A Review Essay on Four Recent Reference Books on Magic

Owen Davies, Magic: A Very Short Introduction,
Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012,
ISBN 9780199588022.

Owen Davies (ed.), The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic,
Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017,
ISBN: 978019289778,
ISBN: 9780192884053.

Various Authors, A History of Magic, Witchcraft, and the Occult, London: DK (Penguin Random House) 2020,
ISBN: 9780241386118.

Owen Davies (ed.), The Oxford History of Witchcraft and Magic, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2023,
ISBN: 9780192884053.

The four books under scrutiny here appeared as pedagogical tools, among others, in the bibliography for my course *Theories of Magic (in Social Anthropology and History of Religions)*, held at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, during the Summer Term of the 2023/2024 academic year. Three of them were authored or edited by Owen Davies, a renowned British scholar of magic, a theme to which he has devoted the best part of his career (more than 25 years to date). With Oxford University Press he has in the past dozen years published a number of works, three of which are reviewed here. The fourth volume is by other authors and another publisher.

As is clear from the titles of these publications, the association between witchcraft and magic is now almost a given, or at least it is taken for granted, but things are more complicated from an anthropological (i.e. relativistic) point of view, which is bound to problematise the very notions of witchcraft and magic as well as the somewhat Eurocentric obviousness of their association. For example, it might be appropriate to notice that although witchcraft without magic can hardly exist, magic without witchcraft can indeed exist, and often it does exist in the various historical manifestations of magic practised in Europe. But this review essay is clearly not the place to develop any further these preliminary methodological observations of caution, and henceforth I will limit myself to commenting only upon the contents of the four books.

Let us start with the smallest and oldest of them, Owen Davies' *Magic: A Very Short Introduction*. It is a legitimate question to ask whether the Oxford University Press series of "very short introductions" is a sound publishing venture – apart from the commercial advantages it offers. Let it be said that separate from the ultimate merits of a book such as this one (many may wonder whether packing entire chunks of human knowledge into a booklet made of a few dozen pages is or isn't an intellectually worthwhile endeavour, or whether we should instead leave that task to encyclopaedias), the writing of *Magic: A Very Short Introduction* deserves to be saluted as an act of academic bravery, for writing a very short introduction on magic is indeed a courageous act. The reason is simple: the literature on magic (let alone the literature *of* magic) produced in the West, and especially in Europe, in the past several centuries and beyond, is no less than oceanic, and clearly indigestible in its entirety by any single author. This has also been observed by another international expert on magic, also a historian, Marco Pasi, who opined that "a serious bibliography on

magic would reach monstrous proportions"[1]. Moreover, what complicates things significantly is that there is absolutely no scholarly consensus on what magic even is, *au juste*, since, as Owen Davies writes in the very first line of the book, "defining 'magic' is a maddening task"[2]. And yet, despite these intellectual constraints, the author does succeed in giving a credible short overview of the matter.

The book is subdivided into eight (very) short chapters, each focusing on a specific theme (writing magic, practising magic, magic in the modern world, etc). Unsurprisingly, historical and anthropological accounts and theories are given greater attention than other approaches (Owen Davies is a social and cultural historian), such as the philosophical, psychological, and cognitive ones, or cultural, literary, and media studies, which are less prominent in the book. And yet the balance between different epistemological and theoretical insights, as well as the choice of case studies from a number of historical periods and geographical areas, is ultimately convincing, and Davies' exercise in scientific funambulism can be considered successful, overall. I, for one, appreciate his effort to avoid cultural self-centredness – for example, when discussing the studies and analyses produced by thinkers outside of the usual anglophone and francophone spheres. It can be concluded, in my opinion, that this very short introduction will be a useful tool in the hands of laypeople and BA students alike, or indeed in the hands of anybody willing to learn a little more about magic, one of the great themes in both Western and non-Western cultures. Even the specialist will surely find in this slim and light booklet insights from unknown authors, theories, or cultures under the rubric of the general problem of magic as a social, cultural, and historical phenomenon.

The two other books by Davies are not meant for the neophyte or the less well-read reader and instead target the learned readership in general, and of course university students and scholars in particular. The two are closely resembling products: *The Oxford History of Witchcraft and Magic* (2023) is nothing other than *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic* (2017) without the *Illustrated*, i.e. without the illustrations. Truth be told, this *Illustrated History*, in spite of being a bigger and more expensive book, does not truly offer that much added value compared to its imageless and colourless sibling. The illustrations are certainly well-selected, interesting, and representative, but some of them are somewhat common if not trite in the study of things magical and witchy, reproduced as they are in most books or websites on the matter. Only some of them will likely cause the expert to raise an eyebrow in surprise or amazement. Perhaps more images would have served the book better: there are little more than one hundred black and white illustrations and some fifteen colour plates. The plates are clumsily stuffed into a few pages in a separate section in the middle of the book – a custom that I thought extinct in modern printing –, which makes their consultation unpractical and unfriendly to a smooth reading experience. Still, the book is very good (as I claim further in this text), but the iconographic apparatus does not really offer significantly more than other books providing illustrations on the same theme.

Indeed, a reader interested in an illustrated book on magic (and witchcraft) with a focus on the illustrations rather than on analyses may want to turn to different products, such as the *History of Magic, Witchcraft, and the Occult* published by DK (a division of Penguin Random House). Among the many such illustrated books on magic on the market – I have counted at least half a dozen published in the past ten years only, and consulted half of these –, this one is by far the most aesthetically appealing, adorned as it is by an extremely rich iconographic collection of very well-selected images of all sorts of magical simulacra, scribblings, effigies, texts, curi-

1 Marco Pasi, "Theses de Magia" ("Theses on Magic"), *Societas Magica Newsletter*, Fall/20, 2008, 1-8: 2.

2 Owen Davies, *Magic: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, 1.

osities, realia, and paraphernalia – and quite the number of them. Also convincing are the short texts that do a very good job of introducing topics at times vast, thorny, or obscure, and a good job of popularising them in general. The foreword is penned by British star historian Suzannah Lipscomb, the scientific direction of the book was entrusted to a recognised scholar of magic, Sophie Page, and in the roster of authors figure names of published experts from the world of literature and journalism. The chapters' topics range from European folk magic to Chinese divination, from Western esotericism to the usage of magical amulets and stones all around the world, and from old or contemporary shamanic practices to fictional witchcraft on the screen. All topics are mostly presented and treated clearly and tactfully. Each of the hundreds of illustrations (some 500 of them) has its own explanatory caption and evokes evidence or analyses put forward in the main texts which introduce each chapter. These introductions are not fleshy; ergo, they can be neither exhaustive nor exceedingly explicative. Yet, after all, the aim of the book is not to provide detailed theory or analysis, but, instead, to introduce the reader to magical objects and acts and traditions with respect to how they look, with the texts complementing the pictures, not the other way around (as in the case of the previously analysed *Oxford Illustrated History*). Moreover, the book is well printed and enjoyable to hold, and the book graphics pleasant to behold.

All this having been said, our *dulcis in fundo* is actually *The Oxford History of Witchcraft and Magic*, edited by Owen Davies and published in 2023. Nicely compact thus perfect for the tram, train, or plane, this volume is now sold to the masses in an economical paperback format which offers a comprehensive and easily digestible history of, well, witchcraft and magic. The intent of the book is, as anticipated above, to guide the reader on a chronological journey through the enchanted lands of humanity's seemingly universal and tireless fascination with the invisible powers, from Sumerian evocations of blood-thirsty demons to more harmless contemporary halloweenesque tricks or treats. Each chapter is written by an expert in the respective field, in order: Peter Maxwell-Stuart, "Magic in the Ancient World"; Sophie Page, "Medieval Magic"; James Sharpe, "The Demonologists"; Rita Voltmer, "The Witch Trials"; Charles Zika, "Witch and Magician in European Art"; Owen Davies, "The World of Popular Magic"; Owen Davies, "The Rise of Modern Magic"; Robert J. Wallis, "Witchcraft and Magic in the Age of Anthropology"; and Willem de Blécourt, "Witches on Screen". Apart from editing the volume, Davies himself penned two chapters (plus a short foreword), both of which are central in terms of chronological order, position in the book, and overall thematic importance in the study of magic and witchcraft. They are among the best of the lot. One may argue that the order could have been different than chronological, and the themes themselves differently chosen, or that there could have been one or two chapters more, or less. These compilations are always problematic because they inevitably end up putting some irons in the fire while leaving others in the cold. Why are the demonologists in and, say, the medieval troubadours and writers of tales of wonder out? Why did the anthropological tradition make it and, say, the cognitive or psychological one didn't? Why the grimoires yes and the fairytales no? The exercise could go on a good length. The editor has space limitations, of course, but also thematic, theoretical, and methodological preferences, and, why not, epistemological antipathies. Take it or leave it. In this case, I think the reader should positively receive the editor's selection, which makes much sense and imposes reasonable order on an otherwise very vast and potentially chaotic matter.

The general considerations of praise put forward so far, however, do not shield the single chapters from criticism. For instance, the first chapter about magic in the ancient world could have used a better distinction between Mediterranean and Near East cultures (Mesopotamia and Egypt for instance) on the one hand, and the classical world (Greece and Rome) on the other, for those macro-traditions are indeed quite different

from one another in many respects. Puzzling is also the idea of having a section about Jewish magic, whereas other important traditions are completely left out: the practices of pre-Christian European cultures such as the ancient Germans and the Celts are conspicuous by their absence. Equally absent are also the Slavs, the Balts, and the Vikings in the following chapter about medieval magic. One wonders whether the first chapter should have actually been divided into two chapters: the first concentrating on prehistoric magic and on Egypt and the Near East (including all the cultures of the Fertile Crescent, along with the Jews), and the second on Europe and the Western Indo-European cultures in general from the Iron Age until the Early Middle Ages.

A crucial chapter is "Witchcraft and Magic in the Age of Anthropology". This is particularly important because social and cultural anthropology has devoted much intellectual effort, and the best of its green years, to describing and interpreting magical practices (or what we Westerners consider/ed magical practices). This chapter is also, unsurprisingly, the only chapter not to be centred on the Old World and on Europe in particular. And yet, paradoxically for a chapter such as this, it suffers from a flaw that Owen Davies himself avoids, partly at least, in his *Very Short Introduction*, the flaw being cultural self-centredness. In the chapter in question we read at length, and rightly so, about the theories of James Frazer, Edward Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner, and several other giants that populate the canon of the discipline, and even of relatively minor (English-speaking) scholars, e.g. Jenny Blain; we also read, but much less, of the representatives of another great tradition, the French one; and yet one would search in vain for extremely important and influential ethnological and anthropological figures in the study of magic from outside the (franco-)anglophone universe, such as Rudolf Otto, Ernesto de Martino, or Vladimir Propp – to name but three that certainly deserved to get at least a few paragraphs. This is a lacuna that I would be delighted to see filled in a future edition of the book.

And now to the sore spot: the weakest chapter is, in my opinion, the final one, "Witches on Screen". Here again one might wonder why the editor did not request a chapter about witchcraft and magic as well (the text is really only about witches), or better still why not a chapter about (magic and) witchcraft in contemporary popular culture and fiction in general. Be it as it may, the chapter is fairly unbalanced: first, it is not always clear why the author discarded certain themes and interpretative angles in favour of others. We get very little semiotic or cognitive analysis, and no treatment of other theories that are pertinent to the topic, such as escapism, cultural bricolage, or suspension of disbelief. No real formal or aesthetical analysis of the movies and series is chosen, either. The chapter is rather descriptive and idiosyncratic – for example, it gives an undeserved and comparably prominent space to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* while leaving aside dozens of other titles that might have deserved more space, or at least some space. One cannot avoid thinking of a too-personalistic approach. This is reflected also in the methodology: as said, many reasonable and expected approaches are absent, whereas the main and sometimes exclusive interpretative angle is that of gender. Most of the analyses focus on why this male witch is depicted in that way, why that female witch is described in this way, until one is left to wonder where all the other myriad ways of understanding the role and evolution of witches on screen are. It is far from refreshing to offer this kind of analysis in an academic environment that seems to be more and more obsessed with dissecting all gendered representations to the bone and joining non-academic literature in chastising fictional products in which women do not have primary roles or in which they are not at least perfectly equal in share and treatment to their male counterparts. Several times, the author only just falls short of accusing even fiction written or filmed by women, such as Harry Potter, to be sexist, for the sin of not complying with the model currently *à la mode*. The genealogical analysis of a motif, the explanation of recurrent visual symbols, the reusage and reinterpre-

tation of historical or mythical representations: the reader will find very little of all this, as most of the text is overwhelmed by the noise of a constant beating on the drum of genderism. The conclusion is for the ages: it is acceptable to only have feminist representations of witches on screen, the rest is bad. On a final note, the text is also the only one to suffer from editing issues, for it is plagued by an annoying recurrent tic: there are dozens of occurrences in which a queer hyphen magically and apparently randomly appears between words. We are thus presented, in the middle of a line in a sentence, with neologisms such as "English", "lit-erary", "cannibalis-tic", "television", or "can-dle", just to name a few among many. Another thing to fix in a future edition.

All things considered, however, the chapters in this edited book, though inevitably uneven in quality, work synergically to convincingly convey at least a broad sense of how magic has manifested itself (especially in the Old World) during the past few millennia, and how it has been studied and analysed in modern scholarship. The book, more than any other that has been reviewed here, has proven a valuable pedagogical tool for myself and for the students on my course, and several of its chapters have made not only informative readings at home but also stimulating objects of discussion and analysis in the classroom.

While I would not discourage anybody from buying any of the four books reviewed in this text, for each of them has its own merits, I particularly recommend *The Oxford History of Witchcraft and Magic*, ideally coupled, especially if the reader is also inclined to please the eye, with the gloriously illustrated *History of Magic, Witchcraft, and the Occult* by DK. As a product of popularisation, the latter has little direct scholarly value (and would not normally be reviewed here); however, its illustrations can indeed be very useful for didactical and even research purposes if complemented with the consultation of more analytical works. Ergo I believe that these two books, if studied together, form a very informative and intellectually enchanting dyad.

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Response to Jack David Eller's review of my latest book[1]

Jack David Eller is a contemporary authority in the field of the anthropology of religion. Therefore, I cannot but take pride in the fact that in the past few years my scholarship has had the honour to receive special attention from Prof. Eller, particularly my latest two books, which have been cited in some of his own recent works.

In the latest of such manifestations of interest in my studies, Eller carried out an attentive reading and critique of what is currently (2024) my latest book, *Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe* (2023). The review he wrote in the issue of Religio prior to the current one (vol. 32/1, 2024) would under normal circumstances require no response from myself, for it is fair and balanced, alternating as it does between praise and criticism, and pointing out fairly but squarely the strengths as well as the weaknesses of my book. So far so good. However, the review also reveals what I consider to be a major error, one that in my opinion requires rectification, which is the main reason for my writing this response. The error lies in the fact that because of a technical miscommunication between the publisher and Prof. Eller himself – a miscommunica-

1 Alessandro Testa, *Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe*, Durham (NC): Carolina Academic Press 2023, review by David Eller, published in Religio 32/1, 2024, 238-240.