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DAVIES, Owen (ed.) (2023). ***The Oxford History of Witchcraft and Magic*****.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 325 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-288405-3.

Academic studies on magic and witchcraft cannot be said to be currently rare. Be it from the perspective of religious studies, history of art and iconography, contemporary media and political studies, magic has been recognized and a near-omnipresent and powerfully structuring aspect of western culture. *The Oxford History of Witchcraft and Magic* continues this expanding narrative by bringing together nine chapters by eight different authors, each focused on a different aspect of these complex historical objects.

While this work is noticeable in many respects, the first which should be mentioned is that, rather than a loose collection of chapters on different aspects of magic practice, what this offers is a coherent and systematic narrative of magic and its perception. Thus, the first chapter, "Magic in the Ancient World" by Peter Maxwell-Stuart, has probably one of the most essential jobs in this work by establishing the construction of the very concept of magic in the antient world. It would be fair to call this a methodological chapter due to its clear discussion of the relative value of concepts such as "magic", "religion" and "science" (a necessity in any academic magic study). With the inevitable uncertainties and nomenclature ambiguities, this chapter tracks a group of ideas which we may empirically associate with magic throughout the cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Judaism, Greece and finally Rome, with constant efforts of cultural contextualization and identification of continuities.

Given its broad scope and difficult task, should we wish to be contentious about it, one could mention that Maxwell-Stuart might, on occasion, break some of his own definitions and paraments for the identification of magic. However, this is likely not so much his fault as the very nature of the beast he is wrestling with. Joining Maxwell-Stuart in his honest and self-aware approach to magic, it should be stated that this chapter fulfills its purpose with competence and efficiency.

Chapter two, "Medieval Magic" by Sophie Page, picks up the narrative by addressing the early Christianization of Europe, the ambiguities of supernatural power in Christianity and the evolving definitions of magic. This leads headfirst into the construction of European learned magic in the medieval period and the Renaissance, and the intellectual and theological conflicts surrounding this. Along the way, Page offers a number of insights which are not often noted by scholars, such as the relation between the construction

of magic and the eleventh century heresies of the Cathars and Waldensians, making its own categorization as a heresy a result of specific medieval and early modern discourses.

Such argumentation is continued in chapter three, "The Demonologists" by James Sharpe. This chapter opens with a clear discussion of the complexity and vastness of the very discipline of demonology and an explicit and open foray into witchcraft itself (already introduced by Page). From here, Sharp follows a fairly logical exposition of the ideas surrounding witchcraft, the Devil, the witches' Sabbat and the diabolical pact through various theologians and demonological treatises, offering clear and well formulated criticisms on their perceived influence and their continuators, with the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) taking somewhat of a center stage. In this, a criticism which can be placed on this chapter, is that this might be excessively focused on Protestant discourse, and in particular on the English side of this, which the author himself admits being of limited influence on the rest of Europe.

Chapter four, "The Witch Trials" by Rita Voltmer, sidesteps the theological and demonological debate and largely focusses on the various dynamics, distinctions, and variations present in, and extractable from, documents we may categorize as "witch trials" in the early modern period. This covers the existence of distinct legal codes, differences between secular and inquisitorial courts and underlaying cultural variations on the notion of witchcraft. It would be fair to also categorize this as a methodological chapter, as one of its central purposes seems to be to lay down the great variety of difficulties, blindsides and pitfalls any contemporary historian might struggle with when dealing with witchcraft trial documentation. A truly valuable piece of writing that should feature in any graduate or post-graduate syllabus on the matter.

Chapter five, "The Witch and the Magician in European Art" by Charles Zika, steps back onto the demonological construction of witchcraft beliefs, but looks at these from the perspective of pictorial representation, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Far from a detour of this work's central narrative, Zika efficiently points out how artistic representations of witchcraft and magic were not only influenced by theological and demonological discourses, but themselves contributed to the construction, perpetuation and dissemination of these, be it among theologically informed audiences or not.

"Popular Magic" is addressed in chapter six by the editor of this work, Owen Davies. Starting from a legal perspective, Davies smoothly shifts the narrative from witchcraft as an intellectual construction of debatable existence, into that of the actual magic early modern individuals were known to practice. Addressed here is the common use of magic as counter-witchcraft,

which, in turn, could itself be prosecuted as witchcraft or diabolical magic by legal authorities. Besides this, a vast array of magic practices are described (with somewhat of an overfocus on Great Britain), which in turn allows for the introduction of the grimoires, or local magic literature.

The "literary turn" introduced in chapter six is eventually capitalized in chapter seven, also written by Davies and focused on "The Rise of Modern Magic". By drawing from the previous discussions on learned magic, adding the Enlightenment and Christian mysticism (on which he might dally a bit too long), and the publication boom of occult-themed books, Davies arrives at contemporary magic. From here he presents the known and well-established genealogy of magic ideas and orders, from the masonic-inspired organizations, to spiritualism, the Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley and contemporary witchcraft. This is an efficient summary of this historical process, by which this chapter could also easily fit any graduate syllabus on the subject

Chapter eight, "Witchcraft and Magic in the Age of Anthropology" by Robert J. Wallis, returns to the historical construction of magic and witchcraft, but focuses on post-eighteenth century academic and anthropological culture. Once again this can be looked at as a valuable and concise methodological chapter, identifying the imperialist, ethno-, Christian- and Eurocentric positions of several of the founders of anthropology itself. Following this line, the chapter eventually leads to contemporary postmodern approaches to magic and witchcraft, where several currently active scholars are questioning the very validity or usefulness of the separation between observer and observed. Far from being a judgmental or validating chapter, Wallis effectively presents what is still an under-construction "state of the art".

Closing this work, Willem de Blécourt discusses "Witches on Screen" in chapter nine. While this opens with some bothersome oversimplifications on historical witchcraft (which, given Blécourts's body of work, are likely due editorial necessity), it eventually shifts to an informed tracking of contemporary portrayal of witches and witchcraft throughout various film and media. While undoubtedly efficient and clear in its purpose, be it as a standalone piece and as the closer of the current work, this chapter feels, at times, too narrow. Outside of English and American film and television portrayals (arguably, the most influential of the present age), barely any other media environment is analyzed.

Stepping back and looking upon *The Oxford History of Witchcraft and Magic* as a whole, there is an overarching criticism which can be leveled at the entire volume. Admittedly, this is, perhaps, a regional gripe of little macroscopic

consequence, but a legitimate one nonetheless. Starting at the very opening of this work, Davies acknowledges some of the awkwardness of talking about magic and witchcraft beliefs in countries which were not geopolitical realities before the nineteenth century, such as Germany and Italy. Moreover, several times in this work there is an acknowledgement of how the conception of magic and witchcraft and, consequently, their persecution, is dependent on regional legal codes and cultural idiosyncrasies. By and large, all authors are sensitive to these historical details when dealing with their areas of expertise, but unfortunately such is not the case when addressing other geographical areas, such as Spain/Iberia (non-avoidable when discussing the very construction of medieval learned magic). While, when dealing with the medieval and early modern period, speaking of 'Spain' is not necessarily an error – as this noun, during these periods, refers to the Iberian Peninsula as a whole –, when 'Spain' is mentioned side-by-side with 'Portugal' (as is often the case) what is implied is the geopolitical territory of the contemporary country called Spain; a country which did not exist before 1714.

Besides a historical anachronism, this seems to suggest a somewhat culturally, intellectually, politically and legally homogenous Spanish territory, instead of one which more closely resembled a multipolar tapestry of political and legal jurisdictions negotiated between several Iberian cultures. This was a territory where tribunals constantly struggled and competed over jurisdiction rights and where, between Portugal, Castile and Aragon, there were about fifteen different branches of the Inquisition, each with their own particularities and sometimes distinct legal codes. So, if while discussing the medieval and modern period, most historians have the tact of, for example, distinguishing between England, Wales and Scotland, perhaps the same courtesy could be extended to Leon, Castile, Aragon, Galicia or the many other politically or culturally distinct territories which have made up the Iberian Peninsula over the past thousand years.

Iberian frustrations aside, one could also say that more in-dept studies do exist on all the topics covered by this work. However, this is fully aware of that, as, concluding the volume, it also offers an extensive list of "Further Reading" (a valuable detail which should be more common in such volumes). Independently of this, it needs to be underlined that this work not only presents a surprisingly coherent overview and functional narrative of the history of magic and witchcraft, but its chapters are not simple republications of established information, and each, in its own way, offers something new to the current historiography of magic. While most experts will not be too surprised by most of the information contained here, this is an extremely well-balan-

ced and well-structured volume which can be taken as a reliable and in-dept academic introduction to the complex history of magic and witchcraft, be it inside or outside academia.

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