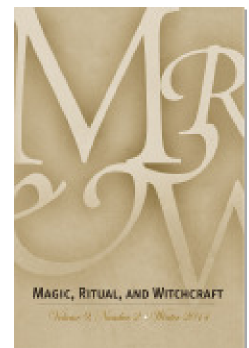
Under the Devil's Spell: Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy (review)



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on how magical beliefs are, in fact, developing in dynamic ways in modern European culture.

To some extent, the difficulty of defining the field of inquiry is a perpetual element in the study of magic. Not just in the modern period do scholars seeking to examine magical practices typically work from sources that have negative intellectual, moral, or legal views of the subject and that define "the magical" in negative ways. Yet the definitions those sources provide cannot be cast aside, partly because other contemporary understandings of magic and the magical are difficult to come by, and partly, also, because those condemning sources strongly affected contemporary understandings. The legal condemnation of witches as servants of Satan certainly affected early modern "popular" views of witchcraft, just as twentieth-century intellectual derision of magical beliefs in newspaper accounts affects attitudes of some practitioners even toward their own acts. Thus even the difficulties these two volumes raise, and the occasional shortcomings that can be detected in them, function as important points of introduction not just to the more recent history of European magic, but also to how scholars struggle to study it.

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MATTEO DUNI. *Under the Devil's Spell: Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy.* The Villa Rossa Series: Intercultural Perspectives on Italy and Europe 2. Florence: Syracuse University in Florence, 2007. Pp. xii + 187.

This is a useful, although ultimately curious, book. The early modern heartland of witchcraft and witch-hunting lay, of course, north of the Alps, and studies of northern Europe tend to dominate the historiography. Experts typically know that southern Europe presents something of a different magical world. While many general beliefs about magic and witchcraft held sway in the south as well as in the north, southern Europe offers notable variations: less outright witchcraft, for example, and more love magic. Institutionally, the highly bureaucratic Roman, Spanish, and Venetian Inquisitions all worked to restrict the sort of major witch hunts that were possible (although far from universal) in the north. Yet northern Europe, and particularly the German heartland of witch-hunting, is still too often presented as the early modern norm; other regions then assume the role of more or less interesting variants. All this is to say that a monograph focusing exclusively on magic

and witchcraft in Italy, and available in English (into which far too little Italian language scholarship has been translated), is very welcome indeed.

Beyond the fact that it fills a notable need, this book offers both broad coverage and a well-chosen archival base of sources. As a further service to Anglophone readers, extensive portions of these records are translated in a long appendix. There are even twenty pages of illustrations. The problem, however, is precisely that the book tries to do so many things, and to do them all in under two hundred pages. In fact, excluding the illustrations and appendix of source translations, the book is comprised of only an introduction and two chapters totaling a mere seventy-five pages. In this, Duni undertakes to survey all magical practices, from learned necromancy to witchcraft to common healing and love magic, for the entire period from the mid-fourteenth century through the end of the sixteenth. Drawing mainly on inquisitorial sources, he also feels the need to provide background on the ideology and operations of inquisitions throughout late medieval and early modern Europe. This means tremendous ground has to be covered in what amounts to a long essay.

In his introduction, Duni sketches his goals for the book. The most basic is to examine magic and witchcraft in northern Italy throughout the Renaissance, which he defines as the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. In this period, he notes, magical practices were implicated in many areas of life—they were in no way marginal (although some magical practitioners could be social marginal persons). He also makes a bit of a case for Italian exceptionalism, stating that northern Italy was the most "economically, politically, and especially culturally" advanced region in Europe at this time (p. 5). While this assertion might draw certain objections from experts in other regions, the line seems mainly intended to startle general readers: "my goodness, even in the advanced and enlightened Renaissance Florentines and Venetians believed in witches." Experts, of course, have long understood this basic fact, and the tone here is a good indication of Duni's intended audience. He follows this line with a more problematic generalization, stating that another reason for focusing on magic in Italy is that "atypical[ly] when compared to the majority of other European countries, the Italian states also provide a case in point to show how repressive institutions and their policies could be far from monolithic" (p. 5). Again, no expert would be shocked that the Roman Inquisition approached witchcraft with "unexpected caution and restraint, which prevented the outbreak of large-scale witch-hunts on the northern European model" (p. 6). Experts might well object, however, to the implication that the Parlement of Paris, for example, or English circuit courts were not equally restrained, or even that there was some "monolithic" character

to the myriad of courts that handled witchcraft cases—some with great restraint and some with horrific zeal—in German lands.

Moving away from generalizations, Duni introduces the archival foundation of his study, the inquisitorial records from Modena. These are, he explains, one of the few caches of inquisition records that stretch from the late medieval period to the eighteenth century in Italy. Moreover, unlike the much better known Venetian Inquisition, the one in Modena represents a far more typical legal apparatus for Renaissance Italy. Since his sources are inquisitorial, Duni decides that his first chapter must present background on inquisitorial ideology, institutions, and practice. He therefore speedily surveys medieval theology about magic, the place of magic in medieval legal thought as a ''mixed crime'' falling under both secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the rise of witch trials in early 1400s, sorcery and witch trials across all of northern Italy from the fourteenth through early sixteenth centuries, and then the restraining force of the Roman Inquisition after 1542. There are some interesting observations, but the chapter really presents only basic survey coverage. On one hand, this is what one would expect from the first chapter of a monograph. On the other hand, this is a monograph with only two chapters.

In his second chapter, Duni turns to his Modenese inquisition records to explore various categories of magic. First he looks at witchcraft, noting Modenese inquisitors dealt with relatively few cases that conformed to the full pattern of diabolical, conspiratorial cults of witches, and then he examines more elite forms of learned demonic magic, or necromancy. From necromancy, he moves to analyze of how magical and religious rites overlapped, and offers this basic summary: ''One could actually say that magic and religion did not really exist as two separate dimensions'' (p. 50). Again, general readers might be taken aback; experts will not be surprised. He then explores categories of magical use: love magic (extremely common in Italy—again experts have long known this and Duni offers no new explanation as to why), divination (out of a plethora of methods, he focuses almost exclusively on demonic divination, and then mentions divination by casting beans as his only non-demonic example), *maleficium*, and magical healing.

At the end of the chapter, he explores the social identities of magic-users. Most were women (three-fourths, conforming to the European norm, although there is no consideration of whether this reflects social reality or the particularly gendered inclinations of inquisitors). Most of these women appear to have been lower class, as suggested by the fact that many are labeled prostitutes. In making this brief assertion, however, Duni neglects to consider whether such statements were mere defamation, for then as now, ''whore''

could be a simple insult directed at a woman of supposedly loose moral character, and not a claim that she actually made a living by selling sex. Perhaps Duni has solid reasons for thinking "prostitute" really means "prostitute" in these cases, but in the brevity of his treatment, he does not offer any.

This, then, is the curious quality of this book. To some extent, it is a detailed study of magic and witchcraft in Modena conducted via inquisitorial records. Witness the extensive translations in the appendix, and the many colorful and quite informative examples of magical practitioners given throughout the second chapter. Yet there is only one chapter of such analysis, and that does not comprise anything like a satisfying study of this local social context. The rest of the book consists of a general survey of magic, witchcraft, and inquisitorial practices, resting for the most part on very responsible generalizations. There is great value to this as well, and a full book surveying Italian magic and witchcraft in English would be most welcome. Yet here, again, we get only a single chapter. This book is neither quite fish nor fowl. There is need for both of the faces it presents, and Duni has done good service by giving us at least a little of each. I wish there had been more.

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FLORIAN EBELING. *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*. Trans. David Lorton. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007. Pp. xiii + 149.

Florian Ebeling's central objective in *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus* is to delineate two parallel Hermetic traditions. Even if the discourses of the Hellenistic technical and philosophical-theological *Hermetica* cannot be considered to be entirely divergent, Ebeling argues that the history of their later dissemination became more or less rigidly divided between two camps—on one hand, the Italian Renaissance philosophers, who occupied themselves primarily with the "learned" *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*, and on the other, the German alchemists and Paracelsian natural philosophers, who drew primarily from Arabic technical *Hermetica* of which their colleagues south of the Alps were largely ignorant. In delineating these traditions, Ebeling seeks to dispel the myth of the rediscovery of Hermeticism by the Italian humanists—not only was Hermeticism alive and well in medieval Europe thanks to Arabic scholars and the Church Fathers, but the image of