



PROJECT MUSE®

Señales, Portentos y Demonios. La magia en la literatura y la cultura españolas del Renacimiento ed. by Eva Lara and Alberto Montaner (review)

Michael Harney

La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Volume 45, Number 1, Fall 2016, pp. 176-179 (Review)

Published by *La corónica*: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cor.2016.0031>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/651995>

neither natural nor universal” (28) but, rather, “appears as a universal category because of the universalist claim of [...] Christianity” (33). The inscribed texts and the evidence of the MS are significant, yet, it is individuals who interpret and reinterpret texts, constructing meaning and sense. The hermeneutic circle freights the interpreter’s agency over a text’s facility to encode itself verbatim into imagination. This monograph devoted to fifteenth-century *alxamía* Judeo-Iberian writings should stimulate further exploration of the subject area.

John Zemke

University of Missouri

Works Cited

- Carruthers, Mary. *The Book of Memory*, 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2008. Print.
- Lopez, Donald S. “Belief”. *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Ed. Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988. 21-35. Print.
- Septimus, Bernard. “A Medieval Judeo-Spanish Poem on the Complementarity of Faith and Works and Its Intellectual Roots”. *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*. Ed. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob I. Schacter. Leiden: Brill, 2011. 227-39. Print.
- Zemke, John. “In Memorial Charles Cook, mentor of Samuel G. Armistead”. *Spain’s Multicultural Legacies. Studies in Honor of Samuel G. Armistead*. Ed. Adrienne L. Martín and Cristina Martínez-Carazo. Newark, Delaware: Juan de la Cuesta, 2008. 333-47. Print.

Lara, Eva and Alberto Montaner, eds. Señales, Portentos y Demonios. La magia en la literatura y la cultura españolas del Renacimiento. Salamanca: Sociedad de Estudios Medievales y Renacentistas, 2014. 948 pp. ISBN-13: 978-84-941708-2-9.

This collection of highly informative articles comprehensively surveys a significant and wide-ranging topic in medieval and early modern Spanish literary and cultural history. In a substantial introduction, Alberto Montaner and Eva Lara closely define and usefully nuance the essential terms and



concepts needed to explore the broad field of arcane knowledge and its many-sided and enduring impact on European culture. Pointing out the distinction between magic, sorcery (*hechicería*), and witchcraft (*brujería*), the authors note the encompassing amplitude of the first term, the narrower specificity of the second and third. After tracing the etymology of magic to *magus* and its ethnic association with an ancient Persian sacerdotal caste, the introduction explains the general concept's diversification over time into the wide array of mystical specialties and disciplines gathered under the magical rubric. Ethnographic theories of the magical are cited, such as James Frazer's concept of sympathetic magic; Marcel Mauss's concept of magic as a socially contextualized body of knowledge; Bronislaw Malinowski's explication of magic as a method of exerting control over the human environment. While emphasizing different aspects of magical thought and practice, these three principal theorists note the broadly cross-cultural use of magic as a set of techniques used to communicate with and to influence otherworldly entities, as well as to manipulate preternatural forces, natural phenomena, and events and persons in the human world. Magic, broadly speaking, can thus be seen as a cognitive methodology applied to the maintenance, acquisition, and application of a special kind of knowledge.

Eschewing any facile dichotomy of magic and religion, Montaner and Lara clarify in their introduction that the boundaries between the two domains are often blurred. Indeed, they note, the magical counter-culture thrived in paradoxical symbiosis with a Catholic establishment, many of whose members themselves believed in the efficacy of the dark arts. The same could be said of many elements of the lay population, whose acceptance of the reality of magic accounts, in large measure, for the popularity of occult and supernatural themes in literature (e.g., the necromancers and sorceresses of chivalric romances; the witchcraft element in the *Celestina*; the chthonic and folk-magical aura of the *Quijote's* Cave of Montesinos episode).

Frequently touching on such themes, as well as on the terminological and conceptual issues pointed out in the introduction, the chapters of the collection focus on such topics as: the polemic genre of anti-magical and anti-superstition treatises that emerged in Renaissance Spain; literary, folkloric, and polemical representations of pacts with the devil and other demonic beings; the poetics and rhetoric of witchcraft; magical themes in Castilian adaptations and imitations of French Arthurian works, especially the chivalric romances; *Celestina*-like witches and male necromancers in sixteenth-century Peninsular

literature; magic as depicted in pastoral romances; magic and the marvelous in Renaissance Spanish epic; the depiction of magic in such literary forms as dialogues and miscellanies; the representation of divination and related arts in Spanish literature of the era; grimoires, spell books, and the traditional mythic image of Solomon as a master sorcerer; Morisco spell-books, potions, talismans, and incantations; the magical imagery of caves and chthonic shrines in Golden Age theater; the therapeutic function of talismanic discourse in Saint Teresa's writings. Finally, in a comprehensive concluding chapter, Montaner surveys the breadth and variety of occultism as practiced in early modern Iberia.

The volume's sixteen chapters deal directly or tangentially with a very wide array of magic-related topics and various expressions of the occult arts, including necromancy (black magic); thaumaturgy (the working of wonders and miracles); the mystical healing arts and the resurrection of the dead; Satanism and demonology; conjuration, cursing, spell-casting, and the use of potions and poisons; the arts of oneirology, clairvoyance, divination and prediction; the use of enchantments and glamours; the important role of spell-books, grimoires, and other textual aids. In addition to occasional references to alchemy and astrology, the sister sciences of magic, the contributors also devote attention to procedural and ritualistic aspects of witchcraft, sorcery, and similar practices. Defined as sets of traditional techniques grounded in the supposed efficacy of incantatory and talismanic words, objects, and artifacts, these practices seek to manipulate events, personages, and natural phenomena, often in conjunction with the treatment of artificial materials and natural substances and processes.

Approaching the material from numerous angles, the editors and contributors of this volume confirm the historical and folkloric importance of magic as the core element of a pre-Christian, and at times anti-Christian counter-culture whose influence was both persistent and pervasive. Hence the inveterate significance, at the core and on the margin of medieval and Renaissance society, of mentalities supportive of magic and demonology as central elements of a wide-spread movement paralleling and intricately interacting with the official worlds of Christian orthodoxy; the materialist realities of economic and social inequality; the emergent hierarchies of political modernity; the evolution of modern scientific disciplines. The presence of this magical textual community, maintained both orally and in multitudinous written, musical, and visual forms, helps us to understand why magic is viewed as a threat by Catholic orthodoxy, whose assignment of magic to the realm of superstition correlates, while acknowledging its instrumental



power, with the circumstantial alignment of the arcane arts with the inequalities of gender and ethnicity. As abundantly documented by Inquisitorial records, magic was commonly associated with marginal or subaltern communities (e.g., Jews, *moriscos*, gypsies); its perennial and deep-rooted correlation with women and their social condition is likewise an enduring theme in social and literary history.

Amadís de Gaula, *Celestina*, and Cervantes's *Coloquio de los perros* are only three of the most prominent literary works illuminated by the wealth of information and insight provided by the chapters of this anthology. Numerous other authors, works, and genres likewise fall under the purview of a collection whose thematic complexity and topical variety can only be hinted at by a brief review. Suffice it to say that the critical acumen and vast erudition deployed by its contributors place this collection among the most complete studies ever undertaken on magic and related themes in the Ibero-American world. Along with Julio Caro Baroja's *Las brujas y su mundo* and Carmelo Lisón Tolosana's *Las brujas en la historia de España*, it is an indispensable commentary and reference work on magic in Spanish social, cultural, and literary history, with the added advantage of a wider focus on magic and related themes than that of the two ethnographic studies, whose authors focus on witchcraft as a feminized specialty. Graced by numerous judiciously selected illustrations, and greatly enhanced, in its encyclopedia utility, by an extremely diverse and extensive bibliography, Montaner and Lara's anthology may also be compared with such similarly oriented anthologies as *La corónica's* volume 36.1 (2007); volume 27 of *Edad de Oro* (2008); a special issue of *Clio y Crimen* (volume 8, 2011); and *eHumanista's* volume 26 (2014). Surpassing those earlier collections in the sheer magnitude and thematic diversity of its collaborative achievement, *Señales, Portentos y Demonios* is destined to remain the definitive resource for all those interested in exploring this complex and historically significant aspect of late medieval and early modern Peninsular literature and culture. By reason of its wide-ranging and intensively documented coverage of magical themes it performs a function roughly analogous, in the Hispanic context, to Lynn Thorndike's multi-volume *History of Magic and Experimental Science* in the international and multi-cultural domain.

Michael Harney

University of Texas at Austin