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# The Magic of Books: A History of Medieval Magic and Literature

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THE MAGIC OF BOOKS: A HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL MAGIC AND  
LITERATURE

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BY

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The Magic of Books: A History of Medieval Magic and Literature  
**Introduction**

Narrative binds people together with a common language and experience. It provides a singular manner for communication and interaction. Without this interaction, there would be no society or culture to speak of; with no way to articulate and control sounds, humans would be forced to communicate through the use of motions and gestures, deprived of the beauty and magic of language. Words can somehow capture pain, joy, beauty, awe, sadness, excitement, emotion and the very thrill that comes from being alive in a way that nothing else can. Language can inspire and influence as much as it can inflict pain and despair, making it truly the most powerful, and even magical, human resource. It is for this reason that books are capable of, essentially, casting a spell over the reader by having the ability to transport him to another world using nothing but words. It is the words themselves that have the ability to not only let someone believe she is actually in whatever situation she is reading about but to be able to invoke real emotions in her. This is just as true today as it was hundreds of years ago in the Middle Ages. Medieval society was fully aware of the existence of magic all around them and they believed that words and language were capable of casting spells over people much like bookworms today believe in the power of books to inspire and transport the mind to somewhere else. People in the Middle Ages had a deep and fervent belief in the existence of magic in the world around them as well as a need for clarity and a way to connect to the world around them. This strong belief in the magical properties inherent in the world around them and the belief that words could harness this magic can only be understood by looking at the mentality held by medieval society towards magic and those who practice it as well as the literature produced during this time. Although attitudes toward magic and those who could and would harness it are vastly different in the Middle Ages than they are today, there is a commonality between the two eras in the way that

beliefs in magic are portrayed through literature; literature always reflects the way a society views issues and so medieval society's mentality towards magic can be seen through the literature of the time.

### **A History of Magic**

In the Middle Ages, magic was a reality. Today's society considers it to be mere superstition or something found only in novels due to the tendency of modern minds for empirical thinking. This automatically excludes magic as it does not fit into this way of thinking. The point of magic was actually simply about conveying a sense of significance from the world around, while, in today's society, magic is seen as something that exists only in films or novels and it is a term synonymous with the concept of witchcraft, effectively criminalizing it much like a secular culture could be considered to criminalize religion. Many people regard world religions the same way modern society views magic: fictional and superstitious. As a result of this association with witchcraft, everything related to magic, whether fictional or not, carries an evil or demonic connotation. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *spell* is interestingly defined as "without article: Discourse, narration, speech; *occas.* idle talk, fable."<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the act of "casting a spell" in the Middle Ages was not necessarily an evil or magical thing but rather more of an influential action. If a spell is simply a narration or speech, then those who cast it are nothing more than story-tellers. In modern society, the definition of casting a spell is strictly restricted to a magical act: in other words, if a person casts a spell, they are performing magic and are therefore a witch or wizard. Even the word "grammar" possessed magical connotations: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is derived from the word

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

“grimoire” which was commonly used to refer to a book of magic spells. It also produced a corrupt form of itself through the word “glamour,” which meant magic or enchantment.<sup>2</sup>

Language was the way people articulated this belief, thereby creating the significance medieval society craved. Today, this is not really the case: our increasingly technological and scientific world provides many opportunities for people to regard magic as a fictional or evil thing. Science explains so much today that, for many people, there is no need for “superstitious” practices such as magic. Full of things that are unexplainable by science (like many religions) people regard it as suspicious or untrustworthy, especially if it does not line up with their belief system. This prevents modern society from fully appreciating medieval literature for what it was as well as excludes the possibility that literature does, in fact, have a bewitching and enchanting quality to it.

The best modern example for this would be *Harry Potter*, and it is almost impossible to discuss magic and witchcraft without mentioning this bestselling series. As a story about young wizards and witches attending a school of witchcraft and wizardry and learning spells and using magic, it is no wonder that this series has caused such a stir. Many people feared that *Harry Potter* was going to corrupt the minds of the children who read the books into wanting to become practitioners of magic. Religious groups tried to remove or restrict the access children had to the novels by attempting to ban them from school libraries in hopes that they would not be tempted to begin practicing magic or turn to the Wicca religion in spite of the fact that Wiccans themselves said the books had nothing in common with the actual practices of this religion. While this fear and ignorance over the subject of magic and witchcraft is indicative of modern society, it also shows the ability and power of words to influence and affect people just

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<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

the same as it could hundreds of years ago when magic was something to be revered. This suggests it is feared because society inherently and subconsciously recognizes the power literature has over people to influence and affect. The *Harry Potter* series is nothing more than thousands of pages of words yet educated adults feared the effect the fictional story could possibly have on impressionable children: people, specifically religious organizations that are extremely distrustful of magic and believe every aspect of it to be completely and totally evil were afraid of the language itself and its power to influence ideas. Medieval society was aware of the ability of language to do just that; however, the biggest difference is that people in the Middle Ages also believed that magic was a real force in nature.

Magic and witchcraft were actually considered a form of science during the medieval era, even to the point where medical texts encouraged the use of charms and magical items for protection, health and even contraception. *The Trotula* was the leading women's medical text of the Middle Ages, and it promoted the use of amulets to achieve certain effects such as birth control rather than use herbs recommended in other texts.<sup>3</sup> It was only during the fifteenth century that the use of charms and amulets (a perfectly ordinary and good form of magic) became associated with demonic powers and evil rites, setting the precedent for the modern mentality towards the subject of superstitious magic.

In order to understand the concept of the magical narrative, there must first be an understanding of the mentality towards magic held by medieval society. Magic, at the time indistinguishable from science, was a way to explain the unexplainable as in its rites, rituals, taboos, and attendant beliefs, magic might be said to comprise, or at least describe, a system for

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<sup>3</sup> Unknown, *The Trotula*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 34-35.

comprehending the entire world.<sup>4</sup> Natural magic (rather than demonic magic) was a way of organising and ordering the chaos and unpredictability of nature and life in an attempt to gain some control over what was viewed as wild and uncontrollable. This process of signifying goes back to the very beginning of creation: Adam names the animals and plants in the Garden of Eden. He gained control over the chaos of nature by assigning familiar names to everything. Another example is seen in how women, concerned over their fertility or the health of their family, would acquire charms to protect their family. This was not just found in the lower, uneducated classes, but extended to all social classes as magical gems, for example, were primarily found in courtly circles that could afford such luxuries, but the use of image magic for bodily harm and sexual attraction seems to have been part of the common culture of medieval Europe, used by people of various positions in society and feared (to different degrees) by virtually all, even if its details and interpretation varied considerably. Gems were definitely believed to have some kind of power to them, a belief that went beyond the Middle Ages through the early modern period (Elizabethan courtiers wore loads of jewelry). The chaos of nature and the uncertainty of life shook people and gave them the drive to figure out a way to organize and make sense of the unknown. This belief in the power of magic was a result of living in a world that was, above all, a world of essences. Medieval society perceived things as having inner natures, inherent and characteristic qualities. Since essences were thought to be not simply conceptual entities but to be real, they were regarded as discoverable and even at times transferable, as in alchemical operations and in the use of talismans.<sup>5</sup> These charms were

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<sup>4</sup> Michael D. Bailey, "The Meanings of Magic," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 1, no. 1 (2006): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Bert Hansen, "The Complementarity of Science and Magic before the Scientific Revolution: Medieval science and magic were consistent parts of a unified worldview that had dominated Western thought for two millennia," *American Scientist*, 74, no. 2 (1986): 133-134.

typically images or words (or both) on manuscripts that could be hung in the home of the person in need of magical assistance. This goes back to the argument that medieval society believed words themselves contained magical properties: it was the manner through which these essences were transferable and so books and manuscripts (as the physical objects containing words) also became magical.

It was this belief in inner natures that can be seen through medieval peasants' daily interactions with nature. Unlike today's society, where people are coddled by the comforts of modern life and remain indoors all day enjoying the advanced technology of laptops, televisions and video games, medieval society only used their homes as a place to cook and sleep. They were outdoors, farming, going to the market and socialising from sunrise to sunset. As a result of their immersion in nature, medieval society believed that it contained hidden powers as every action has magic as its source, and the entire life of the practical man is a bewitchment.<sup>6</sup> This belief in the current of magic throughout every aspect of life is the perfect example of how magic was just as normal to medieval society as science is to modern society. Indeed, magic was believed to be a pseudo-science and ascribed to the primitive magician what was in fact the perspective of the contemporary Western scientist; magic was a phenomenon whose "fundamental conception is identical with that of modern science; underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm, in the order and uniformity of nature."<sup>7</sup> If a medieval belief in magic was equivalent to a modern belief in science, then magic takes on a whole different meaning to the standard stereotype of evil witches casting spells and cackling over a boiling cauldron. It becomes more of a valid system since "to conceive of magic as rational was to

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<sup>6</sup> Sacred Texts, "The Six Enneads by Plotinus." <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plotenn/>. (Accessed 2 May 2013)

<sup>7</sup> Murray Wax, and Rosalie Wax, "The Notion of Magic," *Current Anthropology*, 4, no. 5 (1963): 495.



believe, first of all, that it could actually work (that its efficacy was shown by evidence recognized within the culture as authentic) and, secondly, that its workings were governed by principles (of theology or of physics) that could be coherently articulated...the people in medieval Europe who used, feared, promoted, or condemned magic, and who identified magic as such, not only assumed it worked but could give (or assumed that authorities could give for them) reasonably specific explanations of how it worked.<sup>8</sup> While all of these scholars have proved that medieval society had such a deep belief in the power and existence of magic that it could not be completely separated from science, this does not mean that the clash between magic and science (and religion, as well) ) did not exist: even Sir Isaac Newton was an alchemist for years.

Just as there are aspects to modern science that modern society finds to be immoral, wrong or just something that contains too much grey area to reach an agreement (for example, the heated and passionate controversy around abortion), there were certain parts of magic that medieval society differentiated between: magic, mysticism and witchcraft. Professor Bert Hansen examined the differences between these to explain the relationship between magic and science in medieval society. The science of the Middle Ages is often misunderstood when taken in isolation from the theology, philosophy, and logic of the era.<sup>9</sup> He explains that to regard magic as something illogical and against science is to misinterpret both medieval magic and medieval science: the concept of what was “natural” was considered to be what happened most of the time in the world around them, allowing plenty of room for magic to exist side by side with science

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<sup>8</sup> Kieckhefer “Specific Rationality.” 814.

<sup>9</sup> Hansen, “The Complementarity of Science and Magic before the Scientific Revolution: Medieval science and magic were consistent parts of a unified worldview that had dominated Western thought for two millennia.” 128.

since science focused on the natural world while magic worked in the unnatural world. It is this belief that resulted in

“various activities [being] generally labelled magical in the Middle Ages when practiced to achieve purposeful effects. For example, magic encompassed rituals and incantations that were not part of divine worship, including the use of powerful names, words, sounds, gestures, characters, and symbols... Because its aim was some useful accomplishment, not mere knowledge or understanding, magic was a practical technology rather than a science (Hansen 1978)...Even in cases where magic was employed to learn something, the goal was not philosophical understanding of the natures of things, but practical knowledge, such as the paternity of a child, the virginity of a woman, the location of a lost object, the success of an enterprise, or the prognosis of a disease.”<sup>10</sup>

Just as medieval society believed in the power of charms as a practicality, natural magic was seen as an everyday, necessary aspect of life. It wasn't until the fifteenth century that natural magic was seen as synonymous with demonic magic, in spite of their vast differences. This effectively began criminalizing the use of magic in medieval society.

### **Magic Is Like An Onion: It Has Layers**

Demonic magic had existed just as long as natural magic had and they went hand in hand as polar opposites: natural magic was accepted while demonic, or black, magic was intended to be rejected as evil. More people were reading and becoming educated as access to religious and secular literature was becoming more widespread, resulting in a mixture of different levels and kinds of spiritual beliefs. This led to confusion over the different practices people had and, in

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<sup>10</sup> Hansen 128.

addition to this confusion, many people were not aware that they were practicing “magic” – in other words, what they believed to be daily rituals and rites would be labelled as magic, making them targets for witch hunts. Michael Bailey discusses how “a remarkable aspect of magic is the degree to which many people in various social and historical contexts have engaged in acts that their culture as a whole, or at least certain cultural authorities, would categorize as magical without considering themselves to be performing magic. This seems especially true of simple spells or other common rites or superstitions that people may hold or practice without any systematic coherence.”<sup>11</sup> This goes back to the belief in the magical properties of charms and amulets. Many people believed in the power of these things to heal and protect from evil. This belief was not seen as out of the ordinary practice of everyday rituals; indeed, it was the norm for people to have numerous amulets for protection against harm and evil (even today, people hang dream catchers and the like to help ward off spirits). Yet it would be what would cause them to be considered as practicing dark magic when the lines between natural and demonic magic would become blurred. It was this confusion over what evil or good magic consisted of that led to the eventual mutation of good and evil magic having clear boundaries to having it all be lumped together as a demonic practice.

Renowned medievalist Dr. Richard Kieckhefer wrote an article in which he addresses the relationship between sainthood and witchcraft and suggests that “sainthood and witchcraft are sometimes seen as mirror images of each other, alike in their patterns of behaviour yet reversing each other’s values...sainthood and witchcraft were ascribed roles and could give occasion for competing ascription, with different observers thinking of a single person either as a saint or as a witch, but the necromancer’s role was essentially self-defined, and in the necromancer’s own

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<sup>11</sup> Bailey “The Meanings of Magic.” 2

mind the holy and the unholy, the sacred and the explicitly demonic, entered into a rare and fascinating alliance.”<sup>12</sup> Saints often possessed mystical abilities they claimed came from God; these were the very abilities that created suspicion and caused people to wonder if their abilities came not from God but from the devil. For example, people who were respected as skilled healers could quickly come under suspicion of witchcraft if a person they were treating worsened or died, even if they were not practicing magic. By grouping all magic together under the category of evil, it not only unfairly labelled good people as evil and lowered them to the level of those who did practice evil magic. Kieckhefer states that “the central difference is that witchcraft and sainthood are both in large measure ascribed roles, by which society finds its ideals and nightmares manifest in specific individuals, while in necromancy the holy and the unholy come together in a fusion that is real and complete, if only in the mind of the necromancer.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to explain that witchcraft was a deliberate mockery of the orthodox religion, according to demonologists of the time and that necromancy was the one type of magical practice that was always considered demonic and the opposite of religion. However, just as demonic magic was reviled, good magic was revered, most notably in the forms of healers. A healer was usually a woman who had personal charisma allied with the good spirits, able to tap divine grace and knew about secret rituals that would achieve healing.<sup>14</sup> This goes back to the natural vs. demonic magic debate: necromancy was the ultimate dark magic and was the magic medieval society recoiled against while every day actions that promoted goodness and happiness to others, like healing, was respected and admired. Witchcraft and sorcery were considered to be forms of

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, “The holy and the unholy: sainthood, witchcraft and magic in late medieval Europe,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 24, no. 3 (1994): 355, 385.

<sup>13</sup> Kieckhefer “The Holy and the unholy: sainthood, witchcraft and magic in late medieval Europe.” 383.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Sebald, “Franconian Witchcraft: The Demise of a Folk Magic,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, 53, no. 3 (1980): 178.

heresy as they focused less on religion and more on magic and it was this kind of magic that became blurred with the everyday simple magic most people practiced. The cause of this blurring: the Reformation.

### **The Reformation and the Disenchantment of Magic**

The Reformation was the turning point for how magic and those who practiced magic were perceived in medieval society. It initiated the shift from having two distinct types of magic to the blending of the two forms into one seemingly evil entity. This stripped the effectiveness of any simple magic witches performed: the magical effects of a spell were not a result of the words or gestures used but rather, their access to and control over demonic power was made to rest entirely on an explicit pact with Satan.”<sup>15</sup> This also meant that women who possessed mystical powers they claimed were from God were instantly thought of as witches and were at risk of being persecuted as either witches or heretics, even if they were telling the truth or had never done anything demonic as

“in the century prior to the eruption of Protestantism, reformist impulses already animated many clerical authorities, feeding increased concern about proper religiosity, lay piety, and putative superstition. A number of these authorities became particularly troubled by the common spells, charms, healing rites, and other simple ritualized acts widely used by laypeople and also by many clerics. Fearing that these rites entailed at least tacit invocation of demons, authorities judged them to be erroneous and therefore

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<sup>15</sup> Michael D. Bailey, “The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature,” *American Historical Review*, 111, no. 2 (2006): 386.

superstitious. In this they followed long-standing Christian conceptions of the potentially demonic nature of virtually all magic.”<sup>16</sup>

The church, despite being the entity that began blurring these lines and declaring all magic to be evil, was also affected negatively as “authorities were also obliged to address the nature of many common healing and protective rites, both official ceremonies and formally approved practices as well as more fully popular improvisations often derived from these—those rites of power that Keith Thomas evocatively, although anachronistically, labeled the ‘magic of the medieval church,’ and which David Gentilcore more accurately described as constituting a complex ‘system of the sacred’ that permeated pre-modern European society.”<sup>17</sup> Bailey goes on to explain how, in spite of persecuting people on mere suspicion of performing the smallest acts of magic (i.e. having a protective charm for health, etc.), they denied that the mystical rites of the Eucharist and Baptism had any effect and that as long as the intent of the person performing the rituals possessed good and proper faith, God would respond. However, this also backfired somewhat on the church. All witchcraft rituals were deemed evil and taboo without a second thought but, after being forced to address the same issues in the “magical” rites the church participated in (sacraments, etc.), left church rituals alone with the excuse that God would respond as long as proper faith was maintained. This implied that people should seek to rid themselves of questionable rites (i.e. witchcraft and magical practices) and only perform church approved rituals.

Healers, as discussed above, fit into this type of restriction as they are largely a Christian invention, functioning within the confines of the dogma, assuming that God could be approached

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<sup>16</sup> Bailey “The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature,” 385.

<sup>17</sup> Bailey “The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature.” 386.

through special (and secret) prayers or rituals and that he would avert or heal a witch's curse; the Catholic church in some areas considered the healer as practicing a folk custom that was neither condemned or approved.<sup>18</sup> This also proved that the mentality behind blurring the lines of good and bad magic was that the magical rituals practiced were only considered evil because they were not approved by the church and so associated with the devil as "submitting to the devil, worshipping demons, and engaging in diabolical sabbaths, witches damned themselves, and by performing *maleficium* they harmed others; but perhaps their foulest act, in the minds of clerical authorities, was that by deceiving others about the true nature of witchcraft and tempting them into seeking the aid of witches, they corrupted innocent Christian souls."<sup>19</sup> The Reformation was a time of great change and so everything in medieval society came under scrutiny, including practices that would not have been considered evil in the past. As religious fervour grew, fear of the unknown and unexplainable raised suspicions, causing a deep mistrust in anything that was not approved by the church or explained by religious beliefs.

### **Fear of a Name Only Increases Fear of the Thing Itself**

The very word "magic" inspires certain emotions and opinions in people. Many are indifferent, but others are instantly enraged, suspicious and distrustful of it as it carries connotations of the unexplainable. Animals snarl and turn vicious when afraid or suspicious: it was just so with medieval society. Society turned into a snarling, frightened animal as a result of all the change they were experiencing from the Reformation, causing them to lash out in defence at that which they did not understand. This indicated fragmentation of magic: magic is always

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<sup>18</sup> Sebald, "Franconian Witchcraft: The Demise of a Folk Magic." 178.

<sup>19</sup> Bailey "The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature." 390.

organic since the power of it comes from merging with the entirety. This is what is considered “natural” and someone who can mystically join and become one with the universe was considered “a natural.” Fragmentation separated these two things, contributing to the decline of it in medieval society. This is what the Reformation caused and where society turned on magic and those who practiced it. Their uncertainty over the transformations of religious institutions as well as the variety of religious beliefs and practices as a result of the Reformation caused them to, out of ignorance and fear, generalise everything they did not understand (and was not under religious explanations, such as communion and baptism) into the category of evil and demonic. Gabor Klaniczay argues that the concept of witchcraft blended together to become the concept of demonic practices as “witch hunts [are] the most efficient means of suppressing and disciplining popular culture, resulting in a devastating ‘acculturation’...all traditional beliefs, popular festivities, dances, customs, and healing practices could be stigmatized and forbidden... people living in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even cultivated, high-ranking intellectuals...attributed the status of reality to magical phenomena and bewitchments and agreed with the measures taken against witches.”<sup>20</sup> By suppressing the culture and society of the people who practiced magic, the practice itself would either go underground as people practiced it secretly or it would cause people to stop performing or to rethink their decision to practice magic.

Klaniczay’s article, “A Cultural History of Witchcraft,” calls into question whether witchcraft trials were deliberately induced by authorities or if they were merely the result of panic and disapproval at the manipulation of misunderstood forces. There was a new cultural history of witchcraft forming in which traditional concepts were being made more vulnerable

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<sup>20</sup> Gabor Klaniczay, “A Cultural History of Witchcraft,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 5, no. 2 (2010): 196.



and dangerous in the later Middle Ages by the church's interventions. The culture was experiencing social anxiety concerning not only the normal things such as death and rebellion against oppressive rule but also the "Reformation's and Counter-Reformation's impact on popular literature...beyond the acculturation model, the opposition of popular and elite versions of belief concerning witchcraft, and the problem of the general climate of anxiety in the early modern period, there was a fourth fertile territory within the popular culture approach to research on witchcraft: examination of the conflicts related to popular medicine, healing and midwifery."<sup>21</sup> As a result, there is the possibility that witchcraft persecutions and trials were a product of the panic and disapproval on behalf of the authorities leading the quest to eradicate the practice of magic in medieval society.

Bailey also addresses the idea of fear and ignorance towards those who practiced magic. However, he points out that just being accused of performing witchcraft was not the worst thing: it was something deeper and more evil they were being accused of when targeted for performing magic, even if that magic was something as simple as having a protective amulet in their home. They were accused of being a *malefica* (a person who works harmful sorcery against others); yet "during the years of the great European witch-hunts, the term *malefica* carried a far more specific and far more sinister meaning than just a person accused of working harmful sorcery against others. Witches were certainly believed to perform magic with the aid of demons, indeed via the supplication and worship of demons. But worse even than that, they were accused of complete apostasy, of rejecting their faith and surrendering their souls to Satan himself in exchange for their dark powers."<sup>22</sup> By being accused of this, they were essentially being accused of damning

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<sup>21</sup> Klaniczay, 200.

<sup>22</sup> Michael D. Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 76, no. 4 (2001): 962.

themselves for all eternity and of possessing the desire to damn as many other people as they possibly could. This is incredibly unstable for society, especially if those accused are completely innocent. Once accused, it became incredibly difficult to convince others of their innocence. The fear of magic and of what it could potentially mean if used incorrectly was stronger than the reality of what magic was and caused it to all become evil.

It was this fear of magic that also led to the creation of the modern stereotype of a witch and her practices. Today's society has the image of an ugly old hag (or beautiful young woman, which can sometime be even more sinister through the contrast of beauty and ugliness), cackling over a cauldron or casting a spell over someone. However, this is a false perspective: the reality is that witches (and wizards) were usually people who practiced natural magic for the purposes of everyday issues such as protection and health. It was only the minority of practitioners who veered toward the dark side and practiced evil sorcery for the purposes of causing harm and pain. It was this minority that ruined it for the majority, as so often is the case. It was those who practiced dark magic that the religious authorities were attempting to eradicate, an effort also affecting the ones who only used charms and spells to help themselves or the people they cared about and had no desire to ever practice black magic. However, in the time before the Reformation, the existence of black magic and the relationship between natural and demonic magic can be seen through the literature produced of the time, especially in the Arthurian tales.

### **Magic's Reflection in Medieval Literature**

Now that the mentality of medieval society towards magic has been established and explained, the portrayal and reflection of this mentality in literature can be examined. While there are many more instances than the ones given below of the portrayal of magic and

witchcraft in literature, the examples have been restricted to female characters in Arthurian legends simply because women were more often targeted and persecuted for practicing witchcraft in medieval society as “empirical confusion of sainthood and witchcraft arose, when it did at all, mainly in the case of women, for the obvious reason that women’s spirituality was often more suspect.”<sup>23</sup> In witchcraft trials throughout history, women have always been more commonly and more often accused of performing witchcraft and being witches than men have been of being wizards. Medieval society, as is the case in most of history, was rather misogynistic and viewed women as the weaker of the two sexes. This supposed weakness of spirit and will made them easier targets for witchcraft trials as they were believed to be more easily swayed and persuaded than men. It was believed that the devil would have an easier time of convincing women to entering into a contract with him over men and so would result in large numbers of women being (usually falsely) accused and put through ridiculous and rather stupid examinations to test their innocence. This mentality towards women being weaker (referring back to Eve in the Garden of Eden), while most certainly portrayed in literature, was challenged in the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

Jeanette Smith’s article compares and examines modern Arthurian fantasy and the role of women in today’s retellings to the traditional Arthurian legends. In the traditional tales, one of the most familiar figures is the “Besieged Lady” whose castle is liberated by a young knight and who she then rewards with her love.<sup>24</sup> Women were always portrayed as passive characters to the men, staying at home while knights went off to fight or waiting to be rescued. It was very rare to encounter a female character with any kind of personal power or strength. The female characters

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<sup>23</sup> Kieckhefer “The Holy and the unholy: sainthood, witchcraft and magic in late medieval Europe.” 379.

<sup>24</sup> Helaine Newstead, “The Besieged Ladies in Arthurian Romance,” *PMLA*, 63, no. 3 (1948): 803.

that did have control of their own lives and fates, such as priestesses or witches, were usually portrayed as evil or wicked since controlling their own bodies threatened the ideals of male ownership and supremacy.<sup>25</sup> Morgan le Fey and Merlin, for example, are two of the most powerful magical figures in literature and popular culture, yet she is always portrayed as evil while Merlin is portrayed as good. Even Mordred, the result of Morgan and Arthur's incest, reflects badly on Morgan rather than Arthur. While Merlin inherited his power, Morgan learned "necromancy" in the nunnery she grew up (again, mixing magic with religion).<sup>26</sup> Merlin did not choose to acquire magic, he was simply born with it while Morgan actively chose to learn it. This makes her a threat to male control and so assigns her the persona of an evil character as a result of her mischief and trouble making for Arthur.

However, while many modern retellings of Arthurian legends are still told from the male point of view, keeping women defined through their relationships towards the men, there are a growing number of novels that are portraying female Arthurian characters as the protagonists and are giving them a positive light as in the traditional literature, there are accounts only of the births of Merlin and Arthur and it is a striking feature of the new literature that women are portrayed with full histories of their own.<sup>27</sup> According to Marion Zimmer Bradley, the author of a contemporary Arthurian novel centered on Morgan, *The Mists of Avalon*, throughout history "women have been reared on myths/legends/hero tales in which men do the important things and women stand by and watch and admire but keep their hands off."<sup>28</sup> <<YOU'RE SORT OF SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ON THIS ISSUE—WHICH HAS RECEIVED A HECK OF A

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<sup>25</sup> Jeanette C. Smith, "The Role of Women in Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy," *Extrapolation*, 35, no. 2 (1994): 140.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, "Magic in the Romances and Related Literature," *Magic in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 105-115.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, "The Role of Women in Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy." 134.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, "The Role of Women in Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy." 130.

LOT MORE ATTENTION THAN MAGIC IN THESE TEXTS. I'D CUT BACK ON SOME OF IT. I AM NOT AGAINST TAKING THIS APPROACH. IT'S JUST THAT BRADLEY GETS A BIT OLD FOR ME THESE DAYS (IRONICALLY). MALORY IS STILL FRESH. CAN'T EXPLAIN IT, BUT I'M NOT A MISOGYNIST. I JUST DON'T WANT YOU TO VEER OFF POINT. This portrayal of the normally wicked magical character as the protagonist telling her side of the story is a popular subject in modern society as author Gregory Maguire did just that with the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*. His book, *Wicked*, tells her side of the story and provides a more sympathetic character that makes the original one seem far less wicked than L. Frank Baum surely intended her to be.

However, not all Arthurian legends are necessarily misogynistic. One Arthurian legend that has come under scrutiny for misogyny is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While certainly the most misogynistic of all the romances, Gerald Morgan attempts to prove the opposite. There is the opinion that Gawain goes from a noble Knight of the Round Table to a peasant capable of abusing the women in the household of the Green Knight.<sup>29</sup> This particular Arthurian legend is interesting in that it examines the relationship between chivalry, magic and religion through two different games: the Beheading Game and the Exchange of Winnings Game. Morgan's article examines these games and uses them to disprove the idea that Gawain is a misogynist. He states if there is to be an investigation into misogyny in the Middle Ages, we should look to philosophers and churchmen rather than to a knight like Gawain as knights are inspired by women and prepared to die for them and that Gawain possesses the qualities of a true knight. His courage and fidelity to his word are flawless during the Beheading Game: he keeps his word to meet the Green Knight for him to strike a blow even after seeing him pick up his severed head

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<sup>29</sup> Gerald Morgan , "Medieval Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst against Women in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Modern Language Review*, 97, no. 2 (2002): 265-278.

and ride away, perfectly alive. He is also courteous to the lady of the Green Knight's house the entire time he is involved in the Exchange of the Winnings game and only fails in his virtuous, chivalric duty when he fails to exchange one of his winnings with his host. This is essentially grace: to have grace is the most important knightly virtue. While the lady is portrayed as deceitful and conniving in trying to convince Gawain to kiss her when her husband is out, Gawain is still frustrated and upset about his failure to find courage to see through this deceit<sup>30</sup> as well as the courage to face the Green Knight without a magical lace girdle (another example of how amulets and charms were used as good magic to protect and heal).

It is this disappointment towards his failure that Morgan states is why readers view him as anti-feminist despite the fact that Gawain has proven himself to be all a chivalric knight should be, in spite of the rant he goes on against women at the end. After all, "what brings him safely through his encounters with the world of magic are the 'passive' but (in the circumstances) very exacting virtues of patient fortitude, truth, piety, and chastity: virtues which are frequently annexed in part by the typical Arthurian hero."<sup>31</sup> While misogynist aspects of Arthurian literature are not directly related to the mentalities of magic and witchcraft in medieval society, the examples provided are useful for showing how women were viewed in the Middle Ages and, indirectly, why women were more often targeted over men for being witches and for practicing sorcery.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>30</sup> Morgan, "Medieval Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst against Women in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."

<sup>31</sup> T McAlindon, "Magic, Fate, and Providence in Medieval Narrative and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *The Review of English Studies*, 16, no. 62 (1965): 121

While modern mentalities of magic and witchcraft are vastly different than the mentalities held by medieval society, it is always within the literature and the language of each era that will portray the fears, insecurities and beliefs of a particular society. Language is what binds humans together and it is the power of language that has been repeatedly praised and promoted as being able to influence and affect people's opinions and ideals. It is this power of language that makes books so valuable as, by becoming immersed in the language, the ability to be transported in the imagination to another place or being influenced by opinions and ideas is achieved using nothing but words. Medieval society was very aware of – and had a strong belief in – the existence of magic in their surroundings and in books. Although societal and historical issues eventually led to the decline of magic and the blurring of differences between good and bad magic, their belief in the existence of magic in their surroundings and its ability to be harnessed by the power of language can only be understood by looking at the historical context of the society as well as its reflection in the literature of the time. practice it as well as the literature produced during this time.

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