

Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England

Review Number:

826

Publish date:

Saturday, 31 October, 2009

Author:

Heidi Breuer

ISBN:

9780415977616

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

200pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Catherine Rider

Medieval and early modern literature is full of magic. Invisibility rings, magicians, damsels with healing potions, love potions and many more characters and devices add colour and glamour to the stories, as well as moving the plots in interesting directions. There are also a growing number of recent studies that focus explicitly on the role of magic in these literary works. Heidi Breuer's approach is to focus on the gendered nature of magic in medieval and early modern literature. Magic, in these texts, is done by both men and women but how, Breuer asks, does the presentation of men's and women's magic differ? She argues that presentations of magic and magicians tend towards moral extremes: 'magic-users are saviours or they are villains, saints or devils' (p. 9), so what, she asks, is the role of gender in this process of polarization? Overall, she argues that what can be seen in medieval and early modern literature is a gradual 'villainization of feminine magic' (p. 10).

The book is structured chronologically. After the introduction, chapter two discusses the Arthurian literature of the 12th and 13th centuries, focusing on four writers in particular: Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon. Although these authors wrote in different languages and genres, Breuer argues that they present magic in similar ways, drawing on the same biblical and classical sources. In these texts, villainous female magical practitioners are strikingly absent. The women of 12th- and 13th-century literature often use magic or medicine (and the distinction between the two is often unclear in the source texts) for positive purposes such as healing the heroes' wounds, although Breuer also discusses Thessala in Chrétien de Troyes' *Cligés* who, rather more subversively, helps the heroine to preserve her virginity in the face of an unwanted marriage and later to escape the marriage by faking her own death. In

the context of the story, however, Chrétien portrays both of these actions as good things. These women, Breuer argues, reinforce existing male and female roles rather than threatening them. Women who heal knights enable them to continue fighting and win renown in the masculine world, and even Thessala's magic is non-confrontational, relying on secrecy and subterfuge rather than mounting an explicit challenge to the men in the story. Breuer links this portrayal of women's magic to the position of noblewomen in the 12th and 13th centuries and argues that in a world where women had little real power, there was no need to demonize powerful women. As might be expected in this situation, the source texts present male magical beings as more threatening and subversive. They take two very different forms. Giants represent the dangers of male aggression gone too far. By contrast, Merlin is powerful because he is able to transcend gender conventions, displaying a mixture of masculine and feminine behaviours, and in Layamon's text, also a mixture of human and bestial ones.

Chapter three discusses a set of 14th- and 15th-century Middle English romances which deal with the transformation of individuals. Female transformation is represented by the 'loathly lady' stories (a woman cursed with ugliness is freed by a knight who agrees to marry her and to give her control over her own appearance) and male transformation by the 'churlish knight' (an ugly and unchivalrous knight is transformed by the hero's unfailing courtesy). In both of these kinds of tale, magic can deceive the senses, resulting in an appearance that does not reflect reality. Initially it is not clear how this relates to the argument of chapter two, as the loathly ladies and churlish knights are rather different magical beings from those of 12th-century romance. In most, although not all, cases, they are the victims of magic rather than the users of it. The link comes towards the end of the chapter: many of the romances blame the lady or knight's transformation on a magic-wielding villain, often a woman and sometimes a wicked stepmother or mother-in-law. This, Breuer argues, reflects the growing economic opportunities open to women in this period, especially before marriage or in widowhood. The wicked women of these romances are women who are not mothers themselves, and they reflect the anxiety generated by the new economic possibilities for single women and widows. This is unlikely to be the only explanation for the emergence of wicked female magic-wielders in these stories, but that is not what Breuer is claiming, and she is careful to note that many other factors must be involved.

Chapter four takes the story to the 15th and 16th centuries, focusing on the works of Malory, Shakespeare and Spenser. In the works of these authors, Breuer argues, wicked female magical practitioners are more numerous and more dangerous than before. The magic of both men and women is more explicitly associated with illusion, deception and demons, reflecting the increasing tendency in intellectual culture to see all magic as demonic. Nevertheless, the women are portrayed as more villainous than the men. Breuer suggests that this reflects a backlash against women's increased economic opportunities from the mid 15th century onwards, which is plausible, although again unlikely to be the only explanation. The individual analyses of the literary works are interesting and persuasive, and in Malory's case the results are particularly striking. Malory died in 1471, long before the new stereotype of the devil-worshipping witch was leading to trials in England, but still he emphasizes the demonic nature of both male and female magic. The implications of this for the way in which magic was perceived in 15th-century England are intriguing, suggesting that despite the absence of trials, attitudes were changing. I wondered, however, if more could be made of the demonization of all forms of magic in these stories: male magicians may be on average less villainous than female ones, but the anxiety that these literary works project about all forms of magic is significant. I was also less convinced by some of the contextualization here. It seems odd, although not impossible, that the reaction to a narrowing of women's economic opportunities in the second half of the 15th century should be an intensified version of the reaction to their earlier expansion (as detailed in chapter three): yet more demonization of childless women. Other forces at work may include the way that magical practitioners were perceived more generally in the 15th and 16th centuries. Here the pattern is in some ways similar to what Breuer has found: the rise of the image of the devil-worshipping and usually female witch reflected anxieties about all forms of magic, but as in literature, learned male magical practitioners tended to receive less severe condemnation than women accused of magic.

Chapter five takes Breuer away from medieval and early modern literature and, she admits, out of her

comfort zone, to ask why modern society is still fascinated by wicked witches. What is the attraction of this stereotype for a culture that, mostly, no longer believes in magic? Again Breuer links this to women's economic opportunities. Even though women in the 20th and 21st centuries have many more opportunities than their medieval counterparts, she argues that many modern stories about wicked witches still reinforce the message that women's place is in the home and demonize women who step outside this role. Here Breuer argues persuasively for the relevance of medieval literary studies to modern gender history, and some modern-day witches lend themselves particularly well to her analysis: I was convinced by her argument that the film version of *The Wizard of Oz* emphasized domesticity as the ideal for women. Ideally it would have been nice to cast the net a bit wider. Witches are indeed everywhere in contemporary TV, film and literature, and it would be impossible to cover everything, but I thought it was a shame to restrict a discussion of gendered representations of witches on 1990s TV to *Charmed*: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s gay teenage witches don't fit Breuer's argument that 'good' witches are conventionally feminine as easily as the heroines of *Charmed* do, and it would have been interesting to see what she made of them, or of the hugely popular Harry Potter books.

There is much to recommend in this book. It is engagingly written, even when dealing with difficult concepts, and the linking of medieval with modern representations of magic is fascinating, especially because many students are first attracted to studying magic because of modern TV shows or novels. The argument that the portrayal of magical women is influenced by women's economic position, while not easily provable, provides much food for thought. Readers might also wish to add other parallels between medieval society and these literary depictions of magic: for example, Breuer's argument that 12th-century versions of Merlin gain power from transcending gender conventions made me think of the rise of clerical celibacy at about the same time and, earlier, the Gregorian Reform's linking of celibacy with control of the sacred.

Breuer's focus on gender is also useful, given how much historiography, especially of the early modern period, has focused on the association between women and witchcraft. Occasionally she could add more historiographical context. There are other studies of magic in romance which touch on gender, such as Michelle Sweeney's *Magic in Medieval Romance*, Helen Cooper's *The English Romance in Time*, and Carolyne Larrington's *King Arthur's Enchantresses* (1), and it would have been interesting to see Breuer engage with them. The survey of the prosecution of magical practitioners in chapter five seems to conflate the English and European evidence, as it is questionable how far the increase in the number of trials for magic in Europe as a whole in the 14th and 15th centuries had an impact on England. The recent work of Karen Jones and Michael Zell on church court records suggests that into the 16th century magic cases were not particularly common or harshly punished, a finding which compares interestingly with Breuer's analysis of Malory, which suggests that attitudes may have been changing despite the absence of trials.(2) It's impossible to get everything right, however, especially when looking outside your own discipline.

In places it would also have been useful to have greater precision. Breuer does not say what she means by 'witch'. In one sense, this lack of definition is fruitful. By asking the question 'Who has access to what kind of magic in these texts?' (p. 15) rather than starting with a preconceived idea of a magical practitioner, Breuer is able to compare a wide range of magical beings, from healing damsels to giants to the various incarnations of Merlin and Morgan Le Fay. However, it is sometimes difficult to tell exactly what she is looking for. What does it mean to say that 12th- and 13th-century Arthurian literature only 'featured the occasional witch' (p. 10), or that Thessala is 'the witchiest of all Chrétien's women' (p. 25)? What she is suggesting is that there is nothing in these texts that resembles the later stereotype of the witch (and the point is convincing), but it would have helped to specify exactly which characteristics were at issue. I also wonder how far it is useful to use the term 'witchcraft' to cover these very different uses of magic – for good and bad purposes, done in different ways by very different practitioners. It is difficult to know whether the medieval and early modern readers of these texts would have placed the damsels with healing potions in the same category as giants and Merlin. Breuer demonstrates so convincingly that the magic-wielders of 12th-century literature were very different from their 16th-century descendants, that at some points it becomes difficult to use the term 'witch' for both.

Overall, this is a stimulating and accessible contribution to a growing field, and has much to interest

historians of medieval and early modern magic.

The author intends to respond to this review in due course.

Notes

1. Michelle Sweeney, *Magic in Medieval Romance* (Dublin, 2000); Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2004); Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London and New York, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Karen Jones and Michael Zell, ““The divels speciall instruments””: women and witchcraft before the 'great witch-hunt'”, *Social History* 30, 1 (2005), 51.[Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:

muse

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pgn/summary/v027/27.1.davidson.html> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/826>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3809>

[2] <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pgn/summary/v027/27.1.davidson.html>