

MAGIC ARTS IN THE SUMMA

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IN the *Ila Ilae* under the general tract of Justice, St. Thomas treats of Religion since religion concerns the worship and homage due to God, the Supreme Being. Later on, in considering the vices opposed to religion, he first and naturally considers idolatry as a separate question. But an examination of the allied questions provokes the reader's attention.

Nowadays we are prone to generalize these vices. Under the general title of Superstition and Magic we group many various species. At most we would dismiss these minor species with a generalization. In the *Summa* we would expect for the sake of brevity, the same hasty yet sufficient reduction to a broader category. Our curiosity is then piqued when we notice that St. Thomas treats successively and at some length superstition, divination, vain observance, the "notory art" and lot-casting; this last has been accorded fuller treatment in the *Opuscula*¹

Why did St. Thomas go to so much trouble to explain these "arts"? Why was he so meticulous in dividing and subdividing so that under vain observance, we find a multiplicity of individual "arts and sciences?"

A sharper scrutiny into the time and period in which St. Thomas lived and worked, reveals two sources which may contribute heavily toward a more or less satisfactory reply to our questions. The first is the general character of the period, the life, customs, and prejudices transmitted from antecedent centuries; the second source is the particular state of development found in the scientists and scientific minds of the great thirteenth century.

Paganism has always been shot through with superstition and divination; of all religious forms it has lent itself most readily to man's natural tendency to assert, and his craving to hear, the sensational, the exaggerated, and the impossible, and to fly in the face both of reason and experience. Christianity was not promulgated among newly-created races, but among the adherents of paganism, a people

¹ *De Sortibus, Opera Omnia* (Vives), XXVII, 439.

who take pleasure in affirming the extravagant and in believing the incredible. Rooting out such practices is not the work of a year, or a century; they offer diversion and escape from monotonous routine savouring as they do, not of belief, but rather of childish "make-believe."

The thirteenth century dawned upon a Europe that was only a comparatively inconsiderable number of generations removed from a period of history in which paganism and its accompanying practices flourished. Even today our own advanced age affords us striking examples of magic and superstitious practices, "hexing" and the like. "In the first place the thirteenth century was in no small measure moulded by the crusades. . . . These enterprises linked up the East with the West, and brought about an interchange of thought and learning which enlarged men's vision and quickened the spirit of enquiry."²

Naturally those early centuries following the evangelization of Europe would fall heir to a remarkable amount of magical phenomena. The "fine arts" of magic and its allied "sciences" would still be in a more or less healthy state of cultivation. Their practice would continue to play no small part in the sum total of moral or "human" acts, of which St. Thomas has made so lengthy and conclusive a study. Thus it came strictly within his province to sift out the foolish and presumptuous notions from the wise or at least possibly reasonable theories of the time.

The second and more potent factor in the development of St. Thomas's treatise on the arts of magic and superstition is the state of development found among the scholars and scientists of the thirteenth century, which was in an intellectual ferment due to the re-discovery of the works of Aristotle who had been brought into disrepute among Europeans because of the Arabian commentators.

The great Protestant tradition tended to eliminate the Middle Ages from any consideration except religious. The folly of that viewpoint gradually demonstrated itself; the whole modern world is rapidly coming to admire if not venerate the achievement and progress of the wise men of the Middle Ages. At first praise was accorded them reluctantly; the objects of praise were prone to be men chosen for their fancied or exaggerated outbursts and revolt against ecclesiastical authority. Roger Bacon has been for years held up as the father of modern science, the only one of his time. Later Blessed

² *St. Thomas Aquinas*—Papers from Summer School of Cambridge (St. Louis, 1924), p. 68.

Albert began to receive some small part of the recognition due him, and St. Thomas himself is no longer ignored by scientists.

The newer research being made by modern historians is tending to disillusion the twentieth century in regard to its false notions. Much of the vague and obscure history of the Middle Ages has been thrown into greater relief and overdue appreciation is now becoming manifest.

One modern writer rejoices that he has "exposed . . . the legend of Roger Bacon as a lone herald of modern experimental science, the notion that Vincent of Beauvais adequately sums up all medieval science, and a number of other modern 'vulgar errors' concerning medieval learning."³ In other words, what many deemed an extraordinary exception, namely the life and work of Roger Bacon, modern research has demonstrated to be nothing more than a noteworthy particular in a century remarkably alive to the interest of experimental science.

St. Thomas was not only a theologian. He was primarily a scholar and student. Furthermore, he had been the protégé of Blessed Albert for too many years not to have become cognizant of the tremendous possibilities that lay within the realm of experimental science. "The ideas and discoveries of Hellenic, not to say Oriental, science persisted and were preserved by medieval men to a greater extent than has been generally recognized; and to them the medieval men added questions, observations, and even discoveries of their own. Not only did curiosity concerning nature's secrets continue, but the authority of the ancients was often received with scepticism; and a marked tendency runs through our period (Middle Ages) to rely upon rationalism and experimental method. Medieval science was somewhat under the wing of the Church, but science even in the Middle Ages was learning to use its own wings."⁴

The treatise of St. Thomas seems to have been written almost as a guide for the fledglings of science. First St. Thomas warns all of the danger of divination; although he admits the usefulness of consulting the heavenly bodies in relation to weather forecasts, and other effects directly or indirectly caused by the influence of celestial bodies, he nevertheless cautions all against the peril of attributing powers where, properly speaking, there are none. Nor was this warn-

³ L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York, 1923), II, 971.

⁴ L. Thorndike, *op. cit.*, p. 972

ing given lest investigation be futile, but because of a far more dangerous outcome, namely, the possibility of theurgy.

For St. Thomas the power and the inclination of the demons to inject themselves into the affairs of men for the spiritual destruction of the latter was very real and imminent. This is the dominant note upon which he builds his doctrine concerning the "occult arts." The influence of the demons is according to St. Thomas not only possible but in many well authenticated instances, probably the only solution."⁵

"In the reality of feats of magic, St. Thomas firmly believes, but that the magician and his materials are a sufficient cause of the magic he will not admit."⁶ "Magicians work miracles (the word is not used in the absolute sense) through the demons by means of a compact, tacit or expressed."⁷ "A true miracle is contrary to the order of all created nature and can be performed by God alone. Many things that seem marvelous to us or of which the cause is hidden from us are not properly speaking miraculous (IIa IIae, q. 96, a. 2) . . . Even the feats of the demons can be explained, since they operate by means of art."⁸

However, most of the arts of divination are condemned "as the work of demons. Some arts of divination, however, have a natural basis, and that natural divination is permissible, provided it does not extend to accidental occurrences and true human acts, that is,—free acts depending upon reason and will."⁹

"In discussing the 'notory art' (IIa IIae, q. 96, a. 1), which professes to acquire knowledge by fasting, prayers to God, figures and strange words, St. Thomas declares that demons cannot illuminate the intellect though they may express in words some smattering of the sciences."¹⁰ Such an art is entirely illicit, then, since it springs directly from a pact with the father of lies; for the procedure of the art in itself is possessed of no latent natural virtue or power directly causing the result. But wherever one finds natural causes capable by mutual interaction of producing proportionate results, then the occult works of nature may be distinguished from illicit magic. Here St. Thomas shows himself the scientist. Wherever one finds real, natural causality, it is not only not illicit, but permissible to use

⁵ A. E. Waite, *The Book of Black Magic* (London, 1898), p. 221, footnote.

⁶ L. Thorndike, *op. cit.*, p. 604.

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 110, a. 4, ad 2.

⁸ L. Thorndike, *op. cit.*, II, 602.

⁹ *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 95, a. 5.

¹⁰ L. Thorndike, *op. cit.*, II, 604.

natural causes, for the usage of things as signs through inscriptions and characters indicates the presence of a pact with the powers of evil.

St. Thomas sums up vain observance as relics of idolatry, since they are without reason or art (Ia IIae, q. 96, a. 3). Witchcraft is more familiar to him, and here St. Thomas seems to show himself as also a victim to the prevalent belief. In the *Summa*, Ia, q. 117, a. 3 ad 2, "he regards fascination as a fact and practically explains it as due to the power of the evil eye."¹¹

A noted writer, commenting on St. Thomas' ideas¹² quotes that the Angelic Doctor "accepted the astrological theory, except as limited by human freewill, and further admitted that most men make little use of their liberty of action but blindly follow their passions, which are governed by the stars."¹³ One of the principles which St. Thomas reiterates time and again is that inferior beings are governed by superior beings. In his conception of the divine economy, the celestial bodies though material, are incorruptible and eternal, exercising gubernatorial power upon the earth and its inhabitants. Here he takes exception to the "old masters," Plato and Aristotle, who had attributed souls and intelligences to the celestial bodies.¹⁴ So to astrology and alchemy were ascribed an important place in natural science. These are true arts, in St. Thomas' opinion, since they depend upon real, though occult forces in nature.¹⁵

In summarizing the treatise of St. Thomas on all forms of magic arts, it must be borne in mind that "the attitude of the average mind . . . was to a large extent characteristic of the best instructed and most widely read men."¹⁶ The average mind wavered between a wholesome fear of the evil Spirits and a fondness for the phenomena imputed to them. As a theologian, therefore, in his role of a specialist in *re morali*, St. Thomas could countenance nothing that would tend to characterize him as an "advocatus diaboli." In general then, magic is illicit since it involves demonology (*De Sortibus*, Capp. 3-4). One author observes that "as the idea of Satan time passed over into Christianity, the deeply-rooted belief in sorcery was possible and hence was not thoroughly expelled, though Christ had trodden on the

¹¹ L. Thorndike, *op. cit.*, II, 608.

¹² L. Thorndike, *The Place of Magic in the Intellectual History of Europe* (New York, 1905), p. 13.

¹³ *Summa Theologica* Ia, q. 115, a. 5, ad 3.

¹⁴ *Resp. ad Joan. Verc.*, *Opera Omnia* (Vives), XXVII, 248.

¹⁵ *De Judiciis Astrorum*, *Opera Omnia* (Vives), XXVII, 449.

¹⁶ L. Thorndike, *The Place of Magic, etc.*, p. 12.

head of the serpent. For as the tenacity, as it were, the indestructibility of the serpent ever returns again, and as the spirit of evil is immortal and maliciously disposed to all the arts of seduction, thus the faith in sorcery could not be driven out of religion even by the New Testament though it was unfavourable to it."¹⁷

Yet we cannot pass over unnoticed, the undercurrent of scientific probing with which St. Thomas, investigating the individual "arts," indicates the way by which judicious, reasonable inquiry may pursue its research to good purpose.

"Finally, it should be observed that at no period of her history has the Church pronounced a definite 'ex cathedra' decision regarding the reality or unreality of witchcraft or the possibility of effects alleged to have been produced thereby. Theologians and canonists voiced their views. . . . Many writers . . . took for granted the objective reality of witchcraft and the possibility of producing effects transcending nature. In an age when faith in the supernatural was one of the strongest experiences of human life, belief in the possibility of intercourse with evil spirits was not likely to be called in question."¹⁸

In the thirteenth century "when men still believed in demons and witches and divination from dreams, it is not surprising that they believed also in natural magic. Only a small part of nature's secrets was revealed to them; of the rest they felt that almost anything might turn out to be true. They had to struggle against a huge burden of error and superstition which Greece and Rome and the Arabs handed down to them; yet they must try to assimilate what was of value in Aristotle, Galen, Pliny and the rest. Crude naive beginners they were in many respects. Yet they show an interest in nature and its problems; they are drawing the line between science and religion; they make some progress in mathematics, geography, physics and chemistry; they not only talk about experimental method, they actually make some inventions and discoveries of use in the advance of science. Moreover, they themselves feel that they are making progress. . . . Magic still lingers but the march of modern science has begun."¹⁹

¹⁷ J. Ennemoser, *The History of Magic* (London, 1854), II, 80.

¹⁸ H. M. Pratt, *The Attitude of the Catholic Church towards Witchcraft and the Allied Practices of Sorcery and Magic* (Washington, 1915), p. 123.

¹⁹ L. Thorndike, *Magic and Experimental Science etc.*, II, 979.