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Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages (review)

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Mitchell, Stephen A. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. Pp. 368. ISBN 978-0812242904.

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The historical and ethnographic study of magic has long been perplexed by the magic-religion-science categorical triad made famous by James Frazer and other early anthropologists (including the more subtle Bronisław Malinowski). Having now self-consciously departed from the evolutionary narratives that sponsored this formulation, scholars are faced with the challenge of making distinctions between these categories—or refusing to make them—without the reassuring positivist fables about an “age of magic” giving way to religion (the latter tinged at first with materiality and occultism, then refined into more rational forms), before finally ceding to science the territory of history.

While the association of the triad with modernity’s ideologues has rendered it outmoded in many contemporary anthropological contexts, its contingency has allowed it to persist as part of the apparatus of the historiography of Western magic. It is no longer a politically forceful narrative framework (though Keith Thomas’s famous *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, retained more than a hint of Frazerian whiggishness), nor a hard set of classes into which practices can unequivocally be placed—and yet the triad is still introduced in the methodological setup of most recent works in the history of magic. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the history of Western magic is also the history of how magic-religion-science (both in the evolutionary and purely categorical senses) came to be a normative method of understanding the practices it tried to encompass. It is the task of effective intellectual history to archaeologize its own ways of knowing. That we find these modern categories problematic when examining, for example, the diversity of European folk practices or the history of medicine is interesting in its own right. Thus the second reason for the triad’s durability is that it gives form to modern scholarship even as it remains under sustained critique. It is, if not a straw man exactly, nevertheless a useful error. We do not dispense with the vocabulary altogether (it does not belong only to the early anthropologists, after all), but simply reveal its permeability where previously there was held to be conceptual partition.

Of course, debunking or destabilizing categories will only get us so far—we must not, in dismantling these descriptive tools, lose our ability to describe. So we compromise: if we are to use “magic,” “religion,” and “science” as part of our terminology in writing the history of magic, we must first recognize the breadth of our potential lexicon (including nuanced, hyponymous terms like “theurgy,” “natural philosophy,” and so on), and second, we must readily permit hybridity.

On both accounts, Stephen A. Mitchell’s *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* is a study of considerable value. The variety of materials marshaled (literary, legal, ecclesiastical, and archaeological) is matched by a large array of English, Latin, and Norse terms, not all of which will be familiar to readers but which together affirm the messy, complicated, and often contradictory nature of the traditions under discussion. The special significance of this book, however, is in the way it uses its textual and methodological resources to redirect our attention from the usual terrain of Nordic cultural history. While Nordic magic has enjoyed plenty of attention from other historians (work which underpins much of *Witchcraft and Magic*), this book constitutes something of an intervention in the field. As Mitchell explains in the book’s preface, “To date, there have been no comprehensive evaluations of Nordic witchcraft beliefs between 1100 and 1525. . . . The reasons for this are many. In large part, it is explained by the tendency for many of the late medieval materials, such as the Icelandic sagas, to be appropriated to discussions of the much earlier Viking Age; moreover, there is a view among some specialists that nothing much happened with respect to Scandinavian witchcraft before circa 1400” (ix). This lacuna is understandable: at one end, many have considered saga to preserve an essentially oral form (making it a time capsule of early medieval tradition), while at the other, historians of early modern Scandinavia have access to the far more extensive witch trials of that period.

Rather than embrace the retroactive approach to saga (though he does not disallow such a movement where it can be performed with sufficient caution), Mitchell returns his literary material to its own moment of inscription. Here, narratives involving magic become part of the Scandinavian historical imaginary: “It is in this sense, as mainly thirteenth- and fourteenth-century uses of the past to express contemporary perspectives, that we should encounter the descriptions of historical sorcerers, witches, and magic” (75).

The constructed past is also the locus for a playing-out of religious and cultural anxieties over the Christian/pagan interface—anxieties which were, as Mitchell demonstrates, by no means merely theoretical in the Middle Ages, but which offered both “a palpable embodiment of heathen worship” and a concomitant

“possibility of discourse . . . a meta-language that could communicate complex ideologies on a high plain” (35). Time and again, sorcery is rhetorically linked with the pagan past, to the extent that a fourteenth-century statute of Archbishop Árni Einarsson (following the attitude of his predecessor, Páll Bárðarson) formally categorizes the use of runes as one of many heretical sins associated with sorcery. It is the disruptive power of *trolldom*, *galdr*, and other pagan-inflected beliefs and (real or imagined) practices that emerges as one of the volume’s central themes. As the medieval Church began to take a new interest in rumors of extreme forms of heresy, such as the diabolic pact, territories in which the pagan past remained culturally important gained a new framework for understanding the specter of apostasy. In attending to the specificities of the Scandinavian response to these developments, Mitchell offers countless moments of legal and ecclesiastical intervention that surprise and fascinate.

Mitchell also discerns familiar gendered patterns in these responses, whereby (in line with the rest of medieval Europe) women and men often faced strikingly different accusations—magic believed to have been worked by men, for example, was much more likely to be interpreted by the authorities as full-blown heresy. Women accused of witchcraft, on the other hand, were more often viewed in older, archetypal terms drawn from legend and folk traditions. Accordingly, the volume of accusations against men in Scandinavia seems to have increased in the later Middle Ages as the diabolic pact became a greater concern.

In assembling the range of examples here, Mitchell has done a substantial service to those interested in filling in the gap between the remote matter of Viking magic (for which the bulk of evidence is Christian) and the abundance of early modern witch trials (which were themselves contingent on the development of new models of heresy in the Middle Ages). This material compels Mitchell to the interpretation that the Nordic medievals held to a “magical worldview . . . a worldview that does not recognize the possibility of accidents or randomness: in the magical worldview everything is logically connected in a chain of causation” (143). While this is a far cry from the anthropology of Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (Macmillan, 1890–1915), it is, perhaps, a retreat from the complexity in evidence elsewhere in Mitchell’s book. The model arrived at might be used (or misused) to confirm that we have indeed left behind the “discarded image” (in C. S. Lewis’s terms) of premodernity—an argument rehearsed with yet more nostalgic periodizing in Charles Taylor’s *Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007). Mitchell’s own work makes it clear that the Middle Ages (Nordic or otherwise) were no more coherent on the issue of belief than our own. Moreover, it seems hazardous to try to conjure up a “worldview” from

evidence that has been selected partly based on its magical interest—just as it is now apparent that Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch tended toward reduction when they constructed “ages of faith” with their (often brilliant) histories of religion and society (e.g. Febvre, *Le problème de l’incroyance au XVIe Siècle: La religion de Rabelais*, Editions Albin Michel, 1942). What else, after all, is a magical worldview but the mentalité of an “age of magic”? And as Frazer’s example has taught us, inventing an age of magic is simply another way of inventing ourselves.

Reider, Noriko. *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010. Pp. 241. ISBN 978-0874217933.

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Noriko Reider’s study is an ambitious work that traces the multiple meanings of oni—one of the most famous Japanese demon figures—from the premodern era through the contemporary era. The texts she examines range from the famous medieval tale of *Shuten Dōji* to the anime of Nagai Gō (*Devilman*) and Takahashi Rumiko (*Inu Yasha*, *Urusei Yatsura*), not to mention some famous modern literary works by Edogawa Ranpō, Inoue Yasushi, and Nakagami Kenji. The nine chapters are mostly organized chronologically and are tied together by the overall claim that the oni represent “marginalized others” silenced by hegemonic authority. Reider clearly states in the introduction that her aim is to investigate “the evolution of their multifaceted roles and significance in Japanese culture and society” (xx). Her framework, in this manner, is similar to Susan Napier’s *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity* (Routledge, 1996), where Napier produced a comprehensive study of Japanese fantastic fiction by examining images of alien otherness in modern fiction. In fact, one of the theorists that Reider shares with Napier is Rosemary Jackson, whom Reider quotes to say that “the fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (xix). From the outset then, it becomes clear that Reider aims to complete a wide-ranging, encyclopedic guide to oni and to introduce a multitude of Japanese works for the English-speaking audience.