

Anthony Grafton, *Magus: The Art of Magic from Faustus to Agrippa* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023), 289pp. ISBN: 9780674659735.

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While delivering a lecture on Homer in Erfurt, the man known as Doctor Faustus astonished the students in attendance by making the great heroes from the Trojan War appear before them, as lifelike as they would have been over two millennia before.¹ His ability to perform these kinds of wonders added further fuel to the already inflamed Faustus myth of the great necromancer who had sold his soul to the devil for power, a myth that Christopher Marlowe was only too happy to capitalize on in his famous drama.² But, as Anthony Grafton explains in *Magus: The Art of Magic from Faustus to Agrippa*, these particular “wonders” were hardly unique, as Leon Battisti Alberti and Giovanni Fontana had each accomplished similar feats years earlier, using tricks of optics and light to project the same kinds of moving images for incredulous onlookers. Rather than make him a singular manipulator of demonic forces, Grafton argues that Faustus’s performance at Erfurt established him within the tradition of the learned magus, one that was already rich with scholars from around Europe harnessing their interests and expertise in science, religion and, yes, magic towards human advancement.

Magus: The Art of Magic from Faustus to Agrippa marks a welcome continuation of Grafton’s prior work on learned magi like Girolamo Cardano and Leon Battisti Alberti. In *Cardano’s Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer*, Grafton demonstrated how Cardano’s astrology contributed to contemporary scholars’ larger understanding of the universe and their place in it; such discussion is picked up and wholly expanded in *Magus*, as Grafton highlights that despite contrary processes and beliefs, and with 200 years between them, men like Albertus Magnus and Marsilio Ficino join Cardano in pursuing astrology as a potential bridge between the natural and the divine which can reveal the secrets of the world around them, and even of God Himself.³ In *Leon Battisti Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance*, Grafton provided a biological profile of an

¹ Grafton compiles the work of several scholars who have concluded that the most plausible identity of the man known as Doctor Faustus was Georg of Helmstadt, who was likely born sometime in the 1460s (7).

² Grafton notes that in addition to using astrology, Faustus was also known for conjuring and divination and using “special powers” to affect the world around him, which is part of the reason why he was accused frequently of necromancy (7–8).

³ Anthony Grafton, *Cardano’s Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

innovative painter, engineer, and architect, who he includes in his catalogue in *Magus* of those whom the Italians called “ingegneri,” able to work what looked like magic through mechanical device and innovative engineering design.⁴ In this most recent work, Grafton interweaves his previous studies on these learned magi and brings them into an engaging conversation with several other scholars and practitioners of the arts and sciences which fall under the umbrella of what magic was, and could be, in medieval and Renaissance Europe.

The central goal of *Magus*, as Grafton writes, is to “trace ... the rise of learned magic from its medieval origins to the synthesis that Agrippa created in 1533,” primarily by following the principal historical actors (5–6). The structure of the book itself reflects Grafton’s aims, particularly as the chapters in the second half focus on the work and philosophies of key players in the evolution of the multi-faceted discipline: Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, Johannes Trithemius, and, finally, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. However, these “focused” chapters intuitively facilitate a dialogue between these scholars, revealing how, knowingly or not, their work influenced one another, creating a growing palimpsest of acceptable (and unacceptable) magical practices, culminating in Agrippa’s *De occulta philosophia*, which Grafton notes became “a desk reference for all learned magicians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (176).

Magus, however, is book-ended by contradiction, and this is no fault of the author, but merely an unavoidable tenet of the subject on account of the inherent complexity of the centuries-long debate regarding the nature and purpose of “good” magic. The first chapter establishes how inconsistent beliefs were within even individual philosophies, starting with Nicholas of Cusa who denied the practice of astrology as diabolic, to the point of denouncing the magi who followed the star to Bethlehem, despite the fact that, as Grafton points out, many of the events in the medieval Christian calendar in Western Europe were regulated using a simple form of astrology. Roger Bacon, too, with whom Nicholas ardently disagreed, is described as hesitant in his astrological beliefs, leaning towards the possibility that the planets influenced the human body and could even be used to predict future events—all towards “virtuous ends”—while nonetheless conceding the uncertainty of the practice as a whole. German scholar Johannes Hartlieb found both “eager fascination and horror” in the forms of magic he rejected, those he deemed as requiring diabolic help, despite himself practicing divination, one of those same forms (42). Evidently, if one is looking for any sense

⁴ Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battisti Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

of uniformity in the medieval origins of learned magic, such a throughline will elude them. However, that seems to be exactly the point.

Grafton then leads the reader through a captivating discussion about how these learned magi sought to understand, harness, and manipulate the powers of nature, and how the results of this work manifested in the kinds of wonders with which Faustus was able to amaze his students. Roger Bacon, anticipating the empiricism of the Scientific Revolution, advocated for the “science of experience,” observing the powers of nature in order to further understand them, such as why the metal lodestone exudes such a powerful magnetic force—something that, to the untrained eye, would very much seem like magic. It is through this “science of experience” and experiment that those who became known as “ingegneri” created devices that emulated magical works, such as Giovanni Fontana mechanically animating images of skeletons, raising the dead as a necromancer might. With such intriguing examples, Grafton establishes a clear connection between magical practice and human innovation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Magus extends this connection to the realms of language and religion, demonstrating how the very religious texts that might seem ideologically opposed to magical practice served to inform the philosophies of learned magi like Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Trithemius. For Pico, magic was essentially a spiritual exercise, a way to understand the secrets of nature and ultimately, gradually, gain access to a higher knowledge of the divine. Both Pico and Trithemius referred to the Jewish Kabbalah and the Hebrew language to guide their foray into the secrets of nature and God; moreover, Grafton outlines how even Trithemius’s more controversial works, named as such for their use of conjuring language, calling on angels etc., were but ciphers for less damning, underlying content. Trithemius’s use of this “secret writing” followed not only Alberti, whose own cipher built of coordinated concentric circles operated on a formula composed of substituting letters based on a denoted, changeable index, but further reflected interest in Hebrew as potentially the most powerful cipher, according to Pico, when coded with numerical binaries, and ultimately key to understanding God, being language in which He created the universe. Here again, Grafton makes clear how these different thinkers were united in their overall shared interests in using different forms of “magic” to facilitate religious, scientific and philosophic inquiry towards a more comprehensive understanding of the unknown.

The book’s final chapter on Agrippa allows for a full-circle return to Faustus himself; Agrippa, too, was accused of selling his soul to the devil, and even of travelling with Faustus duping innkeepers out of payment along the way. Agrippa’s multi-volume Occult Philosophy

interweaved the influences of previous thinkers in a synthesis of learned magical practice. Like Alberti and Fontana, Agrippa took special interest in the mechanics of magic, particularly the automaton, further extending his study of “mathematical magic” to the proportions of the human body, creating a symmetrical design of the human form not unlike Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, through which, Agrippa thought, one might denote the impact of planetary influence on the body. Like Pico and Ficino, he believed in using knowledge of natural philosophy to bring the secrets of the natural world into the open, and he viewed both the Kabbalah and the Hebrew language with reverence. However, Grafton highlights how scholars have suggested that not all of these components are equally present in the Occult Philosophy, which contributes to evidence that Agrippa’s own views on natural magic had evolved even by the time the volume was published. Herein lies the other bookend of contradiction, where the man who compiled centuries of magical philosophy and scholarship into a systematized compendium unlike anything produced before, was himself riddled with uncertainty about the very subject he wrote about.

Thus, in a sense, Grafton’s book leaves readers exactly where they started—in a state of unknowing, neither able to ascertain the precise nature of “good” magic, nor if, and how, it might lead one to higher knowledge of God and the universe. However, what we get in between is a multi-layered, highly informative exploration into the evolution of how magic was understood and what it was used for in medieval and Renaissance Europe, which is framed through fascinating profiles of the learned magi who contributed to shaping the discourse surrounding magical practice and its many adjacent disciplines. Accompanied by illustrative visuals and substantial notes for reference, *Magus: The Art of Magic from Faustus to Agrippa* constitutes a scholarly dive into the complexity of a subject that touched all intellectual spheres of early European society, at the centre of which, as Grafton demonstrates, was the magical practitioner.

Bibliography

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