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Book review

Carolina Escobar-Vargas and Anne Lawrence-Mathers (eds) Medieval Perceptions of Magic, Science, and the Natural World. Borderlines.
Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2024. x + 240 pp.

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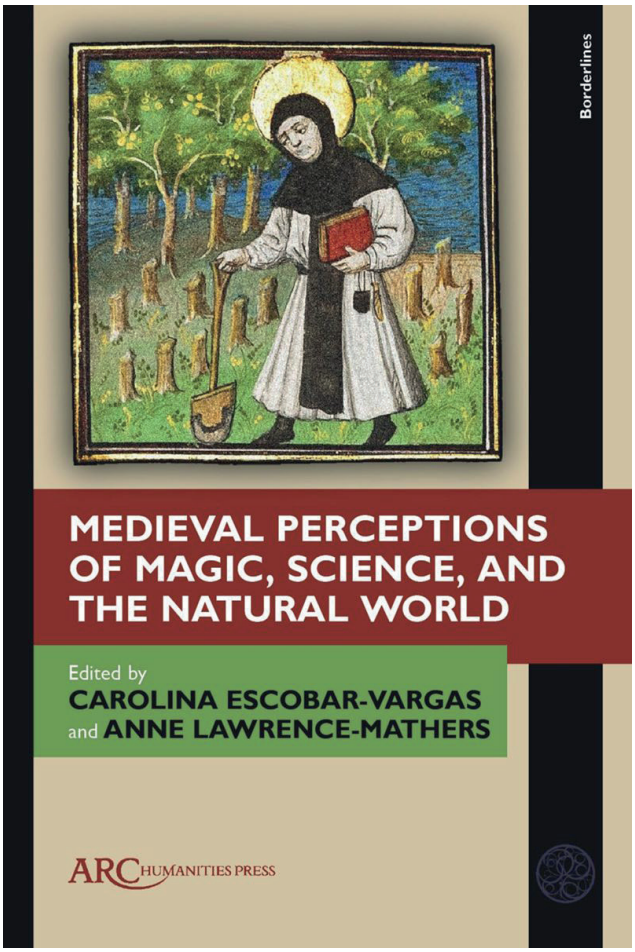

The volume edited by Carolina Escobar-Vargas and Anne Lawrence-Mathers investigates the liminal space between the natural and the supernatural and the boundary between science and magic in medieval Europe. The introduction by Escobar-Vargas draws attention to the fluid boundaries between what was considered natural and what was seen as supernatural, suggesting that these categories kept shifting during the Middle Ages and that previous research does not quite achieve a comprehensive account of the various medieval perspectives on the supernatural. The fourteen chapters that follow focus on specific aspects of science, religion, magic, nature, and the supernatural.

The collection contains several essays touching upon weather and weather prognostication, which is a very welcome addition to the body of research on medieval science and magic. Despite the centrality of weather to everyday life, astrometeorology has remained in the margin of research into astrological practices in the medieval and early modern periods. The chapter by Anne Lawrence-Mathers discusses astrometeorology as an example of the boundary between science and divination.[1] Lawrence-Mathers provides a concise, carefully contextualised account of astrometeorology and simultaneously sheds light on medieval astrological practices and views on the legitimacy of astrology more generally. The author also deserves praise for explaining complex astrological concepts in a very reader-friendly manner throughout.[2] Carolina Escobar-Vargas investigates the relationship between weather, magic, and witchcraft. The central question of the chapter is whether influencing weather through magic was deemed possible in the Middle Ages. This question is posed to a wide

[1] See also Anne Lawrence-Mathers, *Medieval Meteorology: Forecasting the Weather from Aristotle to the Almanac,* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2019.

[2] Another recent publication treating the technical aspects of medieval science in a highly accessible manner is Seb Falk, *The Light Ages: A Medieval Journey of Discovery,* Allen Lane: London 2020.

selection of primary texts ranging from Isidore of Seville to the *Malleus maleficarum*.

Weather is also the focus of Janet Walls's chapter. Walls focuses on late medieval English brontologies – texts that use thunder as a basis for prognostication. Seven manuscripts from Walls's larger dataset of fifty manuscripts have been selected for closer inspection here. The chapter offers plenty of information on the primary texts, both their contents and manuscript contexts, but the argument would have benefitted from clearer structuring. Caroline Bourne's chapter imaginatively combines evidence from hagiographical texts, place -names, and archaeology to explore religious travel by sea in the early medieval period. The chapter by Anne Jeavons, in turn, describes the importance of weather, seasons, and place in the medical texts of Constantine of Africa. While the author offers plenty of examples from primary sources, their argument would have benefitted from more comprehensive engagement with previous research.

Claire Burridge's chapter examines the natural and supernatural rhythms described in medical recipes: the seasonal and agricultural cycles, the lunar cycle, weekdays, and days of the year. The focus of the chapter is on the influence of classical and late antique sources on early medieval manuscripts from western continental Europe: did Christian scribes omit or preserve the occasionally supernaturally motivated timing instructions in their pre-Christian exemplars, and did they add new instructions grounded in Christianity? Burridge's chapter is a lucid survey of previously underresearched materials, with an impressive dataset of circa 6,000 recipes in 46 manuscripts. The chapter provides new insight into the intersection of medicine, religion, and calendrical thinking. It also sheds light on early medieval processes of transmission of text and knowledge.

The boundary between acceptable and unacceptable practices is explored in many of the contributions in the collection. Joanne Edge's chapter evaluates the status and acceptability of onomantic divination in light of late medieval theology and natural philosophy. Onomancy has rarely been the focus of research, and Edge's recent monograph on the topic is a welcome contribution to prognostication studies.3 The chapter in this volume builds on the monograph and offers an elegant discussion of onomancy and its potential legitimacy in late medieval England, also considering ancient and medieval perceptions of the nature of names and numbers more generally. The chapter by Victoria Burns-Price explores the intersection of magic and medicine, with an emphasis on how this intersection was negotiated in theology and canon law throughout the medieval period. Burns-Price first focuses on the medical use of natural substances – plants, stones, and animal parts – and their potentially supernatural associations. The chapter then briefly addresses the connections between medicine, alchemy, and astrology. Finally, the author considers parallels between the use of religious symbols and magical amulets and between votive offerings and forms of sympathetic magic. Sebastià Giralt's contribution focuses on learned magic, especially the boundary between natural magic and necromancy (ritual or ceremonial magic) in scholastic writings of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The chapter is an illuminating survey of influential scholastic thinkers' definitions and perceptions of magic and its different forms. The contributions by Edge, Burns-Price, and Giralt all draw attention to the role and potential power of written and spoken language in medieval magic and divination.

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[3] Joanne Edge, *Onomantic Divination in Late Medieval Britain: Questioning Life, Predicting Death*, Boydell and Brewer: Woodbridge 2024. An early case study of onomantic material in England is Linda Ehrsam Voigts, 'The Latin verse and Middle English prose texts on the Sphere of Life and Death in Harley 3719', *The Chaucer Review* 21(2) (1986), 291–305.

Some contributions explore the volume's theme through literary analysis. Zachary Matus approaches alchemical practice through a reading of medieval alchemical poetry and poetry about alchemy, arguing that poetry is better placed than prose to communicate the alchemical experience. Matus suggests that alchemical poetry echoes the metaphors, paradoxes, and struggles of alchemy as a science, and that it was a means for the authors to both demonstrate their alchemical knowledge and entertain their readers.4 Humma Mouzam's chapter offers an intriguing reading of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, suggesting that Arabic and Syrian astrological and astronomical works influenced the literary use of the figure of the dragon. Victoria Flood examines the treatment of true and false wonder and prophecy in the Middle English *Prose Merlin*, with special reference to Merlin's demonic parentage and his prophetic skills. The chapter draws attention to the Augustinian influence and historic interests of the *Prose Merlin* and compares the Merlin tradition to apocalyptic writings on the Antichrist.

Graphic devices in medieval books have recently been investigated in various fields, including but not limited to art history, history, language studies, and the history of science. Judith Collard's chapter contributes to this growing body of scholarship by exploring Matthew Paris's use of diagrams. Many of these diagrams have previously received surprisingly little attention, and this chapter is thus a welcome addition to research on Matthew Paris as well as medieval graphic practices.5 Graphic devices, especially maps and images, are also examined in the final chapter of the volume by Helen Parish, which moves beyond the medieval period to consider the concept of wonder in early modern European natural history. The chapter shows how natural signs and marvels were interpreted as divine knowledge or communication and how theology, natural history, and medieval conceptions of wonder interacted in the early modern period. The argument is illustrated with two case studies focusing on Olaus Magnus and Edward Topsell.

Overall, this edited volume offers a multifaceted view of the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, magic and science in the medieval period and beyond. With chapters touching upon magic, medicine, prognostication, alchemy, astrology, weather, and natural history, the collection contributes to various fields including but not limited to history, art history, theology, literary studies, language studies, and the history of science and knowledge. The volume will undoubtedly be of interest to researchers working on the intersection between science and magic. Furthermore, the chapters are generally written in an approachable manner, and many of them would be suitable for use in university-level teaching.

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[4] A recent study on the use and function of metaphors in medieval alchemical writing is Sara Norja, 'Nourishing the alchemical child: Metaphors of family life as textual cohesion in the fifteenth-century The *Gracious Work*', *BJHS Themes*, first view (2025). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/bjt.2025.10018

[5] Another recent investigation of the use of graphic devices in medieval England is Olga Timofeeva, 'A visual and linguistic interpretation of the Pater Noster table of the Vernon Manuscript', in Matti Peikola, Jukka Tyrkkö and Mari-Liisa Varila eds, *Graphic Practices and Literacies in the History of English*, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 61, Brepols: Turnhout 2025, 181–200.