

Genevieve Guenther. *Magical Imaginations: Instrumental Aesthetics in the English Renaissance*.

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Magical Imaginations is a timely and critically important study. Early modern magic has proven a particularly challenging topic for postmodern scholars: the disparity of popular belief systems between the two periods here carries, perhaps, even greater psychological and sociological consequences than for other subjects of historical investigation, and the startling variety of beliefs entertained by early modern individuals themselves make the sorting out of literal versus metaphorical manifestations of magic in the literature especially difficult. Guenther's sensible, and brilliant, response to this challenge is to return to Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* and his claim for the "charming force" of poetry. The attribution of ideological efficacy to literary pleasure by the key literary theorist of the Elizabethan period serves as a promising starting point for the exploration of "instrumental aesthetics," a concept of psychological and rhetorical influence rather more accessible to the postmodern mind than the murky complexities of archaic demonologies.

Of course, the fact that in his exuberance "Sidney sounds almost exactly like Cornelius Agrippa" (4) means that Guenther's study is haunted, like other

treatments of the topic, by the troubling question of just how far various early modern writers express personal belief in the magical compulsions they describe or portray. Guenther considers Kenneth Burke's proposal "that we view magical discourse not as a form of proto-science, but as a 'transference of linguistic function'" (6), which quickly leads to a recognition that "Protestant polemics [actually] produced and mandated magical beliefs" (7) by attacking the demoralizing power of (secular) literature. Sidney's argument that poetry "may transform its reader without the reader's knowledge or consent" (21) certainly underlines literature's unconscious influences, and Guenther might have more to say about the psychoanalytic implications of her approach (perhaps via an extended treatment of Burke); moreover, her study might recognize, with more than one brief reference in an endnote, the trail-blazing efforts of Ioan Couliano's *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, an underappreciated treatment of early modern magic as psychosociology. Nevertheless Guenther interestingly explores Sidney's "double bind" (29) of attributing to poetry an instrumental power distinguished from magic but (potentially) indistinguishable from magic. In a brief but fascinating digression, she considers the evidence for Sidney's personal beliefs vis-à-vis Renaissance magic, tracing his courtly connections, and paths crossed with Bruno and Dee. While offering intriguing evidence for Sidney's apparent contempt for Dee, Guenther emphasizes Sidney's continuing ambivalence by noting "that distancing himself with wit from things in which he is actually invested is one of Sidney's trademarks" (34).

Further fascinating ambiguities emerge in Guenther's treatment of Spenser, whose portrayals of enchanters and magicians in *The Faerie Queene* also blur the line between magic and poetry. While Spenser, like Sidney, is clearly interested in the political usefulness of poetry, he seems more set on a course of social improvement through a focus on the individual reader, for whom the poet attempts to enact wonder "by representing magic with verse so artfully ambiguous that it [becomes] impossible for the reader to decide whether the pictures in the mind's eye [are] poetic or demonic, or both" (41). That is, Spenser wishes to train in the reader a "bi-fold intellectual habit, at once desiring and skeptical," in order to render him or her a more "disciplined subject" (14). Whether, for Spenser and his readers, the process of planting images in the mind ultimately reflects the insidious effectiveness of psychological/metaphorical or in fact "real" devils — "magic in *The Faerie Queene* cannot be merely a trope for writing" (42) — remains I think a point of contention. Yet Guenther's provocative analysis certainly suggests the crucial significance of Spenser in any consideration of early modern magic, and further encourages our deconstruction of the traditional division of scholarly attention between Renaissance dramatic and non-dramatic literature.

The third and fourth chapters on *Doctor Faustus* and *The Tempest* become (for me) somewhat less persuasive. Guenther correctly identifies a Protestant critique of efficacious magical language in *Faustus*, but the reading of dramatic effect seems too closely tied, logically, to Marlowe's (unlikely) anticipation of the "real" appearances of devils in productions of the play. The claim that *Faustus* "reveals the inexorable

negativity at the heart of Protestant Christianity” by suggesting not predestination but salvation as “self-obliteration” (83) could be more carefully contextualized with recent critical commentary. Guenther sees *The Tempest* as an “oblique” but daring challenge to the authority of James I, who decreed the torture and execution of magicians as traitors to God and himself. The critic clearly must refute any identification of James with Prospero, but politically the possibility remains, and weakens her argument that the play’s ideological purpose is to bring about the monarch’s ethical transformation through a process that recognizes the theater as a culturally sovereign space. Paradoxically, the discussion also seems to underestimate the efficacy of instrumental aesthetics in *The Tempest* by reducing it finally only to a form of escapism, or consolation for death. Nevertheless, this book’s compelling emphasis on “the power of aesthetic representation to produce ideological effects” (5) renders it of great interest not only to scholars of early modern magic but to anyone concerned with the crucial relation between human imaginative production and ideological coercion.

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