

SUPERSTIZIONE, MAGIA, DEMONOLOGIA, STREGONERIA
MEDIATORI CULTURALI E CIRCOLAZIONE DELLE CREDENZE
TRA TARDO MEDIOEVO E PRIMA ETÀ MODERNA

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INTRODUCTION

Superstition, Magic, Demonology, and Witchcraft.
Cultural Mediators and the Circulation of Beliefs
(Late Middle Ages-Early Modern Age)

In the last twenty years, research on superstition, magic, demonology, and witchcraft – research understood both as the history of repression and as the study of beliefs – has not only multiplied, but has marked important changes in approach and method. Even the chronology has undergone changes, especially through an awareness of the decline of repression between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as of the long survival of beliefs well beyond the Age of Enlightenment.

This is certainly not the place for a complete account of the vast bibliography on magic, superstition, demonology, and witchcraft, which would obviously risk not being exhaustive and excluding some authors or books. We just refer to the book edited by Dinora Corsi and Matteo Duni, *Non lasciar vivere la malefica. Le streghe nei trattati e nei processi (secoli XIV-XVII)* (Firenze University Press, Florence 2008), and the historiographic account, still very valid, by Duni contained therein. That is a volume that opens new fields of investigation and re-discusses themes and concepts that have long been taken for granted; moreover, it does not limit itself to witchcraft alone, but also deals with other issues, such as possession, exorcisms, and enchantments, and grasps the connection, which is important for the study of witchcraft, between elements that had been neglected before, such as popular beliefs concerning magical powers and misfortune, illness, medicine. The multiplication of studies on these phenomena has revealed that, once the “heretical” presence in Italy had been eradicated, the action of the Inquisition turned to a vast and ambitious project of homologation and global control of Italian society. Since the eighties of the sixteenth century, the fight against magic had the objective of erasing deeply rooted practices, involving in fact a various inventory of widespread beliefs and superstitions. As a consequence, for historians and anthropologists – as it is now well known and almost taken for granted – the inquisitorial documents are valuable sources to understand the general history of society in the Early Modern Age, since they refer both

to the way of operating and thinking of the judges of faith as well as of those who were prosecuted along with their beliefs.

If the inquisitorial sources have proven essential to push forward researches about Italy, outside this region scholarship about superstition, magic, demonology, and witchcraft has also progressed in many ways, approaching new fields and experimenting new methodologies. Many factors have been identified and studied: the climate change that occurred in the 1600s and its socio-economic consequences (Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997); the scientific debate that has framed several phenomena related to witchcraft (Stuart Clark, *Thinking with demons*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997); the social conditions in village communities and how often the learned construction of witchcraft must be paralleled by the bottom-up drive: which is how village communities invoked anti-witchcraft persecution (Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002). Without forgetting the contribution of gender studies, not only aimed at the analysis of the condition of women, but also at understanding why in certain areas of Europe (albeit a minority) witch hunts were rather male-witches hunts. All these, and many other approaches, such as those centered on the exchanges between disciplines – history, theology, law, literature, anthropology – but also on the fluid boundaries of themes such as magic, superstition, religion (Marina Caffiero [ed.], *Magia, superstizione, religione. Una questione di confini*, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 2015), have proven to be of great help.

Why is this special issue of the Rivista di storia del cristianesimo devoted to *Superstition, Magic, Demonology, and Witchcraft: Cultural Mediators and the Circulation of Beliefs (Late Middle Ages-Early Modern Age)*, then, and what does it add to the scholarship on these topics? During the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern times, a multitude of heterogeneous knowledge about folk beliefs, magic, and witchcraft developed, interacting at different levels of perception, transfer, adoption, and change, and crossing geographical, political, confessional, and linguistic boundaries. Cultural translations and hybridizations have been at the heart of the elaboration of beliefs and practices that have not yet been properly studied. Thus, a certain importance must also be given to those who carried out the transmission of such knowledge (see Marina Montesano [ed.], *Folklore, Magic, and Witchcraft. Cultural Exchanges from the Twelfth to Eighteenth Century*, Routledge, London 2021). Grasping the differences can help to understand why and how certain persecution mechanisms have come into play. Also, magic beliefs played a role within witch-hunts, but also outside of them; there are domains of ceremonial magic that do not equate with *maleficium* and witchcraft, but are also taken into account by many treatises: astrology, necromancy, divination are fields where cultures met and exchanged, with a strong contribution from the Classical, the Jewish and the Islamic contexts.

Aim of this collection is to have essays dealing with those topics which, collected together, might provide a strong point of view about the topic of circulation and appropriation of cultural motifs in the domain of magic. The proposal is unusual in that it is based on comparison and analysis of the cultural circulation of magic between different religions: Christianity, in its denominational variants, Islam and Judaism. And this aspect alone is quite new, especially if it is not dealt with separately in the various fields, but in parallel, considering that the exchange between the three monotheistic religions is central to the theoretical and intellectual construction of the magical world as well as to magical practices.

We have tried an approach based on transmission, the circulation of beliefs, the similarities within the differences, therefore, of continuity, similarity and imitation of symbols, formulas, images, developed over a very long period, from late antiquity to the modern age. The role of their cultural mediators emerges: treatise writers, theologians, judges, even within different confessional spheres, but also lower class believers who exchange information and books or practice mere acts that were deemed as “superstitious”. Moreover, if we turn to the field of documents, the trials for magic show – as we shall see – that laws, prohibitions and threats failed to achieve the aim of repression.

Another peculiarity of the monographic issue is the diversification between contributions centred on the examination of images and theoretical, symbolic and mythical elements (Patrizi, Abate, Campanini), reconstructed through treatises, and contributions linked rather to widespread practices, and identified through archival sources and especially inquisitorial trials (Tedesco, Valente), or on the debate about demonology in the catholic and the reformed world (Mendez). These essays should be read in parallel, because all the works start from the need for a cultural reconstruction of the phenomena and their mediators.

The persistence of symbols, myths and practices over the long term and their intercultural circulation is highlighted by Luca Patrizi's contribution. Patrizi analyses the magical procedure involving a goblet and a young boy who drinks a liquid from it in the Islamic area, referring to the Greek myth of Ganymede, and other Persian myths. Regarding the young boy, some ancient sacred models can be found, which show the complexity of the theological and esoteric dimension associated to this figure. Moreover, the combination between the young boy and the vessel evokes a recurring image in the mythologies and literatures of the pre-modern world: the divine cupbearer. As we shall see, this imagery is at the origin of a practice that developed in particular in the courts of the ancient world, but survived until modern times. The role of the cup and the young cupbearer symbolises the mediation between the divine and human spheres, although the symbol from mystical literature is also adopted in less intellectual domains and in magical practices, with a cultural transmission from top to bottom. There is also an intercultural element, as studies on Christian and Jewish magical practices of the modern

times have shown that one may often encounter the divinatory rite in which a young boy or a virgin, looking into a jug of water (through the rite of the “*inghistara*” aimed at finding hidden or stolen objects) or into the palm of one’s hand, sees demons or spirits appear, to be interrogated to obtain secrets and revelations. It is then evident how the circulation of these ideas and practices, linked in particular to hydromancy and the role of the young boy or girl, spread to the other two religions.

The role of Judaism and its “magical” tradition is particularly relevant in this sense. The studies on witchcraft, magic, and sorcery in the modern age, even if recently revived and renewed also for Italy, have not, with few exceptions, focused on the connection between these practices and Judaism and on the reasons of the evident interest of judges – and in particular of the Inquisition tribunal – towards Jewish magic and witchcraft. In the field of the Judaism-magic-witchcraft nexus, the underestimation of the topic has induced an interpretative weakness that stems from ignoring one of the elements at stake in the field of magic. On the contrary, the real or supposed magical practices of the Jews seem to be a relevant variable for understanding those of the Christians, as well as the choices and methods of persecution of both. In the course of the judicial proceedings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, initiated by the Roman Inquisition, the aspects of blend, exchanges and combination between Jews and Christians in the field of witchcraft and magic clearly stand out and are underlined by the judges (see Marina Caffiero, *Legami pericolosi. Ebrei e cristiani tra libri proibiti, eresia e stregoneria*, Einaudi, Torino 2012). And they provide today’s historian with valuable information on the cultural trade-off between the two groups.

Within the Jewish world, the making of the Golem, the artificial anthropoid created, according to legend, in Prague by Rabbi Low at the end of the 16th century for the defence of the Jews, denounces a magical procedure, a typical example of magical and cabbalistic ritual, in which acts, Jewish formulas, words converge to create a form of real existence. A true esoteric ceremony of creation, which places this figure on the borderline between human and divine.

The practitioners who deal with the medieval *Sefer Yeşirah* («Book of Formation») aspire, for the limited time of the ritual, to become similar to God, to forge a creature that is halfway between life and death, image and idol, human and object, a duplicate or a statue whose animation raises moral and existential questions. Hence, the creator makes himself similar to God and his power. Emma Abate explores Jewish medieval esoteric practices of initiation and empowerment of the “magician”, which have so far been considered unrelated. The article’s purpose is to uncover their shared formal elements and cultural background, as well as eventual links between them. After a short introduction on the emergence and setting of a multilayered magical tradition in Judaism between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, the essay delves into the characteristics and comparison of rites, which developed in parallel. The connections between medieval practices related to necromancy, astrology and

divination and the hermetic cultural tradition of late antiquity are striking, although the rituals and the sources from which they draw inspiration differ, with various degrees of procedures and meanings, even in the myth of the Golem.

These performances, which are based on a secret knowledge of principles underlying Jewish culture, such as the power of the name of God and of the Hebrew alphabet and a bodily image of the Cosmos, bring out the power of the use of the Hebrew language, which was also transmitted to Christianity, for example with the magical use of the names of angels and demons. In fact, if in the Jewish world, at least in Italy, and even less so in the Christian world, the magical procedure for the creation of a Golem did not exist – and it would be necessary to ascertain the reasons why – the connections between the Jewish and Christian worlds in the cabbalistic sphere were, on the contrary, intense. Saverio Campanini examines a little-known work by the Dominican Agostino Gustiniani, a Hebraist and Orientalist, and one of the most important Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance. Dated 1513, it is entitled *Precatio pietatis plena ad Deum omnipotentem composita ex duobus et septuaginta nominibus divinis, Hebraicis et Latinis, una cum interprete commentariolo*. That was a first essay for him, although already very characteristic of his future contributions to the humanist movement and to the tentative construction of a branch of theology known as Christian Kabbalah. The *Precatio pietatis plena* is a telling example of the pioneering epoch of Christian Kabbalah as a powerful mean for invoking and obtaining God's help. Giustiniani decided to translate, comment and print a prayer made of 72 verses from different Psalms, taken from the Latin translation of the Septuagint: 72 verses like the letters that made up the name of God, the Tetragram. Campanini analyses this prayer which has a Kabbalistic structure and can only be understood through a certain acquaintance with the Hebrew language, recommending a Jewish prayer for Christian use. It is therefore a Christian cabbalistic prayer. Although Giustiniani was not the first to publish such a text, having been preceded by Johannes Reuchlin, the famous author of *De arte cabalistica*, whose different version is here carefully analysed by the author, the central point is that in his commentary the Dominican was faced with the difficult task of providing the theological justification for the prayer. The insistence on the "piety" already present in the title of the booklet is not sufficient to prove, especially in the eyes of suspicious readers, that this prayer, although made of sacred texts would not be exploited for superstitious purposes, as amulets. Coming explicitly and admittedly from the Jewish tradition, the prayer and its use were considered even more doubtful. He was immediately attacked by anti-Jewish apologists, both Catholic and Protestant, but this did not prevent the prayer's great success and reprinting among Christian authors of both denominations until at least the eighteenth century. The magical power of the Psalms was based on the power of the words and the names themselves. An identical procedure can be seen in the 18th century in the attempt of the Roman Rabbi Tranquillo Vita Corcos to justify in the eyes of the Inquisitor the circulation and use, even by Chris-

tians, of an amulet built on the Psalms (see Marina Caffiero, *Il grande mediatore. Tranquillo Vita Corcos, un rabbino nella Roma dei papi*, Carocci, Roma 2019). The question of magic is thus reduced to the power of the names in themselves. A peculiar element of Jewish learned magic was introduced thus into Christian private liturgical practices even if its magical core was denied by the Christian Kabbalists and, almost at the same time, violently denounced by their adversaries. The key to its introduction and its survival among Christians was dissimulation: quite striking for a device promising to make explicit the ineffable Name of God.

If we move from treatises to documentary sources, the persistence of divinatory practices and judicial astrology among all social classes despite condemnations, such as the famous bull of Sixtus v (1586) that equated the astrology with heresy, is studied by Vincenzo Tedesco through the extensive archival funds of the tribunal of the Holy Office of Siena, preserved in the Vatican Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The documentation allows us to understand the effects of the bull on Italian society in the last years of the 16th century, i.e. what effects the prohibitions had on the circulation of cultural elements relating to astrology, who were the individuals most affected, which were the different ways of using astrological knowledge and practices, and how information circulated. The documentation reveals how particularly widespread those practices were in different social and cultural environments. The first element that emerges relates to the extensive possession of forbidden books on the art of divination, and in particular on judicial astrology, by the learned and socially higher classes: this allows us to find out which were the most popular forbidden authors of that period, before and after Sixtus v's bull, and to reconstruct the astrological culture of the time also through the libraries, some of which are considerable in size and deserve in-depth analysis. Judicial astrology was a "discipline" particularly appreciated by the educated classes: clerics, aristocrats, and teachers were among those who enjoyed reading books and composing nativities (horoscopes). Yet, it was extremely widespread and well known even to the less educated, to the point that women of humble origin practising palmistry and the odd spells *ad amorem* and *ad sanitatem*, through the use of banal tools of trade (animal bones, herbs, stones including magnets, rings), qualified themselves as "astrologers", mainly in order to legitimise themselves with their clients. The second important fact revealed by the Siena trial documentation is the existence of a dense network of interpersonal ties that connected astrology enthusiasts: many, for better or worse, knew each other and exchanged their experiments written on paper, discussed them and fed the circulation of knowledge. It cannot be ruled out, moreover, that the now ascertained fact that from this apparently unconnected group of processes there also emerged a substantial communion of readings could derive from an exchange of advice and texts between them. Particularly relevant are the links of Flaminio Fabrizi, a Roman aristocrat practising judicial astrology, sentenced to death

as an “unfaithful heretic” and hanged and then burned in Campo de’ Fiori on 7 February 1591. While other punishments imposed were generally light, probably due to the rank of the accused, the Sistine Bull undoubtedly started a crackdown on the possession of books of judicial astrology and on those who practised an activity that was particularly in vogue among the scholars of the time. There were huge book requisitions that undoubtedly caused a restriction in the propagation of astrological knowledge, which had a fundamental medium of transmission in the printed page, and some private libraries were severely impoverished. However, sources have also demonstrated the persistence of underground book circulation in the years following the ban; moreover, Sienese astrologers continued to practise within their homes, writing nativities and horoscopes on loose sheets that they sometimes exchanged to discuss the results obtained. Oral conversation, conducted with due discretion and between trusted persons, therefore remained important, and indeed became even more so, especially since, due to its evanescent nature, it was much less traceable by the ecclesiastical authorities. Finally, it seems indeed plausible to associate the series of trials against those who practiced judicial astrology to the dynamics of power then in place at the local level, especially since the accused turn out to be aristocrats and, often, also members of the city’s noble elite, a social group that in that period was experiencing the complex phase of adjustment following the war events of the so-called “war of Siena”, which had caused the loss of republican independence and the division of territorial dominion between Florence and Spain, the winners of the conflict.

In perfect continuity with Tedesco’s work on Siena, Michaela Valente examines some cases of magic and witchcraft occurred at the end of the 16th century, through the little known and even less studied documentation of a peripheral inquisitorial court of Venice, the one in Crema, which operated until 1614 under the bishop of the city. This is a first survey that allows one to evaluate both the spread of superstition and some historiographic interpretations, and to acquire information about the differences in accusations and treatment according to the gender of the accused. The essay focuses on the issue of superstition, especially among the lower classes, and analyses the attitude of the Church, which, caught up in the fight against heresy, neglected the problem of widespread folkloric beliefs, tolerating them for as long as it deemed appropriate, in order to maintain social control. Eradicating this complex tangle of rites, practices and beliefs was unquestionably in the Church’s sights, but it never became a priority and the battle was sacrificed on the altar of compromise. Later, in the midst of the Counter-Reformation, the anti-superstitious strife resumed, but not without ambiguity and compromise. In this sense, the condemnation of magic and its equation with heresy contained in the Sistine Bull of 1586 served to curb cults and practices outside those permitted by the Church but did not eradicate superstition. What those papers suggest is a desire to keep the accused under control, a warning from the authority, ready to remind them of its continuous surveillance. Thus, the trials served as a political expedient in what has been called the “pedagogy of fear”. Valente highlights

a considerable gap between beliefs spread in rural and peripheral areas, and those in urban contexts, with an interest in gender perspective as a useful tool for framing the cultural physiognomy of magicians and witches, and confirming some historiographic hypotheses already advanced on the role of gender differences (M. Duni). In urban environments, there was a clear male presence in terms of magic, attributed to the practice of necromancy learned from texts and books, while in rural areas, the operative, therapeutic or love magic, in which primarily women were the operators, stands out. Thus, men, mostly necromancers, turned to the supernatural due to knowledge acquired from books, while women operated more from direct experience, linked to the relationship with empirical knowledge, based on trivial practices and superstitious prayers. In addition to gender differences, however, the cases reconstructed by Valente evoke a variety of objects, people, exchanges, and intermediaries of the sacred: primarily books, even those forbidden, but also practices, sometimes from individuals belonging to other faiths such as Jews, to invoke demons, still speaking of the male universe, while olive wands, magnets, candles were mostly connected to the female universe. The essay also invites one to reflect on the concept of superstition and its use in early modern times, which certainly does not coincide with the idea of superstition developed in the Age of Enlightenment and is very different from its current meaning.

Although placed at the end of the issue, in relation to the chronological period examined (sixteenth-seventeenth century), Agustín Mendez's important essay takes us back to treatises and theoretical discussions, in his case centred on angelology and demonology, and also to historiographic speculations, centred on the impact of the Reformation on the belief in demons. After examining the different theological positions taken by early Christianity on the subject of angels and demons, and their corporeality or immateriality, the author dwells on Thomas Aquinas whose theory became the preponderant one: angels and demons do not have bodies, they are immaterial. The Angelic Doctor affirmed that although angels and demons naturally lacked bodies, they could assume fabricated anatomies. These *simulacra* were made of air. Thus, demons could create a body of any size or form from rarified air. The angelic/demonic body, then, was a representation, something virtual that existed between reality and fiction. They lacked biological functions and virtues enjoyed by real human bodies such as breathing, eating, speaking, and the possibility of having sex. These actions could be simulated but not truly performed. Demons did not need bodies to exist or to produce effects in the material world, but could create virtual ones. This brings us back to the belief in witches in early modern Europe, and particularly to England after the Reformation.

During the Early Modern period, different European territories like England, Scotland, German-speaking lands, and Sweden, spread tales about witchcraft and demons through pamphlets or other periodic publications that reported them. For a century and a half, from 1566 to 1710, pamphlets circulated in great demand and were sold at low prices, thus being accessible to

a wide audience of readers or listeners. The contents were basic: witchcraft pamphlets represented demonic beings as corporeal entities that intervened in the material world on a daily basis. Also based on accounts of witchcraft trials, these booklets provided precise descriptions of the demons, in human form but more often as animals. In addition, the corporeal nature of these spirits, according to popular imagination, made them not only visible but also tangible. Demons seemed to be corporeal beings, and to have real, fleshy bodies. The Reformation was supposed to eliminate these practices and beliefs. According to the prevailing historiographic interpretation, the Reformation in England was mainly under the influence of Calvin, and disrupted the medieval consensus achieved in the field of angelology: all these beliefs were rejected, within a process of modernisation, while reformers spearheaded a campaign to remove the cult of angels altogether. Angelology in England was purged from what was considered as medieval accretions to give birth to a simplified and reformed interpretation of celestial entities. However Mendez, opposing this dominant interpretation, argues that the English demonologists adopted Thomistic ideas about demonic bodies to give an orthodox and systematic framework to the popular beliefs they came across during their pastoral, medical or judicial duties, and that were disseminated by witchcraft pamphlets. His central hypothesis is that English authors resorted to demonological concepts developed by Aquinas to rectify popular ideas about demons described in witchcraft pamphlets published during Elizabethan and Early Stuart periods. English theologians accepted Thomas' system of demons/angels as did the Catholics. Aquinas' ideas on angels were validated and considered orthodox by local demonologists to correct popular ideas that differed from their definition of orthodoxy. Far from dogmatic stances, English demonologists demonstrated their ability to adapt. With great courage and accuracy, Mendez suggests that English reformed conceptions about demons were the result of a continuity with scholastic theology. The English devil, thus, was perfectly scholastic. Aquinas undoubtedly had his share on local demonological discourse, which was as enchanted as the one created by Catholic authors.

Moreover, if we reflect on the fact that angels and demons were also at the centre of the inquisitorial trials involving the Jews, whose beliefs in this matter the Catholic Church wanted to examine thoroughly in order to judge them according to its own criteria, we see that the contribution by Mendez brings us back to the theme of exchanges and connections between different religions.

With his contribution, the circle closes. It is far from the editors to propose through these essays a complete picture of cultural exchanges in the field of superstition, magic, witchcraft, and demonology. Nevertheless, these represent case studies proposing new themes in a field of scholarship that was once neglected, and now in the vanguard*.

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