

Frank Klaassen. *The Transformations of Magic: Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013. x + 280 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-05626-5. \$69.95.

One of the key questions in the history of European “learned magic” in recent decades has concerned the putative novelty of the works produced by Renaissance magi. Did scholar-magicians like Ficino, Agrippa, and Dee constitute a radical break from the magical practices of the Middle Ages, or is the *longue durée* that binds them more salient? The notion that the humanist magicians constituted a distinct break with the past has long been popular among Renaissance scholars, especially in the wake of Frances Yates’ now half a century old work. Along with a broader reevaluation and rejection of the Yates paradigm, however, scholars have come to ask how much of this novelty was really in the eye of the beholder – a product of selection and confirmation biases on the part of scholars who needed to see the Renaissance as an age of novelty, progressive thought, modern values, and philosophical sophistication, contrasted with the “dark ages” and its superstitious “dirty magic.”<sup>1</sup>

Frank Klaassen belongs to a cast of historians who not only argue that the novelty of Renaissance magic is greatly overblown, but proceed to excavate the manuscript traditions that link medieval and early modern magic through meticulous archival research. *The Transformations of Magic* presents Klaassen’s work in monograph form for the first time. The book is published with Pennsylvania State University Press’s “Magic in History” series, where it stands in good company with other titles by key scholars in this revisionist current, including Claire Fanger, Richard Kieckhefer, Benedek Láng and others.

One of the things to commend this useful book is its clearly articulated and consistently executed methodology. Instead of focusing strictly on the substantial content of medieval and early modern magical books and manuscripts, Klaassen approaches them from a forensic angle, asking whether we can learn something new from considering the physical manuscripts themselves: that is, “their mise-en-page, their organization, the works with which they were bound together, and how they were recorded in inventories and catalogues.” (iv) Paying attention to these material details allows Klaassen

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 80–81.

to get at the editorial decisions that were made by scribes, and assess their role in shaping the transmission and gradual reinterpretation of the library of magic texts. Mildly quantitative analyses of what kinds of texts were bound together with each other at various times also offer important clues to understanding the subtle shift in perceptions of magic (70–75). In fact, it is precisely this sort of analysis that makes it possible for Klaassen to formulate one of the big questions that the book tries to answer: Why is it that, numerically speaking, the class of texts known as “image magic” went into decline around the 16th century, while the class of “ritual magic” persisted? Moreover, why did image magical texts stop being transmitted separately and instead become embedded in collections primarily concerned with ritual magic?

The distinction between image magic and ritual magic is thus central to the book’s project. By image magic, Klaassen (and others with him) means practices that draw upon astrological images and talismans for effecting changes in the natural world, whether related to medicine and healing or the acquisition of wealth and material success. Drawing on a philosophical framework lifted from late Neoplatonism, this type of “magic” (typically, these texts do not themselves use this term) would commonly be seen as a form of *magia naturalis* related more to disciplines such as natural philosophy and medicine than to theology and religion. In terms of causal mechanisms, the images were thought to be effective by correspondences and *qualitates occultae* rather than the mediation of spirits. By contrast, “ritual magic” denotes magical operations that explicitly deal with the summoning of angels, demons, or other spirit beings, presenting techniques for binding, questioning, and entering into conversation with them, or receiving visions, prophecies, and higher knowledge.

As Klaassen shows, these two traditions were almost completely distinct throughout the Middle Ages, being transmitted in separate streams. In seeking answers for why they transformed and eventually merged, Klaassen moves from his forensic analysis of manuscripts to what is essentially a “problem history” of medieval and early modern magic.<sup>2</sup> The transformations of the two magical text traditions – both in terms of content and patterns of transmission – are linked to quite specific dilemmas faced by authors, scribes and practitioners. Through a clever narrative strategy, Klaassen introduces these problems by focusing on two concrete practitioners: an unknown apothecary worried about his soul after acquiring wealth through the use of image magic, and the monk

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<sup>2</sup> On problem history, see Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

and magician John of Morigny, the author of the 14th century *Liber florum celestis doctrinae* and its largely autobiographical prologue, *Liber visionum*.

The two dilemmas are succinctly summarized in Klaassen's introduction:

The apothecary must decide whether to believe that an astrological image that made him rich derived its power from occult natural properties or from deceptive demons. Brother John, by contrast, struggles to reconcile the fact that ritual magic was transmitted in books – books that one should assume were corrupt – but could only be learned, practiced, and understood through experiences that were not really communicable through the written word. (2)

In other words, the problem in image magic is one of *attribution* and *discernment*: are the images causally efficient due to natural properties and forces, or (presumably demonic) spirits? How can the practitioner tell the difference in specific cases? For ritual magic the problem is a different one: how does the practitioner know for sure that s/he is learning from a legitimate source, and that the experiential knowledge obtained is authentic and genuine?

Klaassen's argument is that these two problems had a creative effect on the transformations of magic in the late medieval and early modern periods, as practitioners tried to solve the dilemmas. For image magic, the predominant solution was provided by scholastic rationalism, which offered ways to ensure the legitimacy of images if they could be given broadly naturalistic explanations. Thus, Klaassen demonstrates the influence of scholastic natural philosophy not only on the interpretation of magical texts, but also on their selection and transmission. The vehicle of this transformation is above all the 13th century *Speculum astronomiae*, which became the foremost authoritative treatise on whether astrological images were lawful or contrary to nature (i.e. demonic). Late-medieval scribes and collectors had the *Speculum* at hand when transcribing astrological texts, as evidenced by the fact that they were frequently bound together. According to Klaassen, the effect of the *Speculum*'s editorial influence was that, by 1500, the extant set of image magical manuscripts was drastically reduced from about forty to two. Moreover, the two texts that continued to be copied and circulated – Thābit ibn Qurra's *De imaginibus* and a work on astrological images attributed to Ptolemy – were heavily redacted to make sure no ritualistic elements were left (28–29). Works that had previously been quite popular, such as the *Liber lune*, had embedded astrological images in elaborate practices of suffumigation and the drawing of the names and magical squares of planetary spirits. Following the heresiological criteria established by the

*Speculum*, such ceremonial elements were certain signs of demonic intercession, and reason to condemn a manuscript. Scribes largely heeded this call, and sought to edit out ceremonial traces from the few texts that were passed on.

The resolution to Brother John's dilemma is of a very different order. While image magic could be discerned by reference to an authoritative text, which then stabilized the transmission process, the core dynamic driving the textual tradition of ritual magic is an iterative relationship between instructions for practice and repeated alterations of ritual texts based on private, subjectively convincing revelatory experiences effected by these ritual techniques. Klaassen makes an intriguing, and in my view convincing argument that the development we see from the *Ars Notoria* via works like the *Liber florum* and the *Liber juratus*, to the famous experiments of John Dee and other, lesser known transcripts of early modern angel summoning, is driven by author-magicians who cast themselves as divinely sanctioned, visionary editors. They treat earlier texts as recipes for achieving experiential knowledge, and proceed to modify the texts, in a pragmatic fashion, to accord with knowledge obtained from practice and experience. This has resulted in an enduring but constantly changing stream of visionary practice texts, which may, in fact, be traced all the way to the present day.

Understanding the dynamic of this textual tradition, then, it becomes paramount to focus on the experiential dimension of learning to have visions, and using these to alter ritual practices. The close reading of practices involved in some of these texts, and Klaassen's suggestion that processes of training, attentiveness, and mental disciplining were at work in ritual magic is thus, in my view, a significant call for further work. Above all, it cries out for further explication in terms of the cognitive science of religion. Tanya Luhrmann's work on the role of inner sense cultivation in so-called kataphatic (i.e., imagery oriented) prayer traditions seems an extremely relevant connection.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Klaassen's valuable remarks on the *autopoiesis* of ritual magical texts suggests fruitful lines of inquiry that similarly require a more interdisciplinary methodology and affords comparisons with contemporary magical practice.

The mixed methodology, the insightful analysis of individual texts, and the questions visited in the process are all major strengths of *The Transformations of Magic*. Where the book is less successful is in providing clear and satisfying conclusions to the main task it sets itself, namely of explaining *why* image

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Tanya M. Luhrmann and Rachel Morgain, "Prayer as Inner Sense Cultivation: An Attentional Learning Theory of Spiritual Experience," *Ethos* 40, no. 4 (2012): 359–89.

magic declined and got incorporated into the ritual magical corpus after 1500. While Klaassen provides lucid analysis of fascinating material, the prose tends to get repetitious and summary in places where one would expect concluding points. The best example is in the handling of the why-question after having demonstrated that Renaissance magicians (contrary to received opinion) were generally more interested in ritual magic than scholastic image magic. While a number of hypotheses are visited at various points throughout the last two chapters of the book – including the anti-scholastic rhetoric of the humanists, the rise of Protestantism, the secularization of monasteries and a hypothesized demographic shift in magical practitioners – Klaassen never clearly takes a stand among the alternatives, or develops a new thesis. Instead, the final conclusion (215–16) evades the real issue by stating in somewhat circular fashion that “medieval ritual magic and Renaissance magic held similar assumptions, sought similar goals, and often employed nearly identical techniques.” But, since Klaassen has already explained this commonality in terms of a direct influence from the medieval ritual magical material, the ensuing affinity cannot be invoked as explanation for the selection.

Despite shortcomings of this type, *The Transformations of Magic* is an inspiring and innovative work of scholarship on illicit learned magic. It sheds new light on problems with the transmission and transformation of magical traditions in a systematic manner. But more than this, it opens up important new vistas of inquiry for scholars interested in the *longue durée* of ritual magical texts, and suggests that more work is required on the complex, culturally productive relationship between experience, discernment, ritual technique, and textuality in Western magic.

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