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*Dialogues among Books in Medieval Western Magic and Divination* edited  
by Stefano Rapisarda and Erik Niblaeus

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*Dialogues among Books in Medieval Western Magic and Divination* is a volume of collected scholarship—a preface and seven chapters—that emerged from a conference on divination in Erlangen in 2012. It offers a competent and thought-provoking introduction to the ways that magical texts can be historically interpreted in relation to one another and to other kinds of literature. The quality of the individual chapters and the coherence of the whole are excellent.

The value of this volume lies in its thoughtfully designed scope, the complementary relationship of the selected essays to one another, and the caliber of each contribution in its own right. A word to each of these strengths. The contributions share a common interest in understanding how texts on magic relate to one another and how other texts—on magic and otherwise—become critical touchstones for the authors of magical works. As the contributors work to explain, the significance of these 'touchstones' might be addressed explicitly or simply alluded to by the medieval authors. They might also relate to the magical text in a variety of ways, e.g., by underpinning, contradicting, or rivaling the magical ideas and practices contained in the books that refer to them. Several of the chapters work in detail with particular manuscripts and so offer an apparatus in narrative form to the specific text under scrutiny. The approach of the contributors in this regard is well-founded and yet, to the extent that they are asking these questions of texts on magic and divination, somewhat new: the idea that such medieval writings are worthy of meticulous evaluation has inspired this kind of scholarship only in the last couple of decades and follows upon a long silence, or even hostility, toward a careful reading of this kind of medieval literature. *Dialogue among Books* ably and clearly demonstrates how worthwhile this new appreciation is.

The seven chapters themselves hold together well. Rapisarda's first chapter sets the stage by laying out ways that books on magic can be analyzed according to their engagement with a body of authoritative texts. Rapisarda develops his notion of 'canon' with reference to Harold Bloom, while trying to extract Bloom's ideas from the distinctive context of the American culture wars. Rapisarda's backdrop gives depth and coherence to the set of chapters that follows.

The first pair of chapters after Rapisarda's introduction examines later medieval official stances toward divination and evaluates the key canonical texts informing that stance. Erik Niblaeus considers the development of a patristic condemnation of astronomical divination that was derived from a particular reading of the 'canonical' Christian scriptures and would itself become canonical to later medieval thinkers. Jean-Patrice Boudet, who may be known to readers of this journal for his leading-edge study of divination in the later Middle Ages, *Entre science et nigromance* [2006], evaluates the significance of the *Centiloquium*, a work wrongly ascribed to the second-century astronomer Ptolemy, in the later medieval discussions over (and divided conclusions on) the doctrinal validity of astrology. Allegra Iafrate's chapter serves as a warning to those who imagine a univocal canon for authors of magical texts. Taking a particular manuscript of a collection of spells, she meticulously compares references in the text itself, on the one hand, and in the illustrations, on the other, and highlights the distinct and at times contradictory appeals to authority.

The next pair of chapters shows the different ways in which a given text of divination can be evaluated depending on the broader context of writings in which it is put. Thus, Katy Bernard offers a close reading of a particular book of spells and then a comparative reading of that text against other contemporary ones. Alberto Alonso Guardo examines a minor treatise of Thomas of Aquinas on the casting of lots, drafted in response to a question about the permissibility of using lots in selecting a new bishop.

The last chapter is by Julien Véronèse, who has published widely on the *Ars notoria*, a collection of exercises through which angels provide the practitioner with hidden knowledge and insight. He offers a synthesis of the scholarly literature on the *Ars* since Thorndike's notice of it in the *History of Magic and Experimental Science* [1923–1958], highlights its highly evolving

and unstable nature, and demonstrates its wide influence and popularity beyond the Middle Ages and into the 18th century and beyond.

In the final analysis, the book's overview is sober and clear. It is the last word on none of the historiographical or historical questions that it raises. Still, it provides an always factual and often insightful introduction to the history of divination, the nature of its textuality, and the problematic of its legitimacy in the history of its textuality. In this regard the volume does not reach beyond its carefully laid out grasp; and the reader, especially if new to the field, will be exposed to the most important issues, investigated skillfully. The editors, Stefano Rapisarda and Erik Niblaeus, are to be complimented for their care in compiling the volume; and the editors of the *Micrologus Library*, in which several volumes of collected scholarship on magic have appeared in recent years, are to be complimented for their inclusion of this one, to be counted among the best.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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