Brian P. Copenhaver

Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 612. Hb, \$125.

Magic in Western Culture can be roughly divided into three parts. The book opens with a historiographical survey that starts with J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1890) and ends with the work done by D. P. Walker and Frances Yates at the Warburg Institute, where the author himself did his postdoctoral work in the 1970s (*The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* [London: Routledge, 1972]) (Yates's work—long since debunked—on Hermeticism and the Rosicrucian Enlightenment is a target of Copenhaver's). This book, then, is not only positioned as the result of nearly fifty years of scholarly study but also implicitly as the end product and culmination of more than a century of scholarship in the field. (The conclusion further contrasts *Magic in Western Culture* with E. E. Evans-Pritchard's canonical anthropological study of magic and sorcery among the Azande. See *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* [Oxford Clarendon Press, 1937]).

Our second stop is a study of Marsilio Ficino's *Three Books on Life* (1489) to which about half the book is devoted. Copenhaver's analysis of this text shows how important both philology and philosophy were to magic, at least in Ficino's version of it. The authority of classical authors explains why Ficino and his contemporaries took reports of strange creatures such as the ship-stopper (a small fish that was said to, well, stop ships by attaching itself to the hull) seriously, and which, in turn, legitimated magical explanations for these puzzling phenomena. Ficino was also a philosopher and the greatest Hellenist of his generation, and the *Three Books on Life* unsurprisingly borrowed a great deal from the Greek Neoplatonists of late antiquity, in particular Plotinus. Copenhaver shows how Ficino reworked Plotinus's thought, devaluing the role of "gods" or demons and emphasizing instead both natural magic and its practical, medical purposes. (The versatile Ficino was also a priest and a physician.) To legitimate magic and shield it from the attacks of Augustine, Ficino drew on the writings of Aquinas and also grounded magic on "occult" (hidden) qualities inherent in objects, part of a Scholastic and Aristotelian theory of forms.

The final section, in a series of prodigiously long chapters, then takes us from Ficino to the Enlightenment (ending with Kant). The main argument here is that the decline of magic can be attributed partly to natural magic being subsumed (by Francis Bacon and others) into scientific projects, but—much more importantly—to the decline of the Aristotelian philosophy that underpinned magic. Ironically, some of the period's most famous *magi* contributed to the decline of Aristotelianism (e.g. Giordano Bruno's support for atomism). The

new science also won supporters by its use of analogies and visual representations. Magic may have survived in Isaac Newton's work (Leibniz, as is well-known, described gravity as an occult quality), but his followers were much too embarrassed to bring Newton's occult interests to the world's attention (Some Jesuits are to be found in the book, especially in this last section; a few passing references are made to Martin Delrio, Athanasius Kircher, and Francisco Suárez).

It is hard to disagree with these arguments, though I doubt whether the decline of magic can be explained in solely philosophical terms. Magic also declined because textual authority became ever less important. Yet my principal criticism of the book has to do with the way it was written. Indeed, the book in some ways rather mirrors its magical subject matter. Its central argument—that magic was complex, rather than the product of an early stage in human evolution—is reflected in its at times equally complex and opaque exposition of magical theory. Just as magical practices did not deliver results, this book clearly does not offer the survey “from Antiquity to the Enlightenment” promised by the subtitle (“from Ficino to the Enlightenment” would have been more accurate). Overly descriptive and with little sign posting to guide the reader, it is often unclear how what is discussed fits into the book's larger argument or where the reader will be taken next. In the last section, in particular, the book jumps from one philosopher or early scientist to the next, back in forth across time. Copenhaver may have sensed these problems himself—at least he provides a textbox (444) that summarizes his argument in the book's final chapter. (The reader may wish to read it before attempting to tackle the remainder of the book.) Their cause is also fairly evident: *Magic in Western Culture* really is patchwork assembled from Copenhaver's many earlier books and articles on the subject, “re-examined, corrected, revised, synthesized, and reorganised” to be sure but, sadly, neither clearly rewritten or introduced.

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