (or took an interest in) magic and did not see it as fundamentally impious in character. In order to come to a fuller understanding of the positive significance of magic for its Christian practitioners we need to appreciate the continuities between magic and Christian profession – the *normative* character of ritual magical practices from the viewpoint of practitioners, as opposed to the transgressive character as it was defined in the demonological literature.⁴⁷ Although the magical arts were often condemned as impious in the middle ages and the Renaissance, their ritual and ceremonial aspects often suggest strong continuities with ‘orthodox’ religious practices (the use of liturgical, psalmic and private prayer, the use of ecclesiastical paraphernalia such as holy water, incense, altar cloths, etc.). In the remainder of this paper I will consider some of these continuities – looking at magical arts in the fifteenth and sixteenth century as ‘precatory events’ utilising a great many elements of orthodox prayer, and examining some of the subject positions (humility, penitence, petition, thanksgiving, etc.) which magical arts such as the *Ars notoria* had in common with orthodox worship. I also want to consider some of the reasons for the charges of impiety which were levelled against the magical arts (or ‘necromancy’, as they were often perjoratively termed) by Protestant and Catholic critics such as Johann Weyer and Martin del Rio.⁴⁸ I would argue that these charges of impiety were motivated by the same theological imperatives as governed the emergence of the category of ‘heresy’ (as much a matter of the internal policing of doctrinal purity as a matter of any substantial differences between ‘magical’ and ‘religious’ practices).⁴⁹

Henricus Cornelius Agrippa and the „damnable“ arts of the Middle Ages

In his *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*, published in 1528 Henricus Cornelius Agrippa author of one of the most influential works of renaissance magic *De occulta philosophia* (1531) inveighed against the art of „theurgy“ or magical communication with spirits. Taking St Augustine’s famous attack on theurgy and demon worship in Book X of the *City of God* as his starting point, Agrippa sought to disabuse those who saw theurgy as a licit practice. „Many thinke that Theurgie is not prohibited“, he says:

⁴⁷ An excellent outline of the history of the negative character of the demonological literature can be found in N.L. Brann: *Trithemius*, pp. 33–84.

⁴⁸ On the ambiguity of the term ‘necromancy’ (and its Latin correlates, *necromantia* or *nigromantia*) in the mediaeval period s. C. Burnett: „Talismans“.

⁴⁹ A similar argument has been advanced by Gerhild Scholz Williams in her study of witchcraft and demonology (G. Scholz Williams: *Discourses of Magic and Witchcraft*, pp. 121–145).

„As who saithe it were governed by good Angels, and by the diuine power, whereas yet oftentimes under the name of God, & the Angels it is bounde with wicked deceits of the Diuels, for not onely with naturall forces, but with certaine solemnities & ceremonies also, wee winne and drawe vnto vs heauenly thinges [...]“.⁵⁰

These „solemnities“ include purifications, oblations and sacrifices. But these things Agrippa cautions can attract „vncleane spirites and the deceauing powers“. The neoplatonist Porphyry had suggested that by means of Theurgy (or „Magick of thinges diuine“) men could be „made more apte to receaue Spirites and Angels“ but denied that it was possible to use it to have an immediate revelation of God himself.⁵¹ Much of Agrippa’s account of Theurgy (and especially his discussion of purification and the citation of Porphyry) closely follows Augustine’s. What he adds is the extension of Augustine’s strictures to the practices of contemporary magicians. „Of this schole“, he concludes:

„are the Arte of Almadel, the Arte Notarie, the Arte of Paule, the Arte of reuelations, and many other thinges of like superstitions, which be so much more damnable, as they appeare to the ignorant more diuine.“⁵²

These mediaeval magical arts, which continued to flourish throughout the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century are attacked at greater length in the preceding chapter which deals with *goeteia* (that is sorcery or black magic) and *necromantia*. These overlapping terms signify for Agrippa a form of „ceremoniall Magicke“ which involves „the entercourse of wicked sprites, made with the rites of destestable curiositie, with vnla[w]ful coniurations, and with defensive prayers, banished & accursed by the decrees of all lawes.“ These kinds of magician, Agrippa says, „at this daie we call Necromancers and Enchaunters“.⁵³ While he identifies necromancy with one of its putative etymological origins – i.e., necromancers are magicians who „invoke deade mens soules“, he also applies it to those who claimed to use children to proclaim oracles and crystallogomancy – i.e., the calling of spirits into a crystal stone

⁵⁰ „Theurgiam vero plerique putant haud illicitam, quasi haec bonis angelis diuinoque numine regatur, cum saepissime tamen sub Dei & Angelorum nominibus malis daemonum fallacijs obstringatur, non solum siquidem naturalibus viribus, sed etiam certis ritibus & ceremonijs coelestes, & per illas diuinas virtutes nobis conciliamus & attrahimus [...]“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura O3 verso; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 59 recto–verso) The English translation here and in following quotations are from the English translation of James Sanford.

⁵¹ „Theurgia siue diuinorum magia plura disputans Porphirius, tandem concludit Theurgicis consecrationibus posse quidem animam hominis idoneam reddi ad susceptionem spirituum & Angelorum ad videndos deos, Reditum vero ad Deum hac arte praestari posse inficiatur omnino.“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura [O4] recto; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 59 verso).

⁵² „Eius itaque scholae sunt, ars Almadel, ars Notoria, ars paulina, ars reuelationum, & eiusmodi superstitionum plura, quae eo ipso sunt perniciosiora, quo apparent imperitis diuiniora.“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura [O4] recto; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 59 verso).

⁵³ „Ceremonialis autem Magiae partes sunt Goetia atque theurgia, Goetia immundorum spirituum commercijs inauspicata nefarie curiositatis ritibus, illicitis carminibus, & deprecamentis concinnata, omnium legum placitis est exterminata & execrata. Huius generis sunt quos necromanticos & maleficos hodie nuncupamus.“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura O2 recto; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 57 verso).

or glass.⁵⁴ He also extended this category to take in the mediaeval magical arts which he criticises in the chapter on theurgy and a few more besides. „At this daye“, he says,

„there are bookes carted aboute with fayned titles vnder the names of Adam, Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Salamon, of Paule also, Honorius, of Cypriane, of Alberte, of Thomas, of Hierome, and one of Yorke.“⁵⁵

Agrippa here is thinking of mediaeval magical arts such as the *Liber Juratus* or *Liber Sacer* (attributed to Honorius of Thebes), or the *Ars notoria* and the *De quatuor annulis* (attributed to Solomon). He also refers to arts which make „the Angelles of God authors of [...] detestable doctrine“ including „bookes written by Raziol and Raphael“.⁵⁶ Here he is thinking of the magical art variously referred to as the *Liber Razielis*, the *Sefer Raziel* or the *Liber institutionis*, which was condemned in the thirteenth century by Pseudo-Albertus Magnus in the eleventh chapter of the *Speculum astronomiae* as „destestable“ (*detestabilis*). These arts, Pseudo-Albertus said, involved unlawful invocations (*invocationes*) and the use of characters which are „exorcised by certain [angelic] names“ which could, he suspected, conceal things which „might be against the honour of the Catholic faith.“⁵⁷ Agrippa too had religious objections to the practices of the „damnable artificers of damnation“ who used „certaine wicked observations enterlaced and graffed in the ceremonies of religion, with many vnknowne names and signes.“⁵⁸ As Agrippa had already pointed out, these magical arts used „defensive prayers“, they also sought to „binde Sprites with the invocation of the names of God“ and to use „a certain virtue of the names of God“ – the so-called *nomina dei*, or „vnknown names“ of God.⁵⁹ But what of this „interlacing“ or „engrafting“ of the ceremonies of magic and of religion? Rather than seeing the necromancer as a „wicked“ and „damnable“ abuser of religion could we not see them as practitioners of a ceremonial magic which they saw as fundamentally Christian in orientation? Agrippa, like Augustine, was concerned about the appeal of theurgy to the Christian community. Agrippa thought magical arts „damnable“

⁵⁴ „Hi sunt ergo qui defunctorum inelamant animas, & illi quos veteres dicebant Epodos qui excantant pueros & in eloquium oraculi eliciunt, & qui daemones Paredros circumferunt [...] & qui, vt dicitur, spiritus pascunt in vitro per quos se prophetare mentiuntur.“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura O2 recto; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 57 verso) On crystallomancy s. C. Whitby: „John Dee“.

⁵⁵ „[H]odie adhuc confictis titulis circumferuntur libri sub nomibus [*sic*: nominibus], Adae, Abelis, Enoch, Abrahae, Salomonis, licite, Pauli, Honorij, Cypriani, Alberti, Thomae, Hieronymi & Eboracensis cuiusdam [...]“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura O2 verso; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 58 recto).

⁵⁶ „Praeterea non homines modo, & sanctos & Patriarchas & Angelos Dei tam execrabilium dogmatum fecerunt autores, sed & libros a Razielle & Raphaele, Adami & Thobiae angelis traditos ostentant [...]“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura O2 verso; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 58 recto).

⁵⁷ Pseudo-Albertus Magnus: *Speculum astronomiae*, pp. 240–241. Zambelli argues that the *Speculum* was composed in the 1260s (ibid., p. 3).

⁵⁸ „ignaris perditissimis perditionum artificibus esse conflatos ex prophanis quibusdam obseruationibus nostrae religionis ceremonijs permixtis, insitisque ignotis multis nominibus & signaculis [...]“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura O2 verso; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 58 recto).

⁵⁹ „Nam alij daemones malos virtute quadam maxime diuinorum nominum adiuratos aduocare & cogere student [...]“ (H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura O2 recto; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 58 recto).

because they appear „to the ignorant [to be] more diuine“. But what seemed to worry the scholarly community was that this putative ‘divinity’ of magical arts was a belief which extended to the learned rather than the ignorant. Who, in the early sixteenth century, was entitled to judge what was, and what only *appeared to be* divine? Might not the category of ‘necromancer’, like that of ‘heretic’, be seen as a product of a negative dynamic *within* Christian communities which sought to establish a notional doctrinal purity or normalcy through the proscription of certain kinds of doctrines and practices?⁶⁰

Later in the sixteenth century the demonologist Johann Weyer (or Wier) in his *De praestigiis daemonum*, like Agrippa, was concerned with the intermingling of magical and Christian ceremonies, which he construed as a malicious abuse:

„It is useful to have warned the careless and the overcredulous, lest they be deceived and misled by the divine names impiously used for this purpose, or by maliciously distorted words of Sacred Scripture – as we see happening right up to the present time; the magicians thus excuse and exonerate themselves on the very basis on which they are most grievously at fault – namely, that they invoke the sacred names, and mingle the word of God in with this diabolical work of theirs, whereby the most sacred name of God is profaned by the dreadful crime and Holy Scripture is defiled by abominable abuse.“⁶¹

While Weyer seeks to define magical practices as a „crime“ and „abuse“, distortion and defilement, it is possible to see here that it was possible (and perhaps unavoidable) that the individuals using magical arts saw them as legitimate precisely *because* of the elements they had in common with ‘orthodox’ worship: the divine names, sacred scripture and prayers. Like the ‘heretics’ who saw their practices not as an „abominable abuse“ but as a purer and more perfect piety, it seems likely that Christian magical practitioners saw those practices as lawful and Christian activities. Rather than seeing magic as something forbidden and separate from religion, they would have viewed it as continuous with other areas of their religious life, such as private prayer and the study of scriptures.

Attacking Johannes Trithemius’s *Steganographia* – which many sixteenth century scholars believed to be a treatise on angel magic rather than cryptography⁶² – Weyer criticises the „adjurations“ or supposed magical prayers which he finds there:

⁶⁰ S. G.K. Waite: *Heresy*.

⁶¹ J. Weyer: *De praestigiis daemonum*, p. 118.

⁶² For recent works which have revealed the purely cryptographical character of Trithemius’s *Steganographia* s. T. Ernst: „Schwarzweisse Magie“, and J.A. Reeds: „Trithemius’s ‘Steganographia’“. Despite these successful decipherments of the avowedly magical third book of the *Steganographia*, Noel Brann persists in seeing a magical dimension to Trithemius’s work (N.L. Brann: *Trithemius*, pp. 243–245).

„The adjurations themselves are scarcely a continuous prayer, but rather a conglomeration, as it were, of spirit names, arranged in the varying manner of the magical art – almost all of them unfamiliar [...] such as Arabic names and the like.⁶³

In a passage which echoes the criticisms of theurgy in Agrippa, Weyer attacks magical arts because of their claims to be Christian operations:

„The vaunted arts of this school are the arts of Almadel, Bulaphia, Artephius and Paul, the art of magical signs, the art of revelation, and similar monstrosities of impiety – completely intolerable, and all the more deadly in that they appear to the unlearned to be the workings of God.“⁶⁴

Although one might have expected some sort of confessional variation between Catholic and Protestant approaches to the question of magic and religious orthodoxy, there is in fact a striking congruence of opinion across the religious divide. Like their Protestant counterparts, Catholic demonologists focussed on what they saw as the impious use of Christian practices. Jean Bodin, for example, in his *De la Demonomanie* (published in 1580) attacked the „fine veil of piety“ displayed by magicians who made use of prayers, fastings, crosses and consecrated hosts and he condemned as „contemptible“ the magical use of „fine orisons, psalms, the name of Jesus Christ in every phrase [...] and] words from the canon of the Mass [...]“.⁶⁵ Martin del Rio in book II of his *Disquisitiones Magicae* (entitled *De magia daemoniaca*) condemned as „impious“ the idea that God would grant the wishes of magicians through his angels because of their use of „prayers and incantations“ on the grounds that it is „entirely blasphemous“ to attribute to magical arts „something which belongs properly to graces freely given“.⁶⁶ Neither Bodin, nor Del Rio, nor the Protestant demonologists, however, give any express opinion on how the use of prayers in magical arts relates to the piety or impiety of believing in the efficacy of non-magical uses of Christian prayer.

The *Ars notoria* considered as a ‘sacrament’

Let us look at one magical art condemned by Agrippa, the *Ars notoria*, to see why – given its avowedly diabolic character – this magical art might have been as popular as the manuscript evidence of the sixteenth century would seem to suggest. The *Ars notoria* promised the practitioner the ability to learn the seven liberal arts in a miraculously short time. By meditatively gazing upon a series of diagrams or figures (*notae*) at astrologically auspicious phases of the moon, praying intently and reciting a series of magical prayers or orations,

⁶³ J. Weyer: *De praestigiis daemonum*, p. 115.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 116. Cf. H.C. Agrippa: *De incertitudine*, signatura [O4] recto; id.: *Of the Vanitie*, p. 59 verso.

⁶⁵ J. Bodin: *De la demonomanie*, pp. 66 and 98. It should be noted that Bodin’s religious confession has been a matter of some debate: although he was involved from an early age with the Carmelite order, it has been argued that he later developed strong Calvinist sympathies. S. J. Bodin: *Colloquium*, pp. xv–xlvi.

⁶⁶ M. Del Rio: *Disquisitiones magicae*, pp. 68–69, 72–73.

which were supposed to be ‘divine names’ comprehensible to spiritual beings, one could learn rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, astronomy and so on. In a sixteenth-century copy of the *Ars notoria* in British Library, *Harleian MS 181*, the art is described as follows:

„The whole mystery, power and efficacy of this most sacred art or operation consists in prayers, between which the names of the angels of the Living God seated in the highest seats are named, recited and invoked; and in the power of their figures and signs. This is because they [i.e. the figures and signs] are filled up and permeated by the invoked and named holy angels of God with fasting and prayer, hope and faith, divine permission and the power of God and the ministration of the holy angels; and through these things this most holy work is brought into effect.“⁶⁷

Like alchemists, who would often distinguish their own truthful alchemical doctrines from the false and deluding doctrines of charlatans and ‘impostors’, it was not uncommon for magical practitioners to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate magical arts. In the *Harleian MS 181 Ars notoria* we find the following distinction between illicit and licit forms of magical art:

„Solomon and many others after him such as Apollonius, Ptolemy and Virgil, constrained and gathered together evil spirits by naming and invoking them; naming their names, I say, so that they would obey them, and satisfy their wishes; offering them various kinds of sacrifices, in order to bind and confine them, which it is wicked, and extremely unwholesome and doubtful to perform. It is believed to be more efficacious – because it is allowed and permitted by God – to call upon him, naming his name, and to call his angels with their names, along with good works, confession, fasting [and] chastity [...].“⁶⁸

Just as Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* had distinguished between *goeteia* (γοητεία) and *mageia* (μαγεία), „The first the most fraudulent of arts, the second [...] firm, faithful and solid“,⁶⁹ the anonymous author of the *Ars notoria* treatise makes a clear distinction between magic involving the constraint or „binding“ of evil spirits and that which operates by means of good works and calling on good angels. Opponents of magic such as Weyer, of course, would claim that the theurgist believed he was dealing with good angels but

⁶⁷ „[T]otum misteriu[m], et tota virtus et efficacia istius sacratissime artis vel operac[i]onis consistit in orac[i]o[n]ibus, inter quas no[m]i[n]ant[ur] recitant[ur], et inuocant[ur] no[m]i[n]a sanctoru[m] angeloru[m] *Dei viui* in supernis sedibus residentiu[m]; et in virtute figuraru[m], et signoru[m] earu[m]. Quia invocatis et no[m]i[n]atis sanctis angelis *Dei* cu[m] *ieiunio et oratione, spe et fide*, diuina permissione et virtute *Dei*, et sanctoru[m] angeloru[m] administrac[i]one imbuu[n]tur et replent[ur]; et per eos istud opus sanctissimu[m] perducit[ur] ad effectu[m].“ (*Ars notoria, Harleian MS 181*, folio 56 verso). For more on this manuscript s. S. Clucas: „Renaissance magic and Mediaeval Theurgy“, pp. 241–245, and F. Klaassen: *Transformations of Magic*, pp. 165–167.

⁶⁸ „*Salomoni*, et post eu[m] pluribus alijs, sicut *Appollonio, Ptholomeo*, et *Virgilio* constringere malignos sp[iritu]s, et congregare no[m]i[n]ando, et invocando eos; no[m]i[n]ando dico no[m]i[n]a eoru[m], vt obedirent eis; et satisfacerent voluntatibus eoru[m]; vt possent eos ligare, et includere, offerendo eis sacrificia diuersimoda quod malu[m] est, et grauissimu[m], et dubiu[m] operari. Multo enim fortius est credendu[m], q[uod] permissum sit a Deo, et datu[m], rogare eu[m] nominando nomen eius, et rogare sanctos angelos suos, no[m]i[n]ando eoru[m] no[m]i[n]a cu[m] bonis operibus, cu[m] confessione, cu[m] *ieiunio*, et *castitate* [...].“ (*Ars notoria, Harleian MS 181*, folio 57 recto).

⁶⁹ G.P. della Mirandola: *Oratio de Hominis Dignitate*, pp. 26–27.

was actually deceived by evil angels (as Augustine had argued in his rejection of Porphyrian theurgy in Book VIII of the *City of God*). The question of the legitimacy of magical arts which operated by means of ‘contracts’ or ‘bonds’ with spirits which compelled them to do the operator’s bidding in the name of God is also an ambiguous one. There was a long tradition of priests claiming divine warrant in instances of demonic possession, for example, where prayers would be used to command demons to leave the body of the possessed. As we have already suggested, the use of the verb *exorcizare* to signify exorcism, adjuration and conjuration in mediaeval Latin, and the frequent appearance of this verb in magical treatises suggests subterranean links between ‘orthodox’ (if extraordinary) practices and magical practices even in the more marginal case of arts which practice by constraint and compulsion rather than humility and petition. The *Ars notoria*, however, falls squarely in the latter category, and the complex series of prayers which form its fabric continually stress the submission of the practitioner’s will to divine command. „Instruct me o Lord, and make me perfect in wisdom and knowledge [...] humbly I implore, demand, solicit and beg you o Lord [...]“.⁷⁰ Humility and divine permission are the keynotes of the prayers:

„Through your most holy mercy, I beseech this gift of you, although I am unworthy, grant it to me, and confirm and corroborate it in my mind“.⁷¹

„O wisdom and fount of all wisdom; fill me today with the perfect knowledge of this art for which I labour, and invoke your holy name Lord, holy father direct my senses, increase my memory, give me knowledge and wisdom, by your most holy name“.⁷²

„Complete, restore and cure my intellect so that I may glorify you with all the works of my thoughts and words“.⁷³

The art also includes traditional prayers and liturgical texts, such as the seven penitential psalms, the Credo and the Lord’s prayer.⁷⁴ It is hard to see these as anything other than highly conventional prayers of petition and praise, such as any private devotant might use in their oratory in the sixteenth century. The two problems posed by the art were doubtless the presence of the *notae* or figures whose use – together with invocations and suffumigations – Pseudo-Albertus had condemned in chapter 11 of his *Speculum astronomiae* as „abominable“ (*abominabilis*), and the presence of what Pseudo-Albertus called the „names of the unknown

⁷⁰ „Tu Domine instrue me, et perfice in scientia et sapientia [...] Te Domine suppliciter imploro, deosco, flagito, et supplico [...]“ (*Ars notoria*, Harleian MS 181, folio 48 recto).

⁷¹ „[P]er tua[m] sanctissima[m] misericordia[m] istud donum a te peto, qua[m]vis indignus sum, mihi concedas, et in mente[m] mea[m] confirma et corrobora.“ (Ibid., folio 50 recto–verso).

⁷² „O sapientia, et fons totius sapientiae; comple in me hodie perfectam scientia[m] istius artis, pro quo laboro, et inuoco nomen sanctu[m] tuu[m] Domine sancte pater, vt sensus meos dirigas, et memoriam mea[m] augeas, scientia[m] et sapientia[m] mihi tribuas; per sanctissimu[m] nomen tuu[m] [...]“ (Ibid., folio 59 recto).

⁷³ „comple, instaura, sana intellectum meum, vt glorificem te, per omnia opera cogitationum mearu[m] et verboru[m] meoru[m]“ (Ibid., folio 18 verso).

⁷⁴ Ibid., folio 19 recto–verso.

language“ (*ignotae linguae nominibus*).⁷⁵ These names which appear (in part) to be corrupted Greek, Hebrew and Arabic words for God, divine attributes or names of spiritual beings are, admittedly, difficult for the modern observer to view without derision: „Helyschemaht scemoht Hazaram, Sanduhc, Theon, Hazmaras, Iazaram Heloman [...]“ and so on. Nonetheless, we must remember that some scholars in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries believed in the possibility of recovering a lost, perfect language – the language of Adam which he shared with the angels.⁷⁶ While to Thorndike these „magical orations“ were simply „gibberish“,⁷⁷ we could imagine a practitioner for whom these seemingly nonsensical utterances were the preserved remnants of a divine language comprehensible to spiritual beings. Hence the seemingly absurd statement of Pico in his *Conclusiones magicae* that „words that mean nothing are more powerful in magic than words which mean something.“ He believed this because he also believed that „Every word has power in magic in so far as it is shaped by the voice of God.“ The only significant words which he allowed to have a place in magic were „Hebrew names or those closely derived from Hebrew“.⁷⁸ In a situation where a magical practitioner believed that these orations were meaningless to men but comprehensible to God, or believed them to be a form of ur-Hebrew or Chaldean, these apparently ‘pagan’ or ‘barbarous’ admixtures to conventional worship could be seen in a Christian light.

Such ideas were not, of course, universally accepted in the sixteenth century – while university-trained scholars such as John Dee and Thomas Allen were renowned for their interest in mediaeval magical arts, others were rather more sceptical about this intellectual trend. In his *Theoria analytica* of 1575 Everard Digby, Master of Arts and Fellow of St Johns College Cambridge, launched an attack on occult philosophical tenets of all kinds. In his book which – as its title page announces – sought to „remove all obscurities, mysteries and arcane principles“ from philosophy and the other disciplines, Digby took pains to attack what he saw as the „unscientific“ (in the sense of un-Aristotelian) attitudes towards language and signification which he felt had been holding undue sway over many of his learned contemporaries. „There are many books written“, Digby wrote,

⁷⁵ *The Speculum Astronomiae and its enigma*, p. 241.

⁷⁶ J.J. Bono: *The Word of God*, pp. 123–166.

⁷⁷ L. Thorndike: *History of Magic*, vol. 2, p. 286.

⁷⁸ G.P. della Mirandola: *Conclusiones*, pp. 500–501.

„which deal with the power and virtue of characters and words. The foremost authors of these, I mean the Cabalists, Talmudists and Pythagoreans, maintain that marvellous effects ensue from some hidden power or the utterance of some mystical word: however, there are many extant volumes concerning characters and words which are nothing short of magical: such as the *Liber de officiis spirituum*, *De morte animae*, *De arte notoria*, and others which without any signification or concept of nature produce the greatest effects of this kind. The efficacy of bare words is maintained by the author Cornelius Agrippa, who in the sixty-ninth chapter of the first book of *De occulta philosophia*, teaches that names and words have so much power in them that spirits are attracted, raised and restrained by them.⁷⁹ Pico della Mirandola writes about these kind of [magical words] in his *900 theses* as follows: meaningless words, have more power in magic than words which mean something. Following these authorities The most learned men of our age, who are expert in all the sciences and languages, can often be heard saying: Rauarone, Hur, Asmobias, Mebarke, Geballa, Olune etc Neither these, nor any other magical utterance represents any meaningful idea to listeners, whether in English, or Latin, or Hebrew, or Greek, Arabic or Syrian.“⁸⁰

Digby also attacked Johannes Trithemius's *Steganographia*, the mystical interpretation of Hieroglyphs, the Cabala, and the belief in the efficacy of magical characters. Digby saw these doctrines as „empty and absurd loquacity“, as opposed to the solid and fruitful language of logical demonstration which was the only true foundation of knowledge. For Digby the truly scientific use of language involves the definition of meanings, placing these definitions in order, and connecting them (by means of syllogism) to produce truly scientific conclusions. For Digby signs must refer to natural things and be meaningful in a logical sense. Such ‘rationalistic’ views, however, were not yet a dominant trend – as the polemical tenor of Digby's attacks suggest, and the sixteenth century continued to cherish these kinds of beliefs about the efficacious properties of magical words and signs.

In another sixteenth-century manuscript of the *Ars notoria* – a facing-page Latin and English translation in the Bodleian library⁸¹ – we can see how such beliefs came to be held. In a lengthy gloss on the art attributed to Apollonius („The Glosse of Appollonius vpon the former

⁷⁹ S. H.C. Agrippa: *De occulta philosophia*, liber I, caput 59, pp. 231–232: „De sermone atque virtutibus verborum“.

⁸⁰ „Multi enim sunt libri conscripti de characteribus & vocibus earumque vi & virtute. Quorum primi etsi autores, Cabalistsae scilicet, Thalmudici, Pythagorici, per intimam quandam virtutem ac mysticam talium vocum prononciationem, ad effectus mirabile contendunt: tamen multa extant per characteres & voces conscripta volumina, quae mere magica sunt: vt liber de Officijs spirituum, de Morte animae, de Arte Notoria, alijsque qui sine omni significatione notioneque naturae summos in suo genere producunt effectus. Nudis vocibus tantam inesse efficiatiam, autor est Cornelius Agrippa, qui in libro primo de occulta Philosophia Capitulo sexagesimo nonno, docet nominibus & verbis tantam vim in esse, vt eisdem spiritus alliciantur, excitentur, reprimantur. Huiusmodi quidam in nonaginta conclusionibus suis scribit Pycus Mirandula in hunc modum: Nonsignificatiuae voces, plus possunt in magia quam significatiuae. Huic autoritati accedit quod saepe audiui doctissimos nostrae aetatis, omniumque pene Scientiarum & Linguarum peritissimos dictitasse: Rauarone, Hur, Asmobias, Mebarke, Geballa, Olune &c nec Anglicè, nec Latinè, nec Hebraicè, nec Graecè, Arabicè, aut Syrice, nec vero quicquam aliarum dictionum magicarum, notionem aliquam significatiuam audienti repraesentare.“ (E. Digby: *Theoria Analytica*, pp. 384–385).

⁸¹ *Ars notoria*, *Ashmole MS 1515 folio*, foliis 4 recto–10 recto.

Treatise called *Ars Notoria* or *Ars Memoratiua* &c.⁸²), we find the following transmission history:

„And although in ye beginning ye most hie god <did> make <the first man> [...] Lord & principall & did p[er]fectly Illustratt him w[i]th all wisdom, yet we finde [tha]t not only to him, but also to many other [...] he hath ministred his grace and knowledge abundantly amongst w[hi]ch we specially finde out one, [tha]t is to say Salomon, w[hi]ch the most hie hath elected to powr forth in him his wisdom, knowledge & grace. / And so to him he sent downe his Angell *Phanphilus* w[i]th certaine golden tables, wherin were described certen names of holy Angells w[i]th *Chaldaean Greeke & hebreu* orations & likewise w[i]th those orations were pictured certen figures diu[er]slye drawne, w[hi]ch the said Angell carried in those golden tables & putt vpon the Altar of the Temple w[hi]ch Salomon had erected to the Lord, & he p[re]sented yt to the kinge saying & showing of those pray[er]s what they did signifie: & of the figures w[ha]t they did portend, & did declare yt by elements as in ye beginning teaching the same maner, terme & continency of working.“⁸³

The problem of the magical orations and the *notae* or figures (i.e. the claim that they were extraneous and impious additions to orthodox Christian prayer) is thus resolved. These elements are not only believed to be of venerable antiquity (written in the ancient languages of Greek, Chaldean, and Hebrew) but they are also seen as having been delivered, or revealed, by angels to Solomon. They could therefore be construed as possessing the character of a prophetic vision. Thus one of the prayers of the *Ars notoria* is described by Apollonius as „a certain sacramental & ineffable oration, w[hi]ch cannot be expounded by eny humayn sense“,⁸⁴ while in a beautiful fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Ars notoria* the art itself is described as an „inestimable sacrament“ (*sacramentum inestimabile*) and a „great mystery“ (*magnum misterium*).⁸⁵ As Apollonius says in his gloss on the *Ars notoria*:

„Therefore this most divine Arte, w[hi]ch is called of *Salomon Art notarie* & in other places *Art memoratiue* conteyneth in it a most holy mistery, for in it is no other thing specified, but Invocations of most holy orations among w[hi]ch are named the names of holy Angells resident before the most hie god & in invocating the divine names of god are adored.“⁸⁶

While the idea of a mediaeval magical art being seen as a ‘sacrament’ may seem a shocking statement to many people today (especially to practising Christians), I would argue that our ‘shock’ has more to do with our current understanding of the antithetical relationship between magic and orthodox religion than it has to do with the piety or impiety of magical practices in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Our understanding of this antithetical relationship

⁸² Ibid., foliis 23 recto–40 verso.

⁸³ Ibid., folio 23 recto.

⁸⁴ Ibid., folio 24 recto.

⁸⁵ *Ars notoria*, Bodley MS 951, folio 1 verso. On the use of the term ‘sacrament’ in relation to the *Ars notoria* s. J. Véronèse: *L’ars notoria*, vol. 1, pp. 258–261, and J. Véronèse: „Medieval Ritual“, p. 56. Cf. C. Fanger (ed.): *Invoking Angels*, pp. 17–18.

⁸⁶ *Ars notoria*, Ashmole MS 1515 folio, folio 23 recto.

has, I believe, been shaped by our reading of the demonologists and opponents of magical arts rather than the views of their practitioners.⁸⁷ I would argue that many of the practitioners of these magical arts saw them as continuous with their orthodox devotions rather than as divergent from them. The question of the orthodoxy of any particular magical art is no different than the question of the orthodoxy of any particular set of religious beliefs. Those who practiced these magical arts doubtless saw them as continuous with their religious faith and not as an excursion outside of it. A genuine historiographical understanding of magical arts in the late middle ages and Renaissance will not be possible until we cease to accept the dominant binary terms of the critics of magic, and instead try to identify the shared assumptions behind magical arts and other kinds of ‘sacraments’ or religious practices.

⁸⁷ On this point see the useful remarks of Richard Kieckhefer in id.: *Forbidden Rites*, pp. 1–21 (esp. 10–13).

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