Book Review

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Dan Attrell and David Porreca. *Picatrix: A Medieval Treatise on Astral Magic*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. xii + 372 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-08212-7. $39.95.

Dan Attrell and David Porreca offer an English translation of the *Picatrix*. To better appreciate my comments on the translation, it is useful for the reader to know what the *Picatrix* contains. Divided into four books preceded by a prologue, the *Picatrix* is one of the most famous texts in the history of learned magic. Commissioned by Alfonso X, king of Castile and Leon, this treatise is a 13th-century Latin rendition of the *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*, a theoretical and practical compendium of astral magic written in Arabic by Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī in the 10th century.[1]

The *Picatrix* evidences a concern with legitimizing astral magic. In the prologue and Book One we are told that astral magic is not the outcome of an interaction with malevolent spirits but the result of pure devotion to God and awareness of the occult law that God created in the universe. Even though destructive purposes are often the goals of ritual operations included in the *Picatrix*, the laws that govern those operations are dependent on the spirits of heavenly bodies that act according to God's will. Knowing those principles is the ultimate goal of a righteous life. However, as explained in Chapter 1 of Book Two, to understand and perform astral magic, one should master the quadrivium (astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music) and study metaphysics.

1. The work was first translated into Castilian, presumably by Yehuda ben Moshe, a Jewish astronomer known to have translated other astronomical texts for Alfonso X. Some time after the first translation was finished, the Castilian text was translated into Latin, presumably by Aegidius de Tebaldis of Parma. Only a few fragments of the Castilian version have survived in a 13th-century manuscript (Vat. Reg. lat. 1283[a]), which Alfonso D'Agostino edited in 1992: *Astromagia* (Napoli: Liguori, 1992). The Latin text, however, exists in many different manuscript copies spread across Europe. The Latin text differs in some respects from the *Ghāyat* due to interpolations during the process of translation and transmission.

There are three main types of ritual practices that the *Picatrix* describes. Firstly, the construction of talismans (*ymagines*). A talisman is a material object shaped according to astrological figures and made with materials that sympathize with astral bodies. It is thanks to these materials that talismans can harness the powers that come from the higher spheres. Secondly, there are rituals that involve suffumigations and long prayers to the planetary spirits to ask them to realize personal requests. Thirdly, there are rituals that aim to make the spirit descend and appear in front of the practitioner. The spirit will appear in a human shape, and the practitioner can then make his/her requests.

This review is an assessment of the overall quality of Attrell and Porreca's translation on the basis of their stated goal: to offer a translation "specifically intended for students and scholars of the history of science and magic" (2). There are other modern translations, but Attrell and Porreca are more explicit and unique in stating their goal,[2] and their statement implies the importance of having reliable translations to understand the complexity of magical literature.

The introductions of previous Italian and French translations have mainly highlighted the characteristics of the philosophical and astrological thought underlying the *Picatrix*. Generally, the *Picatrix* is based on Aristotelian thought and especially the concepts of the world of Ptolemy, the theory on the rays (*De radiis*) by al-Kindi, Empedoclean notions of attraction and repulsion, and Neoplatonic emanationist hierarchies.

Attrell and Porreca, while offering a general introduction on these themes, have focused their analyses on the practical aspects of magical operations. They

2. John Michael Greer and Christopher Warnock have translated the *Picatrix* in an edition addressing modern practitioners: *The Picatrix: Liber Rubeus Edition* (Phoenix: Adocentyn Press, 2011). The aim of the Italian translation edited by Paolo Aldo Rossi, *Picatrix. Dalla versione Latina del Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* (Milano: Mimesis, 1999), and of the French one edited by Béatrice Bakhouche, Frédéric Fauquieret, and Brigitte Pérez-Jean, *Picatrix: Un traité de magie medieval* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) is comparable with Attrell and Porreca's. All of them, including the translation under consideration here, rely on the only existing Latin critical edition edited by David Pingree. Pingree's edition was published in 1986 and it relies on the majority of known manuscripts, the earliest dating from the 15th century.

supply charts categorizing the various ritual objectives found in the text. The majority of the objectives, according to Attrell and Porreca's categorization, deal with interpersonal relationships: "the large number of rituals directed at promoting – or more particularly, gaining the help or favor – of social superiors exemplify how important social hierarchy was to the author and intended readership of the *Picatrix*"(23). By contrast, the fulfillment of basic needs such as food is marginally covered in the *Picatrix*. Hence, Attrell and Porreca's analysis offers clues about the social class of the book's intended readership. The readers might have "occupied the middle rungs of the medieval academic or clerical ladder" of the Medieval Warm Period (900 C.E. to 1300 C.E) (25–26).

The index of celestial names and magical words and the index of substances and materials named in the *Picatrix* are useful tools for researchers, especially scholars dealing with the materiality of magic. The attention to material aspects is also reflected in the section about psychoactive and poisonous substances. The many endnotes, in turn, help to clarify the correct translation of substances, astrological terms, and names corrupted in the translation from Arabic.

Attrell and Porreca contend that a "word-for-word 'literal' rendering" of the *Picatrix* is almost impossible without reducing it to "'latinese' – or at worst, outright gibberish" (31). They have therefore taken liberties to "make the text appear to a twenty-first-century English reader as we believe it might have been understood by a typical European medieval or Renaissance magus" (31). They have eliminated redundancies that they claim do not provide any "additional clarity or meaning," removed the "excessive use of self-referential expressions," and "cut out extraneous adverbs and conjunctions" (31–32). I agree that a literal translation of the redundant Latin of the *Picatrix* would have made it less understandable and engaging in modern English. Indeed, the language used by the medieval translator is typical of the transformation of Latin that occurred in the 13th century: a technical Latin, simple in syntax and monotonous in style.

However, it is difficult to infer how a medieval or Renaissance magus might have understood what was written in the manuscripts. The *Picatrix* is in itself cryptic and labyrinthine and the ways we interpret small details can lead to very different translations. The case of a sentence in Book Two, Chapter 7 is an example. The Latin text reads "*Et est locus aspectus ad hoc, ut sit levitas operandi quousque ad optatum finem in opportuno tempore attingat.*"[3] Attrell and Porreca translate *aspectus* with a nominal predicate: "Location is an aspect toward the goal that the ease of the ritual endure all the way until one reaches the desired end at the opportune time" (98). However, *aspectus* can also be translated with the genitive case, changing the meaning completely: "And there is the appropriate place of the [astrological] aspect, so that there is ease in operating in order to reach, at the right time, the desired goal." My hypothesis that *aspectus* may be translated as a genitive case is reinforced by the fact that the following line suggests the same structure where the genitive case is evident:[4] "*Et locus ymaginis necnon et ipsius apparatus in aere vel in terra celandi vel manifestandi et aliis similibus*" ("and as well [there is] the place of the talisman and of the necessary things in the sky and on Earth that serves to show it or hide it, and other similar things").[5] Besides, we find that the astrological term *aspectus* is related to *locus* in some parts of the text.[6] Hence, it is even more plausible that the medieval translator is not thinking about a generic aspect but precisely that there is a proper place of the planetary aspects — an astrological one — that facilitates magical operations.

3. David Pingree, ed., *Picatrix: The Latin Version of the Ghāyat Al-Ḥakim* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1986), 58.

4. Even though they translate the second *aspectus* as a genitive, they have cut out *necnon* ("and also, and furthermore, as well"). Their translation is "The location of the image, its materials, whether it is in the air or on land, whether hidden or open, and other such factors [...] all these things are worthy of consideration" (98). Thus, ignoring *necnon* prevents us from reading the sentence as "*et est*" ("and there is") "*locus ymaginis necnon*" (the place of the talisman as well): "*et est*" is implicit and suggested by the previous sentence "*Et est locus aspectus.*"

5. Pingree, ed., *Picatrix*, 59.

6. Pingree, ed., *Picatrix*, 44-54, 217.

Attrell and Porreca do not reflect on important choices of translations like this one *vis à vis* the different translations of the previous Italian, French and German editions.[7] It would have been beneficial if they had supplied a critical glossary for clarifying choices of translation. A critical glossary would be useful for other words as well, such as *sensus*, which appears frequently in the text and which Attrell and Porreca often translate as "senses" or "sense perception" (41, 43, 63, 69).[8] However, that is not the only plausible translation in a medieval context where its meaning can also imply mind or intellect, and especially in the *Picatrix* where the relationships between sense perception, intellect, and mind are central.[9]

One choice that the translators are explicit about, is that of translating '*nigromancia*' as 'magic' throughout the text. According to them, since *nigromancia* is a corruption of the Greek term *necromanteia* ('divination through the dead') into 'dark (or black)' divination, and because "there are no forms of divinations pertaining to the dead in its pages," using the term 'necromancy' seems inappropriate (10–11). In addition, they argue that the meaning that the medieval translator had in mind for *nigromancia* does not reflect our conception of necromancy in popular culture, namely, "images of dark wizards summoning skeletons" (11). Hence, to avoid ambiguity and the transformation of the "noble and hieratic" astral magic of the *Picatrix* into a "hubristic" practice, they translate it with the more "nebulous word magic" (11). Linked to this is the fact that they contend that "those who secretly practiced *nigromancia* considered it the natural outcome, the consummation, of all medieval science, wisdom, and philosophy" (31).

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7. "*Il y a le lieu de l'aspect convenable pour faciliter l'opération de façon à ce qu'on atteigne au terme souhaité en temps opportun*," Bakhouche, et al., ed., *Picatrix*, 132; "*c'è il luogo dell'aspetto opportuno perché ci sia facilità nell'operare al fine di giungere, nel momento opportuno, allo scopo desiderato*," Rossi, ed., *Picatrix*, 88–89. The German translation of the Arabic text reads "the place of observation": "*Und zwar kommt im Frage der Ort der Observation und seine bequeme Zugänglichkeiten für den, der sie ausführt, damit er ihn zu der gewünschten Zeit erreichen kann*," Pseudo-Maǧrīṭī, *'Picatrix': Das Ziel Des Weisen von Pseudo-Maǧrīṭī*, translated and edited by Hellmut Ritter and Martin Plessner (London: The Warburg Institute, 1962), 105.

8. Cfr. "*intedimento*" and "*intelletto naturale*" in Rossi, ed., *Picatrix*, 31, 33, 53, 60; "*esprit*," "*intelligence*," and "*intellect*," Bakhouche, et al., ed., *Picatrix*, 47, 51, 79, 88.

9. See Chapter 1, Book 4; Pingree, ed., *Picatrix*, 174–78.

There is no doubt that the meanings of *nigromancia* in the late middle ages are many and different and that translating the term as 'necromancy' could misleadingly create parallels between the *Picatrix*'s *nigromancia* and other forms of illicit demonic conjurations that have nothing to do with the more 'natural' (even physical) techniques in the *Picatrix*. However, in my opinion, making explicit all the terminological variance regarding *nigromancia*, *magica*,[10] and *magia*[11] would have better illustrated the classifications and subcategorizations of magical knowledge and practice in the mind of the medieval translator. Chapter 5 of Book Two significantly describes that this magical knowledge (*sciencia*) can be divided into three parts: "*sciencia magica*" ('magical science'), which belongs to the Sabeans; "*sciencia stellarum*" ('the science of the stars'), which belongs to the Greeks and involves suffumigations, sacrifices, prayers, and scripture; and the use of words, incantations, music to bind spirits, and the altering of the senses, which belongs to the Indians who are considered the most powerful in "*artibus nigromance*."[12] Moreover, according to the *Picatrix*, Indians "sought oracles through severed heads" (85) and we can recognize a form of divination through the head of a dead body in *Picatrix* 3.11.54. This section describes how to prepare an ointment by cooking a human head with "fresh opium, human blood and sesame oil" for 24 hours (203). The oil that is produced "permits one to see those things one wishes to see" and "if you light a light with the oil or anoint something with it, or if you give a little of it to someone in food, you will see whatever you wish" (203–4). The use of human heads for necromancy have a long history dating to late antiquity. Emmanouela Grypeou finds evidence of the necromantic practice of using heads in rabbinic and Christian sources that indicate "a communication and shared cultural knowledge in the wider area of Mesopotamia around the 7th/8th centuries."[13] We can therefore infer that

10. "*sciencia magica*," "*magice science*," Pingree, 46.
11. *Magia* is not listed in the index of names of Pingree's edition, only the adjective *magicus*.
12. Pingree, ed., *Picatrix*, 46
13. For example, in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the preparation of the *teraphim,* a severed human head

there may be evidence of transmission of necromantic practices in the *Picatrix* from late antiquity, which obviously have nothing to do with modern interpretations, but which deserve to be further investigated.

To conclude, scholars of medieval magic will have to carefully compare this new translation with the Latin text, and when necessary with the other translations available. Having this translation in English can certainly help scholars to shed light on the possible interpretations of the most obscure points of the text. For scholars and students who do not work specifically with medieval magic, the book is an excellent point of departure for understanding the main features of the text. The endnotes offer references for further primary sources and secondary literature. Compared to the study of ideas and theories, scholars of magic have paid comparatively less attention to substances and materials. As previously mentioned, the unique strength of this edition is the attention given to the materiality of magic, suggesting a path for further studies.

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rubbed with salt and spices and with an inscribed golden plate underneath the tongue, is described. The head would have been put into a hole in a wall, and it would have started to whisper. Similar stories are found in the *Targum Pseudo-Johnathan* (Genesis 31:19) and in the medieval compilation *Sefer ha-Yashar,* in which the head's divinatory power is attributed to "an influence by the planets," Emmanouela Grypeou, "Talking Heads: Necromancy in Jewish and Christian Accounts from Mesopotamia and Beyond," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 16 (2019): 3–5.