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PRIN Monsters, Sorcerers, and Witches of Northwestern Europe: The Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Otherness in Literature for Popular Audiences.

University of Naples L'Orientale

*Il volume è finanziato dall'Unione europea – Next Generation EU, Missione 4
Componente 1 – PRIN 2022*

*PROT. 2022M92E5J – CUP B53D23022870001 – Responsabile scientifico
Prof. Luca Baratta.*

NORTH AND MAGIC

**MYTHS, WISE WOMEN, SPELLS
AND WITCHES IN THE SCANDINAVIAN
AND GERMANIC WORLD**

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CARLA RIVIELLO, CONCETTA SIPIONE, LETIZIA VEZZOSI**





ISBN
979-12-218-2468-1

PRIMA EDIZIONE
ROME 27 FEBRUARY 2026

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editor wants to express her heartfelt thanks to the Department of Comparative, Linguistic and Literary Studies of the University of Naples “L’Orientale” for the institutional support, to the contributors of the volume for their precious collaboration and to the colleagues of the PRIN project *Monsters, Sorcerers, and Witches of Northwestern Europe: The Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Otherness in Literature for Popular Audiences*. The editor is also very grateful to the scholars of magic, Old Norse and other relevant fields she has had the opportunity to communicate and study with over the years while studying the magical world of the North, especially those working at the Arnamagnæan Institute of the University of Copenhagen for their encouragement and hospitality.

INTRODUCTION

MARIA CRISTINA LOMBARDI

North and Magic. Myths, Wise Women, Spells, and Witches in the Scandinavian and Germanic World

This volume presents a number of articles by scholars of Germanic and Nordic Philology as well as of Scandinavian Studies written within the PRIN 2022 research project *Monsters, Sorcerers, and Witches of Northwestern Europe: The Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Otherness in Literature for Popular Audiences*. The project involves the Universities of Siena, Turin, Florence and Naples “L’Orientale”.

Discussions of magic over the past decades have been shaped by a variety of experiences and interests. Excellent overviews of magic theories are, for example, those of H. Geerts 1975, Kickhefer, 1989, Flint 1991, Stephens 2002, Burnett and Ryan 2006, Bailey 2007, Rooper 2009, Schjødt 2012, Mitchell, 2025.

In *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Richard Kieckhefer describes magic as «a kind of crossroads where different pathways in medieval culture converge. First of all, it is a point of

intersection between religion and science [...]. Secondly, magic is an area where popular culture meets with learned culture. [...] Thirdly magic represents a particularly interesting crossroads between fiction and reality»⁽¹⁾.

Our research has developed these three aspects dealing with several topics in the field of medieval and postmedieval magic, while pointing out directions for future scholarship. Scandinavian and Germanic medieval magic is today certainly proving itself a fertile subject for scholarly inquiry. New sources are regularly being identified, new ways of interpretation are being applied to long familiar texts, new methodologies have developed contrasting interpretations, and significant questions of cultural and social history are being addressed.

James Frazer's inspiring text, *The Golden Bough*, had explored magic and its relation to religion⁽²⁾, being the starting point of important studies such as Malinowski's. His illuminating analysis concludes that both magic and religion are based strictly on mythological tradition, and that they both exist in the atmosphere of the miraculous, in a constant revelation of their wonderworking power⁽³⁾. This enlightening view has guided our research which has singled out how Christianization in North-Western Europe brings to light forms of heathen magic that were transformed into Christian rituals, suggesting constructive entanglements between Christians and pagans and demonstrating a range of continuities between pre- and

(1) KIECKHEFER R., *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 1.

(2) FRAZER J. G., *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

(3) MALINOWSKI B., *Magic, Science and Religion*, Mansfield Centre, Martino Publishing, 2015, p. 89.

post-Christianized European cultures. For example, the late and slow Christianization of Scandinavia, from the eighth to the fourteenth century, resulted in a uniquely extended period of Christian-pagan coexistence. Abundant surviving evidence offers the opportunity to investigate different models of re-elaboration of earlier pagan magic as shown by several runic stones with an ambiguous iconography linked to both traditions spread in Gästrikland, a Northern region of Sweden. Our textual sources for the recovery of pre-Christian and Christian magic in the North have been various and heterogeneous: for example sagas are rich of realistic presentations of pagan magic, but we have to consider that their forms are products of the post-conversion world⁽⁴⁾.

Equally compelling in investigating later sources has been our quest to understand how and why the notion of witchcraft developed as it did, generating the extent of worry and violence which has inspired enormous amounts of writings. Such texts show that medieval temporal and spiritual authorities associated magic with the activity of demons and gradually imputed heresy to the practice of magic. New procedures such as the inquisitorial mode of investigation and judicial torture made the identification, prosecution, and punishment of magic more efficient. New clerical organizations, such as the Dominican order, were extremely active in the condemnation and prosecution of magic. The equivocal and irregular medieval ways of distinguishing the natural and the supernatural and the subtle distinctions between the miraculous and the

(4) RAUDVERE C. and SCHJØDT P., *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, Lund, Nordic Academic Press, 2012.

magical clearly appear in the so called “texts with normative functions”⁽⁵⁾. Among these, homilies and penitentials as well as law codes, taken into consideration in this volume, offer assessments of illegal behaviours, often disapproved both by church and state authorities. For example, the Old Norse homiletic warning against aphrosisiacs is connected with Anglo-Saxon sermon literature and the magical flight we know from a saint’s life has probably arrived in Scandinavia from Continental folk traditions⁽⁶⁾.

The volume develops various aspects of magic and uses different approaches and investigating instruments, combining diachronic and synchronic dimensions. Its articles are devoted to magic and witchcraft seen by numerous perspectives: language, philology, textual transmission, translation, folklore.

Simonetta Battista’s paper is based on some passages on the origin of magic as it is represented in Old Norse translation literature, particularly in *Stjórn*, a compilatory work which combines the contents of some books of the Old Testament with commentaries from the *Historia Scholastica*, *Speculum Historiale* and other Latin sources. By comparing these passages with findings in other contexts, an attempt is made to draw parallels among the ways in which the origin of magic and some representative figures of magicians are shown in different Old Norse contexts.

Jasmin Bria’s study traces textual links between the *Brut* and the *Vita Merlini*, demonstrating how Lazamon adapts Geoffrey’s material through his own cultural lens. Moreover, through an etymological survey, Bria examines

(5) MITCHELL S., *Old Norse Folklore. Magic Witchcraft, and Charms in Medieval Scandinavia*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca/London, 2025, p. 19.

(6) *Ibidem*.

the transition from “Morgan” to “Argante”, hypothesizing a moment of linguistic transition. Finally, the paper situates the role of elves within a broader folkloric context of medieval England.

Eleonora Cianci’s article proposes a historically grounded interpretation of the so-called *Sélestat charm* (Bibliothèque Humaniste, Cod. 134), a short bilingual marginal text the opening line of which has resisted explanation since its first edition. Then, addressing both its Latin and German components, she identifies formulae and motifs that link this charm to other known charms and related texts. Following, based on the example of the *Sélestat* material, Cianci shows how early medieval charms derive their meaning not only from formulaic counterparts, but also from the local, manuscript-bound alignment of penitential instruction, liturgical authority and vernacular efficacy.

Angela Iuliano explores Isac Friberg’s book of magic (1770), an interesting example of Swedish black book preserved at the Skövde Stadsmuseum. Her study analyses the text synchronically (from the literary point of view) and diachronically (in all its heterogenous contents: charms, medical recipes, complex exorcisms, alchemical references), providing a meaningful glimpse on cultural and social aspects of 18th-century Scandinavia.

Maria Cristina Lombardi analyzes the role of bones as central elements in Scandinavian charm healing procedures, tracing the practice of definitely eliminating magic evil-doers by breaking their backbones, found in some Nordic texts, back to other European and Oriental traditions. The contribute suggests the existence of beliefs in such a bone or in the marrow as the seat of life (as the “resurrection bone” to which the *Talmud* alludes). The article

aims to investigate the motif of “back-breaking” as a means of destroying evil beings – which appears rooted also in Scandinavia – by investigating and comparing texts belonging to different Nordic genres and traditions (sagas, skaldic verses, charms, folktales), reconstructing common elements and patterns in order to discover the possible origin and tracing the spreading of the motif.

Agneta Ney concentrates on the phenomenon of shape-shifting in some Old Norse poetic and prose texts, starting from the *Poetic Edda*, passing through the Sagas of Icelanders and the Legendary sagas. Her study also analyses whether shapeshifting is related to gender, if it is due to self-shifting or to an external influence (such as social categories or particular spaces), and how it was performed, for example by words or actions or both..

Carla Riviello’ contribute examines two texts belonging to the Old English homiletic tradition about St. Matthew: the anonymous text entitled *Sancte Andreae* and Ælfric’s *Natale Sancti Mathei Apostoli et Evangelistae*. Despite the different contexts and sources, Riviello points out the common hostility from pagan magicians evidenced in both texts. Through analysing the two homilies and comparing them with their potential sources and analogues, this essay demonstrates that both stories share a representation of magic as a feature of an “Elsewhere” that Christianisation, as a process of assimilation and erasement of “Otherness”, transforms into a comforting “Here”.

Concetta Sipione shows the crucial role played by female figures (such as Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr and Grímhildr) in the Eddaic *Völsung-Niflung* cycle in offering magic potions, on several occasions and for various purposes (to strengthen memory, to inspire courage and determination,

to induce oblivion or to suppress pain and hostility). By comparing different episodes, Sipione points out how they appear as ancient manifestations of the typically female function of “drink offering”, as well as inspirers and manipulators. A prime example is Grímhildr, who in the *Völsunga saga* (chap. XXVI) is referred to as *in fjolkunnga* and *grimmhuguð kona*, and a deviser of strategies aimed at consolidating the family and dynastic position.

Letizia Vezzosi’s paper investigates the semantic and rhetorical construction of the “extraordinary” in Middle English sermons, challenging the assumption that terms such as wonder, marvel, and miracle function as interchangeable synonyms within homiletic discourse. Her analysis demonstrates that these lexical choices operate within a highly structured rhetorical pattern which is used for guiding moral interpretation and enforce orthodoxy. By mapping distinct semantic fields, the article demonstrates that homiletic literature reorganizes the vocabulary of the supernatural also to defend the doctrine of the Real Presence, and reinforce clerical authority against the threats of skepticism and heresy.

While far from being exhaustive, we hope that this volume, by its differeny approaches to magic and witchcraft, albeit geographically and chronologically limited, will contribute to a deeper understanding of magic, at least of some of its aspects. Such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, widespread in time and space, calls for a continuous interplay between its different mechanisms oscillating from higher to lower social levels, laymen and clergy, elite and popular literature: a shared effort and a task we have undertaken and that we hope to have fulfilled.

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