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Magic as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis

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Abstract

This article outlines the role and function of ‘service’ magic in premodern society, and suggests ways in which the study of magic can be used as a lens to investigate and understand broader historical questions. Magic studies is a marginalised field, and the supernatural generally is treated as an unusual aspect of the human experience. This article shows that there are major benefits to reintegrating magic into wider historical studies. The article begins by introducing the concept of service magic as a phenomenon in premodern societies, and argues for its fundamental importance particularly during the medieval and early modern periods. Having established this, I explore the ways that its reintegration can affect our interpretation of the past. This article suggests ways in which magic might be useful for exploring other fields of social, political and economic history. Its function as an illicit tool makes magic a unique window for exploring a number of topics, such as cultures of tolerance and persecution, black market and proto-capitalist economics, and liminal or marginalised communities.

I

In one form or another, magic is a constant in all societies across the world and throughout time. The place it inhabits in society, and how those who practise it are treated, are the variables; the fact of its presence is never a novelty. In late medieval and early modern England, the ubiquity of magic used for practical ends, by people from across the social spectrum, makes magic a useful lens through which to explore several important aspects of English society.

The focus of this article is on the presence and function of service magic in late medieval and early modern England. Through my research collecting a database of over 550 cases of magic use between 1350 and 1650, I have established that magic was treated as a tool, in constant use throughout the period and by people from across the social spectrum. It inhabited a broad cultural position of ‘useful yet distasteful’, and was regularly called upon even at the height of the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its utility in medicine, finding lost goods, manipulating relationships, and affecting finances made it important

for many individuals and communities, and was recognised as such by contemporaries. Magic's liminal moral and legal status, combined with its centrality to everyday life, makes it useful as a means of exploring the life of premodern peoples. It allows us to investigate their hopes and fears, community interactions and belief systems, and the unofficial channels through which people dealt with problems that formal institutions could not address. Throughout this article I argue that premodern magic should be considered in a similar way to how prostitution or drug-dealing is treated today. Most would rather not admit to using such services, and for those in positions of authority especially, being found to use them could be embarrassing. Despite being thus marginalised, there was still a cultural recognition both that magic existed and that it was serving a social need.

The existence of magic in medieval and early modern Europe, and its impact on society, has long been recognised by a series of scholars. Keith Thomas's groundbreaking 1971 work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, established the importance of supernatural beliefs in early modern England, and demonstrated that such belief was deeply embedded, both culturally and intellectually, into everyday life.¹ Thomas's book included a chapter on 'popular' magic, which commented on magic's use to practical ends like finding lost goods.² Alan Macfarlane's *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* likewise contained a chapter on practical magic and its use in English communities, and combined these works have proved to be the foundation of much of our understanding of early modern English so-called 'cunning folk'.³ Owen Davies picked up the baton from here, with his wide-ranging study of cunning magic in England from the late medieval period to the nineteenth century, which showed how and when practical magic was used to meet people's needs.⁴ Since then, several books and articles have engaged with the theme of popular or cunning magic in premodern Europe.⁵ More broadly, the impact and integration of magic in premodern European society has been covered from a range of angles: Richard Kieckhefer was among the first to explore non-witchcraft magic in the medieval period in *Magic in the Middle Ages*, showing that it was an established feature of learned ecclesiastical and aristocratic culture.⁶ Sophie Page has expanded Kieckhefer's research into the endemic nature

¹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1971).

² *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

³ Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (London, 1970), ch. 8.

⁴ Owen Davies, *Cunning Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London, 2003).

⁵ See for example Edward Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2008), ch. 7; Catherine Rider, 'Common magic', in David J. Collins (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 303–31.

⁶ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1990); Richard Kieckhefer (ed.), *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park, PA, 1998).

of magic in monastic contexts.⁷ Hammering home the ubiquity of the supernatural, Stephen Wilson introduced the concept of the ‘magical universe’, arguing that premodern people lived in a world where magic was real and all around them.⁸

Magic as a feature of premodern society, therefore, is not a new concept. What is notable, though, is the relative lack of interest in the fact that the practical magic described was treated as a service. These works only really recognise magic as a service in passing. The phenomenon of magic as a structured, usable tool which was literally bought, sold and sued against when the magic failed, has largely been either overlooked or taken for granted. Likewise, although the field of magic studies is well established, the utility of magic as a lens to explore broader social, political and cultural episodes is largely unrecognised.

This article seeks to demonstrate the ubiquity of service magic and its potential utility as a tool for exploring aspects of the past. It begins by defining what is meant by ‘magic’, and the different kinds of magic which were current in medieval and early modern England. This article demonstrates how service magic was used on a daily basis, and the liminal yet important position it held in premodern life. The article then explores some of the ways in which recognising its existence can inform wider historical scholarship and finishes by suggesting ways in which magic might be useful for exploring other fields of social, political and economic history. Its function as an illicit tool makes magic a unique window for exploring a number of topics, such as cultures of tolerance and persecution, black market and proto-capitalist economics, and liminal or marginalised communities. At the very least, magic deserves to be recognised as a central aspect of premodern life, not a rarity that it is appropriate to ignore.

II

What precisely is meant by ‘magic’ varies according to time, culture and, to an extent, individual opinion. The word itself shares the Old Persian root *magu-*, meaning to help or be able, and evolved to refer broadly to the ability to wield hidden or occult powers.⁹ Within Christian societies, this hidden power was distinguished from that wielded by God by being linked to demonic rather than divine aid. St Augustine of Hippo in particular went into great detail on the existence of demons, the manner in which they can effect apparently miraculous results, and how they can work alongside pagan magicians in order to draw people away from

⁷ Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe* (University Park, PA, 2013).

⁸ Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-modern Europe* (London, 2000).

⁹ ‘Magu-’, *Old Persian Baseline Dictionary* (Austin, TX, 2020), <https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol_base_form_dictionary/aveol/22> [accessed 1 June 2020]; ‘magic, n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford, 2020), <www.oed.com/view/Entry/112186> [accessed 1 June 2020].

faith in the divine.¹⁰ This basic premise was adopted by later theologians across medieval Christendom, leading to a rough theological dichotomy between miracles – effected by God and truly supernatural in the sense that they transcend the laws of nature – and magic, which is demonic and only appears to suspend natural laws.¹¹ This definition was muddled by several details, including debates about the legitimacy of ‘natural’ magic – harnessing the hidden powers placed by God into the natural world – and whether it was sacred or profane to abjure angels into effecting the miraculous.¹² There was also the very real problem of diagnosing something as demonic or divine: if one tried to tell the future by letting a Bible fall open and reading the relevant passages, was this something in which God would intervene, an opportunity for demons to meddle, or simply a natural act with no further significance? Could this only be decided on a case-by-case basis? Such apparently niggling questions led to some carefully nuanced definitions by theologians, as well as several attempts to stop such practices entirely on the reasoning that it simply was not possible to be sure.

To an extent these questions were academic. Although there were certainly theologians who attempted magic, thus making the question quite pressing to themselves, for the majority living in medieval and early modern England the means were not as important as the results. This vagueness on the part of practitioners makes the definition of magic even more slippery, as people’s actions did not fit neatly into official, contemporary definitions. A magical practitioner might think that they were acting through God when they wrote a healing charm on a piece of parchment; they might, conversely, have thought they were invoking fairies entirely removed from the demonic-divine paradigm.¹³ When discussing magic in this context, therefore, it is most useful to focus on the preternatural outcome rather than the exact means by which it was reached. In this vein, magic is therefore defined here as ritualised practices performed by humans, to achieve a defined outcome not normally possible through nature and simple human agency.¹⁴ By ‘simple’ and ‘natural’, it is meant that the actions of the rituals themselves should not, through normal cause and effect, bring about the intended outcome. Words written on a piece of parchment should not, through natural means, heal an unwell person if they are never read by the sufferer and the words are not actioned or actionable (which would be the case for

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan (Washington, D.C., 1954), bk 21, ch. 6, pp. 352–5.

¹¹ B. Otto and M. Stausberg (eds), *Defining Magic: A Reader* (Sheffield, 2013), p. 17.

¹² Catherine Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England* (London, 2012), p. 30.

¹³ For example, Richard Stabler was questioned in the sixteenth century for hanging prayers around his patients’ necks, Borthwick Institute, York, PR/Y/CR, fos 194–5; Agnes Hancock claimed that she consulted fairies to diagnose the sick in 1438 (T. S. Holmes (ed.), *The Register of John Stafford, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1425–1443* (London, 1915), pp. 225–7).

¹⁴ This is a variation on the definition put forward in Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London, 2006), p. 106.

a medical prescription, for example). If merely writing words on a page cures a fever, therefore, it can be counted as magic. Such a definition can be broadly applied to most time periods and cultures, with the caveat that it is tempered by the context of a society's own beliefs and systems. In the case of late medieval and early modern England, recognising the wider context means obviating practices consciously recognised as an orthodox religious act. A fourteenth-century religious procession, conducted during a plague outbreak in the hope of ridding a town of disease, would not have been magic for contemporaries: it was a logical action within the constraints of orthodox religious practice. On the other hand, in late sixteenth-century England, where Catholicism was outlawed, previously acceptable religious phenomena like transubstantiation could instead be seen as magic.¹⁵ In this sense the definition of magic, and its presence in society, does not fluctuate: what does change are the actions which count as such.

III

As stated, this article focuses on service magic. Service magic is that which was performed to a useful, tangible end, normally on behalf of another and in exchange for a fee, whether that was money, payment in kind, or a favour to be redeemed at a later date. Such magic is common to most cultures, appearing as needed to resolve the problems society – or personal circumstances – cannot seem to address otherwise.¹⁶ Historians of early modern England have normally recognised practitioners of useful magic as ‘cunning folk’: relatively homely magicians who offered simple spells to their neighbours, or travelled the country offering quackery dressed up as something more impressive.¹⁷ To date, Owen Davies has published the most comprehensive work on cunning folk; mostly focusing on the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, he has explored some of the problems cunning folk were most commonly called on to address, and their integration into English life.¹⁸ Separated from cunning folk in the historiography are ritual magicians: learned practitioners, almost exclusively male, who used complex rituals to summon and control spiritual entities either demonic or angelic according to the practitioner's preference or intentions.¹⁹ Ritual magicians tend to be seen as a different order from cunning folk, primarily because of the complexity of their spells and the high level of theory which underlay them.

¹⁵ See for example Thomas, *Religion*, pp. 36–7.

¹⁶ Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven and London, 2018), p. xi.

¹⁷ Davies, *Cunning Folk*, pp. 1–4; Rider, ‘Common magic’, pp. 303–4.

¹⁸ See for example Owen Davies, ‘Charmers and charming in England and Wales from the eighteenth to the twentieth century’, *Folklore*, 109 (1998), pp. 41–52; Owen Davies, ‘Cunning-folk in the medical market-place during the nineteenth century’, *Medical History*, 43 (1999), pp. 55–73.

¹⁹ Claire Fanger, ‘Christian ritual magic in the Middle Ages’, *History Compass*, 11/8 (2013), pp. 610–18.

Separating practitioners according to their level of learning and methodology is logical and reveals a good deal about the social groups drawn to these different styles of practice.²⁰ However, in focusing on the different means, there has been a tendency for scholars to miss the similarities in the ends to which magicians of all stripes directed their powers. There is broad agreement that cunning folk's magic was used to five main purposes in medieval and early modern England: to heal the sick, affect love lives, identify thieves, discover buried treasure and divine the future. Within ritual magic, there were two broad ends: one was to gain some intangible benefit, such as divine knowledge (similar to that which the eponymous Doctor Faustus claimed to desire in Christopher Marlowe's play), or simply to know whether the magic was possible.²¹ The second strand of ends, however, was strikingly similar to those towards which cunning folk acted. Ritual magic books repeatedly proffer spells to regain lost goods, inspire love, cure wounds and instruct fortune hunters not only on how to discover where treasure was buried, but also how to ward away the spirits that guarded it.²² These similarities are interesting, particularly given the insight they offer into the shared priorities of magicians from across the social spectrum, though they are not, perhaps, surprising. What is striking, though, and rarely recognised, is that both ritual magicians and humbler cunning folk offered their powers as a service. For instance, in 1467 William Byg, alias Lech, confessed to having practised crystal gazing for at least two years as a means to discover stolen goods. Going into detail on his methods, Byg explained that he used a twelve-year-old boy to crystal gaze for him, ordering the boy to recite the Apostles' Creed, Ave Maria, and the Pater Noster (Lord's Prayer), as well as the incantation 'Lord Jesus Christ send us three angels from the right-hand direction who shall tell or show us the truth about these things which we shall ask'. When the boy saw the angels appear in the glass, Byg would take over, commanding in Latin that the angels tell the truth and show where the stolen goods were hidden.²³ This spell has all the trappings of ritual magic – the summoning of angels, use of a pre-pubescent boy to do the scrying, exhortation in Latin – but the end to which he was acting (finding stolen goods) was the same as that of cunning folk. The following year, for example, Agnes Steveday admitted to identifying thieves several times, always 'from information given her by a spirit of le Fayrre'.²⁴ Putting ritual magicians and cunning folk alongside each other according to their function rather than their methods changes the way we see magic

²⁰ For example, Frank Klaassen has made use of ritual magic texts to assess the performative masculinity and class distinctions of its practitioners in 'Learning and masculinity in manuscripts of ritual magic of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 38/1 (2007), pp. 49–76.

²¹ Page, *Magic in the Cloister*.

²² Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, pp. 69–103.

²³ John Amphlett (ed.), *Court Rolls of the Manor of Hales*, II (Oxford, 1912), p. 449.

²⁴ Karen Jones and Michael Zell, "'The Divels Speciall Instruments': Women and witchcraft before the "great witch-hunt"', *Social History*, 30/1 (2005), pp. 45–63, at p. 53.

in medieval and early modern society. For one thing, it makes the presence of service magic seem much more common than has previously been recognised. For another, it shows that service magic was in demand across the social spectrum, from the poorest labourer to the royal family. Ritual magicians, with their high level of literacy and complex rituals, tended to charge more for their services, and were generally employed by the upper gentry and above. Cunning folk tended to charge less on average, and their simpler spells often catered to lower social echelons. The fact that ritual magicians and cunning folk were working towards the same ends demonstrates a continuous spectrum of magic use where, although the methods varied, the utility and demand for the practice are constant.

That magic was indeed treated as a service during the period in question is clear. From a database of magical activity which I have compiled for the years between 1350 and 1650, I have identified 553 practitioners who performed some form of ‘practical’ magic. Of these, 313 were explicitly performing magic as a commercial service; of the remainder, some were practising for their own benefit or that of a family member, while several sources do not record the intended recipient. Several factors make it clear that magic was being performed as a service in these 313 cases. The most obvious is that the majority clearly state that a fee was charged for the work. Joan Bettyson claimed to charge *1d.* for each head of cattle she cured in 1595, and Roger Clerke’s initial fee for curing a fever was *12d.* in the fourteenth century.²⁵ In 1418 Thomas Forde charged *18s. 6d.* to recover half a gown of cloth of gold, and in the same century John Curson paid 22 nobles (probably referring to angels, worth a total of £8 5*s.*) for information on where to find several thousand gold and silver coins.²⁶ There even appears to be some theory behind the amounts charged, determined by a combination of factors including the wealth of the client, the importance of the outcome, and the purported complexity of the spell on offer. For one-off services unlikely to be requested again, magicians seemed to charge the maximum they could reasonably expect from their client. In the case of Margaret Geffrey, a poor woman living in London in the 1490s, this principle meant handing over her most valuable property (two drinking bowls worth 5 marks 10*s.*) in exchange for a spell that would secure her a rich husband.²⁷ If the spell had worked, then Geffrey’s payment would be proportionate to what she stood to gain, and thus judged a tolerable risk by the client. Meanwhile, the magician (unnamed, as the action took place through an intermediary) could not expect repeat custom from Geffrey, so charging a high fee for a

²⁵ R. F. B. Hodgkinson (ed.), *Extracts from the Act Books of the Archdeacons of Nottingham*, Transactions of the Thoroton Society, 30 (1926), p. 51; Henry Thomas Riley (ed.), *Memorials of London and London Life in the XIII, XIV & XV Centuries* (London, 1868), p. 464.

²⁶ Reginald R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London 1400-1422*, I (London, 1909), pp. 196–97, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/london-letter-books/voli/pp195-206>> [accessed 1 Sept. 2020]; Edward Peacock, ‘Extracts from Lincoln Episcopal Visitations’, *Archaeologia*, 48/2 (1885), pp. 249–69, at pp. 254–6.

²⁷ William Hale, *A Series of Precedents and Proceedings in Criminal Causes* (London, 1847), p. 32.

high-value service was logical. In other instances, the complexity of the spell was given as the reason for charging a high price. In 1631, William Barckseale of Southampton tried to charge 50 shillings to find some stolen linen, arguing ‘that any man goeing about to finde out stollne goods doth yt with greate difficultie with fastinge and prayinge three daies together and greate paines taken therein’.²⁸ He was eventually haggled down to 40 shillings to discover the thieves, although it seems likely that Barckseale’s boast of his effort and skill was part of his overall sales pitch. Conversely, if the magician could expect repeat custom or they wished to maintain the good will of their client, they may have charged less. Joan Bettyson likely charged only a penny per cow because the spell would likely need repeating annually. Charging a reasonable amount, therefore, helped ensure a regular income.

A second determiner that magic was commercially available, and culturally recognised as such, is that potential clients actively sought out magicians for help. One example is that of Mabel Gray in 1637. Gray, living in Westminster, had lost some spoons, and sought her neighbours’ advice on how to recover them. They told her to go to an unnamed ‘cunning woman’ in Southwark, who said that she was unable to help but recommended a cunning man in Lutners Lane who might be able to. Gray paid the cunning man in Lutners Lane a shilling in money and a shilling in drink to take her to a Mr Tunn of Ram Alley, who informed her that the spoons ‘should come agayne they should not know howe and be laid in the same place fro[m] whence they were taken’.²⁹ Not the most helpful information, especially given the five shillings of money and three shillings’ worth of wine that she paid Tunn, but the episode demonstrates that people were not practising magic in isolation, secreted away from wider society and treated as a rare and deplorable phenomenon. Rather, there was a broad cultural knowledge that magicians were available to resolve everyday issues, and even if one did not know personally how to find a practitioner, they were easily discoverable through word of mouth. To draw a modern analogy, this cultural recognition seems similar to that surrounding recreational drugs today. Although they are mostly illegal in European and North American countries, there is still widespread recognition that these products are available on the black market. Most major cities have at least one area that carries a reputation for drug sales, and in general there are few degrees of separation between a user and a potential dealer. Access is necessarily easier in urban environments, and this seems true of early modern magicians as well: while there appears to have been a choice of practitioners in seventeenth-century London, potential clients in rural areas often had to travel beyond their community for magical aid.³⁰ Seeking help outside one’s community may have also

²⁸ R. C. Anderson (ed.), *The Book of Examinations and Depositions, 1622–44*, II (Southampton, 1931), pp. 105–6.

²⁹ London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), MJ/SBR/7, fo. 82; WJ/SR/NS/50/22.

³⁰ Alan Macfarlane made a similar point with regard to Tudor and Stuart Essex. His research showed that people would normally go some distance to find cunning folk and rarely to one in their own

been preferable: again, like recreational drug use, many clients would probably have wanted to be discreet about their activities. As George Gifford stated in his *Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts*, published in 1593, there are ‘very many [who receive help from cunning men]: [but] there be a number which do never make it knowne, because it is misliked by some’.³¹

There was clearly a demand for magical services, then, and, moreover, clients expected results. Clients cannot be viewed as uniformly naïve or gullible: they often wanted guarantees that their money was wisely spent, and took appropriate precautions. For example, some clients withheld a portion of the fee until the spell was completed, on the rationale that magicians had an incentive not just to abscond with the money, and clients had a little power if the spell initially failed to work. Mary Pennyfather returned to Thomas Harden twice when his advice on how to cure her ‘changeling’ child failed, for example, paying him sixpence in advance but promising more if – and only if – his charms succeeded.³² Even more striking is the number of clients who actually sued magicians at the court of Chancery when the magic was ineffective. Such cases are significantly more common before the mid-sixteenth century, when many forms of service magic became a secular crime under the successive Acts against Conjurations and Witchcraft.³³ Most of the prosecutions came up through the Chancery court as appeals against fraud, as clients expressed their dissatisfaction at being duped by a ‘false’ magician. By bringing these charges, clients risked proceedings against themselves for putting their faith in magic, although it seems that for some clients, the moral outrage and lost fee was enough to make the risk worthwhile. In 1375, for example, John Chestre was prosecuted for failing to discover a thief as he had promised, and was forced to return his fee of 9 s. 2 d. to the complainant.³⁴ Roger Clerke was prosecuted seven years later by his client, also for fraud.³⁵ Thomas Forde was indicted along the same lines in 1418, for defrauding two female clients.³⁶ Even after the introduction of the Acts against Conjurations magicians were sued on occasion. Thomas Harding was called up for fraud in 1589 after he failed to identify an arsonist for one Mr Olyver. Olyver’s willingness to prosecute was probably because

village. Although my research demonstrates that this was not always the case in other regions, it is nevertheless clear that many clients wished to keep their business private. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft*, pp. 129–30.

³¹ George Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* (London, 1593), <http://www.gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:5997> [accessed 10 July 2020], p. 65.

³² Cornelius Nicholls, ‘Notes on the Hertfordshire county records’, *The Home Counties Magazine*, 11 (1909), pp. 96–107, at pp. 97–8.

³³ 33 Henry VIII c. 8 (1541/2); 5 Elizabeth I c. 16 (1563); 1 James I c. 12 (1604); For transcriptions of the Acts, see Marion Gibson, *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1550–1750* (London, 2006), pp. 1–7.

³⁴ A. H. Thomas (ed.), *Calendar of Select Plea and Memoranda Rolls, London, 1364–1381*, II (London, 1929), pp. 185–205.

³⁵ Riley, *Memorials of London*, pp. 464–6.

³⁶ Sharpe, *Letter Books of London*, I, pp. 196–7.

of the inordinate sum Harding charged for his services: £2 in advance, and £20 in total after the magic succeeded.³⁷ A readiness to sue, and the careful manner in which some clients withheld a part of the fee until after the magic succeeded, demonstrates that people clearly felt that they were engaging in a commercial transaction when coming into contact with magic. The transaction may be esoteric and in a moral and legal grey area, but at its heart it demonstrates that magic was seen as a biddable tool in everyday life.

It should be clear by now that magic-use was widespread, although exactly how common it was is difficult to gauge. The provenance of the sources used in my study suggests that service magic was rarely actively prosecuted, even after the passage of the 1563 Act against Conjurations.³⁸ Most cases are found in ecclesiastical court records, sometimes prosecuting the use of magic directly, but mostly appearing as secondary information in charges related to defamation, fraud (like those listed above), or theft. The incidental nature of its appearance, and the almost casual way that magic is mentioned in some instances, suggests that magic-use was rarely a priority of peacekeepers or spiritual authorities. This summation is supported by Catherine Rider's research into late medieval priests' manuals, which demonstrates an awareness that magic was a part of everyday life, but that it was seen as a far lesser problem than endemic spiritual issues like adultery or missing communion.³⁹ Moreover, as we have seen, there is evidence of a cultural recognition of magic's widespread use, as demonstrated by the apparent local knowledge possessed by many on where to go to find a service magician.

This common usage is also demonstrated through contemporary drama. I have identified forty Elizabethan and Jacobean plays which mention service magicians, many of which are set in environments that would have been familiar to their English, and especially London, audiences. These plays treat service magicians as an unsurprising and necessary feature of a community, and figures around which other characters coalesce. Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589), John Lyly's *Mother Bombie* (1594), Thomas Heywood's *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* (first performed c.1604) and Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (first performed c.1613) all follow the same basic pattern, in which other characters visit the wizards' homes to receive help, often concluding the play there.⁴⁰ Judith Bonzol argues that Heywood portrayed the Wise

³⁷ Nicholls, 'Notes', pp. 97–8.

³⁸ This is recognised to be the point at which so-called Witchcraft Acts became more actively enforced. Although Henry VIII passed an earlier Act in 1542, this was repealed by Edward VI (I Edward VI, c. 12) and never used to its fullest extent.

³⁹ Rider, *Magic and Religion*, p. 147.

⁴⁰ Robert Greene, *The Honorable Historie of Frier Bacon, and Frier Bongay, As It Was Plaid by Her Majesties Servants* (London, 1594), p. 12, <http://www.gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:215200:2> [accessed 1 Sept. 2020]; John Lyly, *Mother Bombie: As It Was Sundrie Times Plaid by the Children of Powles*, 2nd edn.

Woman's house in Hogsdon (modern day Hoxton, north-east London) as serving a 'civic function as a place people will make use of when confronting intractable or unprecedented social problems in a rapidly changing urban world'.⁴¹ In many ways the Wise Woman's house is one of ill repute, as she offers many of the services that early modern England needed but would rather not acknowledge. She runs a brothel, takes in expectant mothers and re-homes their illegitimate children after birth, sells magic and performs secret marriages.⁴² She is mistrusted by many characters and abused by them, but for all this, she is visited so regularly that she might as well have a revolving door. Her services are indispensable for characters both high and low, and though she lives away from London in the satellite town of Hogsdon, she is clearly central to important aspects of their lives.

The centrality of the magician to her community is also true of the eponymous character in Lyly's *Mother Bombie*. Bonzol argues that Bombie is a liminal character, who keeps her community at bay as much as she is shunned by it.⁴³ Bonzol bases her conclusion on the way that Bombie is staged – she never leaves her house or invites anyone in, but instead conducts her business in the liminal space of her doorstep – concluding that this is a manifestation of her social position, and reflective of real cunning folk. Although Bombie is certainly careful to keep herself to herself, even complaining that her 'house is no inn', like the Wise Woman she has a constant barrage of visitors. Her complaints are echoed by real magicians of the same period: the prolific service magician William Wycherley, active in the 1540s, claimed that 'people ar [sic] so importune upon hym dayly [for his services] that he is not [able to] avoyde them, but kepeth hymself within his doores'.⁴⁴ In Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c.1597), when Falstaff is making his way through the town dressed as the 'old woman of Brentford', he is followed back to his lodgings by a customer, who wants to employ the services of the 'cunning woman' he is pretending to be.⁴⁵ These were not figures who were avoided

(London, 1598), sig. E3v, <http://www.gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:10282> [accessed 1 Sept. 2020]; Thomas Heywood, *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* (London, 1638), <http://www.gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:4272> [accessed 1 Sept. 2020]; Thomas Middleton, Ludwig Drees (ed.), *The Witch; ed. from the Bodleian Ms. Malone 12* (Louvain, 1945).

⁴¹ Judith Bonzol, "'In good reporte and honest estimacion amongst her neighbours": Cunning women in the Star Chamber and on the stage in early modern England', in Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich (eds), *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage* (Farnham, 2014), pp. 169–84, at p. 181; for more on the politics and staging of *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*, see Daniel R. Gibbons, 'Thomas Heywood in the house of the wise woman', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 49/2 (2009), pp. 391–416.

⁴² Thomas Heywood and Sonia Massai (ed.), *The Wise Woman of Hoxton* (New York, 2003), pp. 35–6.

⁴³ Bonzol, 'In good reporte', p. 179.

⁴⁴ John Gough Nichols (ed.), *Narratives of the Days of the Reformation, Chiefly from the Manuscripts of John Foxe the Martyrologist; with Two Contemporary Biographies of Archbishop Cranmer* (London, 1859) pp. 332–5.

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. H. C. Hart (London, 1904), Act 4, sc. 5.

or an oddity within English culture, therefore: quite the opposite. They were known of, frequently sought after and, according to Wycherley at least, far too popular for their own good.

The cases drawn from court records, therefore, should only be seen as the tip of an iceberg: authorities were not especially interested in prosecuting the phenomenon, and individuals do not seem to have strongly wished to report on their neighbours. Indeed, the only times that spiritual or secular authorities seemed to become particularly exercised is when the magic caused harm. This harm could take two forms: either the magic commissioned by a client was explicitly a curse or otherwise intended to hurt another, or the magic inadvertently caused a disturbance of the peace. There are multiple examples of the latter. In 1390, two men were beaten and almost banished from London as a result of a magician naming them as thieves.⁴⁶ In 1484 Elizabeth Doland was beaten by her husband and driven from her own house for the same reason.⁴⁷ A public scandal was apparently caused in 1382 when Matilda de Eye openly confronted one Johanna Wolsey for supposedly stealing her mazer.⁴⁸ In each of these cases, the harm caused to the accused, and the accused's protestations of innocence, is what prompted the involvement of the ecclesiastical courts.⁴⁹ In the resulting defamation suit brought by Wolsey, the main charge against the service magician was 'that by such soothsaying, magic arts, and falsities, good and lawful men and women might easily, and without deserving it, incur injury in their name and good repute'.⁵⁰ Another source of problems was fraud. As seen above, clients were prepared to prosecute on occasion when the service they were promised was not delivered. In such instances, the magical practitioner was treated as a fraud and a 'seducer of the king's subjects'.⁵¹

In the eyes of magistrates and other law-enforcers, magicians must have been viewed largely as public nuisances. They had the potential to cause assaults and public scandals, and often appeared before the court as fraudsters. Occasionally they would be investigated for more serious damage: namely attempted or actual murder. Before 1542, successful murder attempts through magic were dealt with by secular courts; otherwise, unless the attempt affected the nobility, generally the case was handed over to the ecclesiastical authorities. For example, in 1331 Robert de la Marche, Andrew of Oxford and John of Gloucester were discovered performing ritual magic, possibly to kill two of Robert's enemies. The case was turned over to the bishop of Winchester because no actual

⁴⁶ Riley, *Memorials of London*, pp. 518–19.

⁴⁷ Hale, *Series of Precedents*, p. 61.

⁴⁸ Riley, *Memorials of London*, pp. 472–3.

⁴⁹ Ecclesiastical jurisdiction over defamation cases which also touched on secular crimes (for example, the public accusation of a person for theft) waned during the early sixteenth century. Defamation cases imputing an underlying secular crime were increasingly heard at the royal courts. See R. H. Helmholz, *Select Cases on Defamation to 1600* (London, 1985), pp. xli–xlvi; lxvi–lxvii.

⁵⁰ Riley, *Memorials of London*, pp. 472–3.

⁵¹ William le Hardy (ed.), *Calendar to the Middlesex Sessions, 1612–1614, I* (London, 1935).

harm had been caused – otherwise the case would presumably have stayed with the King's Bench.⁵² During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries more cases of attempted harm reached the secular courts, but most of these (when practised by magicians as opposed to demonically enslaved witches) feature suspicions of treason or regicide. This pattern implies a pragmatic approach to policing magic: if the ends magic was used to were disruptive or illegal, then the magician or client would likely be prosecuted. Otherwise, the use of magic was mostly overlooked.

We can conclude, then, that service magic was a constant and widespread aspect of late medieval and early modern culture. Alan Macfarlane estimated in the 1970s that a cunning person lived within ten miles of every village in Elizabethan Essex, and Owen Davies suggested in *Cunning Folk* that this number be revised to within five or six miles of most villages in England.⁵³ If we expand the remit to include all magicians who practised as a service rather than just those who fit the definition of cunning folk, this figure inevitably becomes higher, suggesting that service magic was endemic across the country. Taken in such a light, it is necessary for historians to recognise magic as a facet of premodern life: it is not something which can easily be sidelined, and as will be shown below, can be a useful means to explore other facets of society. The following section proposes that magic can be used as an analytical tool for fields far outside of the supernatural, mostly owing to its liminal yet widespread status.

IV

There are arguments for incorporating service magic into broader historical studies. Magic tends not to be treated seriously outside magic studies itself, which can skew historians' readings of certain historical episodes. Francis Young has raised this point with regard to studies of treason in medieval and early modern England. Whereas magical treason has been discussed in a supernatural context, it is not discussed by historians 'specifically concerned with the law of treason', despite magic's inclusion in contemporary treason legislation.⁵⁴ This omission has led several historians to see charges of magic-use against major political figures as simply attempts at sealing their guilt by throwing everything at them and seeing what stuck. An example of this from a European context is Margaret Harvey's interpretation of the allegations made against Popes Gregory XII and Benedict XIII during the papal schism of 1409. Harvey argues that the magic accusations levelled were used in building a sufficiently strong case to justify deposing both popes.⁵⁵

⁵² G. O. Sayles (ed.), *Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench under Edward III*, V (London, 1958), pp. 53–7.

⁵³ Macfarlane, *Witchcraft*, pp. 129–30; Davies, *Cunning Folk*, p. 68.

⁵⁴ Francis Young, *Magic as a Political Crime in Medieval and Early Modern England* (London, 2018), pp. 5–6.

⁵⁵ Margaret Harvey, 'Papal witchcraft: the charges against Benedict XIII', *Studies in Church History*, 10 (1973), pp. 109–16, at p. 115.

The same approach has been adopted more recently in investigations into the political expediency of the 1563 Act Against Conjurations. Pierre Kapitaniak presents a thorough and well-argued explanation of William Cecil's use of the act as an attempt to demonise Catholics, employing the work of Reginald Scot to do so.⁵⁶ The argument is strengthened by Michael Devine's discussion of anti-Catholic sentiment in Elizabethan England, and an uncomfortable legal loophole which might have motivated the passage of the Act.⁵⁷ These studies offer vital context to the changing attitudes towards magic in the period. However, they also treat magic as an excuse rather than a reality. In explaining the cynical motivations for magic persecution, to an extent they remove the magic from the cases, and implicitly suggest that sorcery was unlikely to have actually taken place. At the very least, these scholars suggest that magic was not the primary concern when penalising magic, which seems a slightly hollow interpretation.

Returning to the Woodvilles and Edward IV's troubled reign, the same can be said of the attempts to delegitimise Edward and Elizabeth's marriage through magic accusations. These attempts are generally seen as trumped-up charges made after the fact, at the convenience of Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, whose frustration at the marriage was known from the outset, and Richard of Gloucester during his bid for the throne.⁵⁸ There is another way to see these charges, though: instead of being hastily applied as a convenient way to act against an upstart, perhaps there was a wider tradition of magic use which was generally overlooked unless it became politically convenient to do otherwise. Rumours had been flying that Elizabeth's mother, Jacquetta of Luxembourg, practised magic for years before a formal charge was brought, and even Edward IV himself was rumoured to be using 'Nygromancye, and ... Crafte to poison his Subgettes' in the 1470s.⁵⁹ The fact that the charges were levelled at times when the king and, later, his widow, were politically weak could be seen in a similar way to how embezzlement is weaponised in a corrupt modern state. It is an open secret that the practice takes place, but it is mostly tolerated. Where convenient, however, the law can be used to rein in individuals who go too far, or even used as a tool for political sabotage. This interpretation forces us to take the existence of magic for premodern peoples seriously, and adds new layers to our knowledge of their political machinations.

⁵⁶ Pierre Kapitaniak, 'Reginald Scot and the circles of power: witchcraft, anti-Catholicism and faction politics', in Marcus K. Harmes and Victoria Bladen (eds), *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England* (London, 2016), pp. 42–60.

⁵⁷ Michael Devine, 'Treasonous Catholic magic and the 1563 witchcraft legislation: the English state's response to Catholic conjuring in the early years of Elizabeth I's reign', in Harmes and Bladen (eds), *Supernatural and Secular Power*, pp. 67–91.

⁵⁸ John Leland, 'Witchcraft and the Woodvilles: a standard medieval smear?', in Douglas L. Biggs, Sharon D. Michalove and A. Compton Reeves (eds), *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth-Century Europe* (Leiden, 2004), pp. 267–88.

⁵⁹ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, VI (London, 1832), p. 194.

We cannot doubt that magic itself was taken seriously by major political figures, and that service magic was even utilised by the same. Although he was by no means the only magician to enter the employ of royalty and the nobility, perhaps the most famous example of a court service magician is John Dee. Dee was periodically paid by such illustrious personages as William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth I of England, King Stephen Bathory of Poland and Emperor Rudolf II to research and perform magic to various ends.⁶⁰ Burghley financially supported Dee during his Continental travels in search of occult texts in the 1560s; in 1559, Dee was rewarded with a rectory in Lincolnshire for prognosticating Elizabeth's future on the day of her coronation; and Stephen Bathory offered Dee his protection in 1585 in exchange for angelic prognostications.⁶¹

The high-level protection Dee enjoyed at various stages of his career demonstrates the esteem with which service magic might be held. At times, Dee's abilities were deemed invaluable to politicians and heads of state, and he was richly rewarded for his time. However, Dee's turbulent career also belies the level of precarity and liminality associated with magical practitioners: while they could be central during a time of need, they were still vulnerable to attack or arrest for their 'uncanny arts'.⁶²

Alongside the perceived utility of magic at court, it was also recognised as a genuine threat. In 1619, 'One Peacock, sometime a schoolmaster and minister' was imprisoned in the Tower and examined under torture 'for practising to infatuate the King's judgement by sorcery ... in the business of Sir Thomas Lake and the Lady Exeter'.⁶³ The business in question was a case taken to the Star Chamber, involving accusations against Frances, countess of Exeter for attempted poisoning. The allegations were made by Sir Thomas Lake and his daughter, Lady Roos, following a land dispute between the Lakes and Lord Roos (Lady Roos's husband), with which Frances interfered in Lord Roos's favour.⁶⁴ James I personally oversaw the Exeter versus Lake case, and the evidence quickly unravelled. It is not clear exactly what form the 'infatuation' cast by Peacock was meant to take, although it is clear that the aim was to manipulate James's judgement and affection to the extent that the Lakes would win the case. Francis Bacon, who oversaw the examinations, advocated Peacock's torture, which indicates that the attempt was tantamount to treason. In Bacon's own words, 'He deserveth [torture] as well as Peacham did',

⁶⁰ Glyn Parry, *The Arch-Conjuror of England: John Dee* (Yale, 2012), pp. 50, 179–93.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50, 187.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁶³ Francis Bacon, James Spedding (ed.), *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon, Including All His Occasional Works, Namely Letters Speeches Tracts State Papers Memorials Devices and All Authentic Writings Not Already Printed among His Philosophical Literary or Professional Works*, VII (London, 1874), p. 79; *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: James I, 1619–23* (London, 1858), p. 125.

⁶⁴ Samuel R. Gardiner, *A History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War, 1603–1642*, 10 vols (Cambridge, 1883), III, pp. 189–94; see also Alastair James Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603–1660* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 252–4.

referring to a preacher accused of treason in 1615 for writing a sermon which, among other things, foretold the king's death.⁶⁵ The severity of the crime was determined by the subject and the outcome: the monarch, and an attempt to subvert his supremacy. However, in order for this attempt to be seen as so severe there had to have been a genuine concern over the methods used, not only by James himself, but also from Bacon.

Taking magic seriously can therefore affect our interpretation of various political episodes in history, making our understanding richer and more nuanced. It can help us to understand these figures and their fears: not only were they concerned about the physical rallying of armies, the cloak-and-dagger politics of the royal court and the oversight of the Church, but they also had to keep a watchful eye on magical interference, and charges of magical activities against themselves.

V

Moving on from the political, there is also benefit to incorporating magic into sociological studies. Up until the mid-sixteenth century, service magic was a moral crime largely dealt with by the ecclesiastical courts, although it was sometimes handed across to the secular courts when attempts to kill or otherwise seriously harm were suspected.⁶⁶ The practical purpose behind policing magic, beyond that of wishing to stop people sliding into superstition, was that it could cause serious disruption within communities. The magical identification of a thief frequently led to public confrontations between the magician's client and the named culprit, which in turn led to damaged reputations, broken relationships, and even false arrests. When John White divined Elizabeth Doland as the thief behind some stolen silver in 1484, Doland was beaten by her husband and driven out of her own house as a result.⁶⁷ Another case ended up in the Chancery Court in the same year: according to the testimony of William Paule, 'parisshe prest of the churche of Seynt Andrewe in Holbo[r]ne', he had discovered some stolen goods of Thomas Fereby thrown over the wall into the rectory grounds. Paule returned the goods to Fereby, only to be accused of trespass himself after Fereby sought the opinion of 'diverse nigromansiers' as to the identity of the thief.⁶⁸ Fereby brought a private action through the Common Pleas claiming that Paule had robbed through force of arms, prompting Paule to appeal to the court of Chancery to clear his name. In a more public version of the same basic scenario, Alice White confronted Richard Faques in front of witnesses in 1511, declaring that she knew he had stolen money from

⁶⁵ Gardiner, *History of England*, pp. 189–94; Roger N. McDermott, 'Peacham, Edmund (1553/4–1616), Church of England Clergyman and Traitor', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21666>> [accessed 23 Feb. 2021].

⁶⁶ Gregory Durston, *Witchcraft and Witch Trials: A History of English Witchcraft and its Legal Perspectives, 1542 to 1736* (Chichester, 2000), p. 185.

⁶⁷ Hale, *Series of Precedents*, p. 61.

⁶⁸ National Archives, C 1/154/50.

her several months prior. White knew Faques was the culprit because she had consulted a soothsayer, who told her the thief she was looking for had a blemish on his face, and Faques was the only person she knew to have such a mark.⁶⁹ The potential damage this accusation could cause to Faques's reputation prompted him to sue White for defamation. Such incidents could cause serious damage to livelihoods (which relied on trust and reputation) and relationships, making magicians potential disruptors to social cohesion. Likewise, disruption could be caused by fraud, and on more than one occasion, a magician's services caused a serious risk to life and living. Margaret Geffrey almost lost everything she owned after handing over all her movable property in payment for a magician to find her a rich husband; Alice Trig apparently almost died of melancholy in 1382 after the fraudulent magician William Northampton told her she would drown within a month.⁷⁰ Roger Clarke had no qualms about selling a charm to cure a sick woman of her fever in the same year, even though he knew 'a straw beneath his foot would be of just as much avail for fevers'.⁷¹

From the perspective of Justices of the Peace and other peacekeepers, therefore, service magic could be a nuisance and, although never as regularly policed as drunkenness, adultery or theft, still a constant irritant. This is particularly true of London, where I have found 120 individuals practising service magic between 1350 and 1650. Despite the surviving evidence, studies of crime and misbehaviour rarely, if ever, mention magic. Marjorie McIntosh's work on social disruption in late medieval and early modern England makes no mention of magic of any kind, despite an otherwise thorough overview of the subject.⁷² Similarly, Garthine Walker's landmark study of crime and gender in early modern England briefly touches on witchcraft, but leaves other forms of magic out of her purview.⁷³ Paul Griffiths's *Lost Londons*, despite a clear focus on the underworld of the capital, once again does not give magic a mention.⁷⁴ This lacuna is not altogether surprising: magic studies is often treated as a discrete field, and it is the responsibility of its scholars to emphasise its relevance to others. In excluding magic, though, social studies like these still lack an important facet of their focus.⁷⁵ Particularly when considering social underworlds, magic has an important place that deserves to be recognised, as well as being a useful tool for exploring communities which are liminal or marginalised.

In the context of late medieval and early modern England, service magic inhabited a liminal social space. It was outlawed and caused both

⁶⁹ LMA, DL/C/206, fos 21v, 22r, 40r, 42.

⁷⁰ Hale, *Series of Precedents*, p. 32.

⁷¹ Riley, *Memorials of London*, pp. 464–6.

⁷² Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehaviour in England, 1370–1600* (Cambridge, 1998).

⁷³ Garthine Walker, *Crime, Gender, and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁷⁴ Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime, and Control in the Capital City 1550–1660* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁷⁵ An exception to this rule is Malcolm Gaskill's work on crime, society and magic. See for example Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000).

spiritual and practical issues, but it also met certain fundamental needs of communities and as such was in constant demand. Service magic performs a similar function by helping people in situations where there were few other avenues for redress. In helping people to find thieves, service magicians were filling a void that would later be served by a police force. By healing the sick through prayers and charms, they were helping to answer the desperate needs of people who had been failed by physicians and apothecaries. In casting protective charms over cattle, divining the future, and prompting love in otherwise uninterested parties, they were helping to control aspects of the human experience that we still find it difficult to manage today. Service magicians therefore held a difficult social position of ‘necessary yet distasteful’, leading to an uneasy recognition and toleration of their presence by communities across England. In this way, it has certain parallels with other service providers or marginalised groups. For example, during the late medieval period especially, there are strong similarities between the function and perception of service magicians and sex workers. Both were kept at arms’ length by the authorities; clients would rather not admit to using their services (especially if they were connected to the Church or held positions of authority), but they were nevertheless called on by all levels of society and recognised as a necessary evil, addressing needs that others could not. In the case of sex workers, the justification for tolerance was that it helped stop unmarried men from falling into further sin by venting their sexual frustration through masturbation, sex with another man’s wife or daughter, or same-sex acts.⁷⁶ Sex workers thus performed a necessary service which, ideally, society would not need.

The overlap between sex workers and magicians can also be geographical. In London, city decrees regulating the movements of prostitutes tended to stipulate that they should not lodge or work within the walls; likewise vagrants were expected to leave before the gates closed at night.⁷⁷ The outer neighbourhoods most famed for housing prostitutes – Southwark, Shoreditch, Cock Lane in Smithfield, Fleet Street – were also those where magicians happened to live or practise their arts.⁷⁸ These locations are as close as possible to the city proper, without entering London’s jurisdiction and thus avoiding close oversight.⁷⁹ Both groups were therefore carefully positioned for ease of access, but also in areas which were less carefully regulated by the

⁷⁶ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 5–6.

⁷⁷ Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, pp. 90–1; Martha Carlin, *Medieval Southwark* (London, 1996), pp. 210–11.

⁷⁸ On prostitution in London, see, Carlin, *Medieval Southwark*, pp. 209–10; Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, pp. 90–1; for overlap between magicians and prostitutes in Shoreditch, see Bonzol, ‘In good reporte’, pp. 180–1; examples of magicians practising in outer London neighbourhoods include: 1331, Robert de la Marche and Andrew of Oxford in Southwark (Sayles (ed.), *Select Cases*, pp. 53–7); 1549, Lowth in Fleet Street (Nichols (ed.), *Narratives*, pp. 334–5); 1549, William Wycherley in Charterhouse Lane off Smithfield (Nichols (ed.), *Narratives*, pp. 332–5).

⁷⁹ Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, pp. 78–82; Francis Sheppard, *London: A History* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 186–8.

authorities. This geographical positioning reflects their liminal position in society, as well as their theoretical position in people's minds. The liminal status of magicians serves as a useful lens through which to consider questions of tolerance and acceptance, and the pragmatic approach which communities adopted in relation to other groups deemed problematic by contemporary authorities. It feeds into Benjamin Kaplan's theory of 'practical coexistence' between different religious denominations, and demonstrates that the theory can be applied more widely.⁸⁰ Other groups which share this conceptual space of 'useful yet distasteful' during the late medieval and early modern periods include (converted) Jews, Gypsies, and some economic migrants from rural into urban environments: a deeper exploration of their incorporation might lead to a greater understanding of society as a whole. It may be relevant that many of these groups – sex workers, Gypsies and Jews – were also associated with different forms of magic use during the period. Gypsies were culturally recognised as having fortune-telling powers, and as David Cressy has recently elaborated, were kept at arm's length by Tudor communities but also visited for divinatory services.⁸¹ Likewise there are several instances in which Jews were associated with magical abilities: the magician Wisdom claimed to have consulted 'a blind man which was a Jew born and a practiser of the same art [of scrying]' to identify where treasure was buried in the sixteenth century; in 1390, John Berkyng was described as 'lately a Jew' when he was indicted for discovering lost goods through magic.⁸² Although the Edict of Expulsion under Edward I officially expelled all Jewish people from England in 1290 until the latter half of the seventeenth century, these references should not be overlooked.⁸³ The records state that the individuals in question were *conversi*, thus legally entitling them to settle in England, but the fact that this was even mentioned at all may be significant. The epithet may denote these individuals' liminal status, or might have been added in by the testifier as a slur. It is also possible, though, that these records evidence wider tolerance of Jews and Judaic practices in certain contexts. It was recognised by contemporary theologians and commentators that ostensible conversion did not automatically imply an abandonment of past practices or beliefs: a point which James Shapiro has demonstrated was a source of concern in late medieval and early modern England.⁸⁴ Judaism also had a long-standing connection with magic, at least according to medieval and early modern Christians.⁸⁵ By seeking out (converted) Jews for magical help,

⁸⁰ See for example B. J. Kaplan, 'Coexistence, conflict, and the practice of toleration', in R. Po-chia Hsia (ed.), *A Companion to the Reformation World* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 486–505.

⁸¹ David Cressy, *Gypsies: An English History* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 54–5.

⁸² James Gairdner and R. H. Brodie (eds), *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, 21.2, September 1546–January 1547 (London, 1910), British History Online, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol21/no2>> [accessed 29 Sept. 2020]; Riley, *Memorials of London*, pp. 518–19.

⁸³ James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 2nd edn (New York, 2016), p. 42.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–42.

⁸⁵ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 119, 149.

therefore, clients were tacitly acknowledging these individuals and their (albeit still liminal) role in society.

A final area of interest is that of local economics, and how trade was conducted for black market or otherwise unregulated goods. As magic was illicit, it was not of course subject to price regulations like other, legitimate goods and services. It was still bought and sold, however, and as was elaborated previously, there appear to have been certain market forces which determined the price that was paid. The relatively high number of cases which record both the cost of magic, and how clients found and commissioned magicians, could make it a useful tool for mapping how other unregulated services conducted their business.

VI

Because of its ubiquity and the intimate nature of the problems it was used to resolve, service magic has the potential to act as a lens through which historians might explore several aspects of history. Tom Johnson recently demonstrated magic's potential utility in this regard in relation to legal proceedings, when he explored a case in which a woman commissioned a soothsayer to identify a thief in early sixteenth-century London.⁸⁶ Johnson argues that the aim of the commissioner, Alice White, was to circumnavigate the courts: if White could identify the thief and contact him privately, the issue might be resolved without the cost of a presentment or harm to the reputations of either party. In this instance the attempt failed as, her private pleas apparently ignored, White chose to confront the suspected thief publicly and thus brought a defamation charge upon herself. Despite the individual failure of White's attempt, Johnson forwards an intriguing question of how late medieval Londoners attempted to settle disputes without recourse to the law, and magic is at the heart of the investigation.

Service magic has been a part of human activity for centuries, easily pre-dating demonic witchcraft, and a constant throughout the period in question. In this article, the value of recognising magic in premodern society has been shown by considering several points of historical interest. First, it demonstrates that there were other levels of intrigue and fear circulating in royal and baronial courts than are normally recognised. Although magic has frequently been interpreted by historians as a charge of last resort in political trials, it should not be. Accepting that the use of service magic was a real possibility in a court context changes the tenor of such accusations: rather than being desperate and sensationalist, the charges become part of a carefully curated argument. If we accept that the use of service magic was an open secret among the nobility, it becomes one of many tolerated misdemeanours which could be weaponised against an individual who fell out of favour.

⁸⁶ Tom Johnson, 'Soothsayers, legal culture, and the politics of truth in late-medieval England', *Cultural and Social History: The Journal of the Social History Society*, 17 (2020), pp. 1–21.

Second, service magic has the potential to shine light on the everyday lived experience of medieval and early modern people. Understanding how and when service magic was used can elucidate people's hopes and fears, the lengths they were prepared to go to have their desires realised, and some of the needs which other societal mechanisms were unable to meet. At present, studies on community relations, crime and social underworlds barely mention magic, which represents a lacuna in social history. Finally, there are means by which magic can act as a lens to explore several historical fields. The liminal status of magicians overlaps with other groups who were mostly held at bay by broader society but still called upon when needed. There is an opportunity here to explore how communities interacted with seemingly problematic groups and to what extent these groups were absorbed both culturally and socially. Ultimately, therefore, the study of service magic can be useful for other fields of research. Though unexpected, the prevalence of service magic means that it was a feature in many people's private lives and the goings-on of communities. This positioning makes magic an insightful window into the past.