Book Reviews


It is a pleasure to review this remarkable book for many reasons. It is a compendious study surveying a massive range and variety of material (a considerable portion of which is only extant in manuscript); it is a reference work which I have already found to be invaluable in the short period that I have owned it; it offers a useful contribution to the intellectual history of the period and area under discussion; and most gratifyingly, given its length and density, it is lucid and readable throughout.

The book is an overview of the shifting relations between astrology, divination and magic—semantic fields that are overlapping, but not coterminous—between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The arc of its narrative leads from the Christian reception of the Latin translations of Arabic astrological and magical works in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the medieval birth of the witch hunts. Boudet's work is set solidly on the foundation of recent secondary works including important dissertations in a variety of languages, and it also demonstrates his intimate familiarity with medieval manuscripts. However the virtue of the book lies not only in its magisterial synthesis of these materials, but in something larger. Boudet is actually one of the first scholars in this field in a position to construct a history of the medieval traditions of intellectual magic in a way that takes into account not only excellent new work on manuscript sources of astrology and image magic, but also medieval ritual magic, on which there has been a spate of new research only in the past decade or so, much of it in France, no small portion contributed by Boudet himself. For me, it is the more exciting to read this book because I know that ten years ago, it would not even have been possible to write it.

Boudet describes his "triple methodological objective" as follows: '1. To try as much as possible to decompartmentalize research by multiplying angles of attack and bringing together all types of sources; 2. To study astrology, divination and magic in themselves, by privileging primary source documents, and not only regarding them from the exterior and doctrinal angle of "superstition"; 3. To keep a critical and open eye, not taking the normative Christianocentric viewpoint at face value, and not interpreting the set of available data according to a teleological perspective, such as the triumph of reason, or the birth of the modern State' (p. 24). If these targets seem somewhat idealistic, in practice they are gracefully achieved, partly because Boudet really does have acquaintance with virtually all types of sources, and is equally interested in all of them, partly because of his care and caution with his materials. Boudet has given roughly equal attention to the proliferation of magical discourses in the period under discussion and the discourses that endeavored to categorize and limit it, and the result is an elegant synthesis of different
kinds of historical data which brings together a diverse array of materials but still keeps a strong narrative line.

The book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the impact of the Arabic-Latin translations and the quest for a norm in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the second with the expansion, proliferation and repression of astrological and magical texts and practices in the fourteenth and fifteenth. Part I contains chapters which treat in turn astrology and its renewal, the varieties of divination in use during this period (to a greater or lesser extent legitimated by their relation to astrology), the transformations of magic (concerning the birth of the idea of natural magic and its sources), magic and astrology in the courts (especially focusing on Frederick II and Alphonse the Wise), and the quest for a juridical and theological norm, an important chapter dealing with the development of the views of William of Auvergne, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon, and separately, but relatedly, the role of magic in canon law and the condemnations of 1270, 1277 and 1290.

Part II begins with a chapter on the expanding sociocultural and political promotion of astrology at the end of the middle ages, and moves on in the following chapter to construct a broad picture of learned magic under development in this period—an overview which is the best of its kind I have ever read. The final chapter in part II concerns the medieval birth of the witch hunts. The book’s conclusion cuts to a discussion of some of the most sympathetic author magicians to emerge at the turn of the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino and Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples—a move which brings the author magicians into the same sociocultural field of view as the witch hunts, and allows the book to close with a graceful “zoom out”, gesturing at medieval magic as our own inheritance (however little we may actually have known about it before we read Boudet’s book).

There follow several appendices, editions and translations of texts which have come under discussion repeatedly in the volume, including an edition of an extract from Trithemius Antipalus Maleficiorum (1508), Book I, chapter 3, which annotates every text of condemned magic mentioned by Trithemius and, where known, lists the manuscripts and editions known to contain it. For the interested medievalist, this appendix alone is worth the price of the book. A sequence of high quality colour images of manuscript illuminations follows the appendices.

If I have any complaint to make about this useful volume, it is that the “selective bibliography” is rather too selective, comprising less than ten of the book’s six hundred twenty four pages. I spent some time trying to figure out the logic of the selection but without success: why, for example, is David Pingree’s edition of Picatrix omitted, although it is mentioned in the footnotes? Other works by Pingree are included. Has the author chosen to omit editions of primary sources? (And if so why? It would have been most useful). There are other primary source editions occurring in the footnotes that seem to be missing from the bibliography (for example Falgairolle’s Envoûtement en Gévaudan en l’année 1347) but also some editions seem to be included (for example Kieckhefer’s Forbidden Rites—the presence of which is certainly amply justified by the number of times it is referenced; but Picatrix is also referenced frequently). The absence of a more comprehensive bibliography is all the more disappointing because the footnotes contain such a wealth of material, and one of the book’s major uses will surely be as a bibliographical reference, so it is a pity there is no clearer guide to it. A list of manuscripts would have been helpful too, but there is none, beyond what is found in the footnotes to the Trithemius edition.