

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



# Rampton, Martha, ed. European Magic and Witchcraft: A Reader

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This book offers a rich contextualization of material life, family relationships, economic activities, and power struggles in a corner of the Mediterranean world that was extremely important, but about which very little has been published in English. This study is beneficial to those readers interested in the study of early modern cultural and social history, state formation, and local politics.

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**Rampton, Martha, ed.**

***European Magic and Witchcraft: A Reader.***

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. Pp. xv, 416. ISBN 978-1-4426-3420-6 (paperback) \$49.95.

For several decades now, magic and witchcraft have been the focus of scholarly attention, and Martha Rampton's reader—a collection of primary texts that prepares the topic in all its breadth for use in the classroom—is a welcome addition. University of Toronto Press has to be thanked for providing teachers, students, and scholars alike with a rich and voluminous source-book, albeit less affordable than one might have hoped. *European Magic and Witchcraft* presents carefully selected texts, eighty-six examples from very different genres, from biblical times to the early modern period in chronological order. Some of these texts are famous and have had an enormous cultural impact, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Augustine's *City of God*, while others are quite rare, such as Alferic of Eynsham (ca. 955–1010) or court records of the use of torture in early modern witchcraft trials (377–86). Rampton explains that magic and witchcraft thus unfold as a series of topics, where “the legal and the literary, the playful and the polemic exist side-by-side and often each delivers quite a different take on the magic of the time” (xiv). Yet Rampton also emphasizes the continuity of motifs surrounding her topic, namely “the association of women with the moon, [...] the domain of Diana, consternation over astrology, dependence on love magic; the phenomenon of the werewolf” (xv). Some historians might be less at ease with the mingling of texts describing “real” practices with imaginative literature; Rampton explains that she is “looking for cultural conceptions of magic and witchcraft that are manifest in

the written record, fictional or otherwise" (xv). Be that as it may, the collection of texts provides an immensely helpful and fascinating read for all who are even remotely interested in the topic.

Rampton's introductions to the primary texts are deliberately short in order to "mute [the editor's] voice and give students the opportunity to hear the echoes of the past in primary documents (albeit in translations)" (xiii). It should be noted that some of the translations are modified. The book is divided into six historical periods; four chapters are dedicated to the period between the fall of the Roman empire and the discovery of the Americas. Even though Rampton's brief chapter introductions are only a few pages each, they are immensely helpful, written in a non-technical language that is easily accessible to graduate students and to general readers alike.

In the mind of this reviewer, though, the chapter introductions would have been more helpful if they referred to topics discussed in the primary texts: for example, texts written by non-Christian authors who saw the miracles of Christ as conjuring and cheap stunts, or as necromancy (4). Such ideas were indeed crucial, and had a marked temporal and spatial impact; they should have been reflected and referred to more clearly in the selection of texts. Each text is accompanied by a questionnaire, which makes the book very apt for classroom use; an index of topics helps the reader draw up individual themes between the texts. An *index nominum* would have been a further assistance.

A collection of texts inevitably solicits questions about choice. If this reviewer, who is most familiar with the Renaissance period, notes the absence of a couple of seminal texts for Renaissance learned magic—Marsilio Ficino's *De amore* (1456) and his *De vita libri tres* (1498)—it is not intended as a major concern. These texts are not only easily accessible in good translations; they have also been the focus of much scholarly attention already. However, I would like to have seen at least one sample text of the classical Neoplatonic tradition (Plotinus, Jamblichus, or Porphyry), whose philosophical and practical engagement with magic was as crucial to learned magic as the mythical figure of Empedocles. But these are minor qualms. Rampton must be thanked for her generosity in sharing two decades of her experience in teaching that subject, and for preparing future generations of students for the study of magic and witchcraft.