

literary works that otherwise did not conform to moral or religious standards, particularly certain kinds of merry and frivolous tales. Within the German-speaking areas such patterns of legitimation developed much later than in western and southern Europe. While the so-called *Mensa philosophica* published in Cologne around 1479 seems to be the first example employing these patterns, earlier attempts to legitimize similar works can be observed at the court of the Emperor Charles IV at the time of the Black Death.

That leads Wachinger to the subject of the third chapter of his booklet, Boccaccio's well-known *Decamerone*, which more than any other contemporary work reveals the relation between health, disease and literary freedom. Well-chosen illustrations complete the exquisite text. Without any doubt, the booklet is worth reading. This interesting subject offers various possibilities for further investigation in a number of fields.

Kay Peter Jankrift,

Institut für Geschichte der Medizin
der Robert Bosch Stiftung, Stuttgart

Marie-Louise Thomsen and Frederick H Cryer, *Witchcraft and magic in Europe: biblical and pagan societies*, The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe series, vol. 1, London, Athlone Press, 2001, pp. xvii, 168, illus., £50.00 (hardback 0-485-89001-1), £17.99 (paperback 0-485-89101-8).

The concept of a series on witchcraft and magic in Europe beginning with a treatment of Mesopotamia and the Bible has much to commend it. The cultural impact of Mesopotamia and the Bible on Europe was crucial, and incidentally much greater than that of Egypt, although systems of magic were roughly contemporary. The present book is a useful starting point, providing a general survey of witchcraft and magic with good examples of magical texts in translation. Although not actually stated *per se*, the implicit assumption of the book is that Mesopotamian magic and witchcraft influenced biblical literature,

reflecting a wider cultural Near Eastern context of the Bible, and the Bible later influenced European culture after the spread of Christianity (and to a lesser extent Judaism) to Europe.

The book covers a wide range of relevant topics, with particular attention being paid to the art of witchcraft, followed by examples of protective magic, amulets, exorcisms, and use of figurines, and other ritual forms of magic from Mesopotamia. Biblical evidence is less well attested, with relatively few examples from the Old Testament for healing or exorcism, but these are treated comparatively with the Mesopotamian material. So far so good.

There is a general problem with this work, which arises from the particular expertise of the two authors, both of whom have previously written intelligent books on related subjects. Thomsen's book on *Zauberdiagnose und Schwarze Magie in Mesopotamien* (Copenhagen, 1987) broke new ground in discussing many aspects of Mesopotamian witchcraft, with numerous examples from previously untranslated texts, both from the magic and medical corpus, and with technical discussions of the system of witchcraft. Cryer's book on *Divination in ancient Israel and its Near Eastern environment* (Sheffield, 1994) was a sensible treatment of the subject in both Mesopotamia and the Bible, which is somewhat unusual these days. Unfortunately, the present book is an attempt to cover the larger field of "magic" by presenting a less technical and more general discussion for a popular audience, but depending predominantly upon their previous respective works in related fields. The result is predictable. Thomsen's bibliography, for instance, hardly includes any work published after 1987, although the present book was published in 2001, and she gives too much prominence to witchcraft within the context of magic; witchcraft was only a sub-category of ancient magic, and not even the most important component. Cryer, on the other hand, confuses divination and magic and assumes divination to be part of magic, without considering the possibility that divination in antiquity was treated as a separate discipline and endeavour. Divination was the responsibility of the *barû* priest in Mesopotamia, while magic was

Book Reviews

conducted by the *āšipu* or exorcist. Magic was used to counteract a bad omen (in so-called *Namburbī* incantations). Otherwise, there was no magic in divination or prophecy; the processes and theory and practices of divination and magic had little in common.

The title of the book includes the words “witchcraft” and “magic”, but there is no attempt to distinguish between these two activities, which causes some difficulties in interpretation. As Thomsen herself points out (p. 32), the Babylonian Diagnostic Handbook was used theoretically by the exorcist as a means of prognosis by examining symptoms derived from observing the patient’s body, and witchcraft only features in less than five per cent of the assigned “causes” of illness. Although Thomsen herself was puzzled by her own statistics, it probably reflects the true relationship between magic and witchcraft, which is only a small part of the large and complex field of Mesopotamian magic. Of the many causes of illness and misfortune, witchcraft and evil eye represent only one possible source within the sphere of magic; much more common are divine displeasure, the activities of a plethora of demons and supernatural adversaries, or violation of an oath or taboo. Furthermore, Thomsen (p. 23) assumes that someone using an anti-witchcraft incantation suspected who the witch might have been, which is a completely unsupported hypothesis. Witchcraft can exist without witches, simply as a function of paranoia; we have no Salem witch trials in Mesopotamia.

Finally, Cryer’s discussion also never takes on board the biblical phrase, “do not allow a witch to live” (Ex. 22:17), which has been interpreted as a general attack on the use of magic in ancient Israel. The point is that witchcraft was universally feared in antiquity as black magic, comparable to an attack of malevolent demons, and one of the key roles of magic was to protect a client against witchcraft, or to make the client believe that he was being protected against some hostile force which he conceived to be a witch. The rest of magic, however, was mostly benevolent, designed to offer protection and even healing, and was not proscribed by the Bible. This point needed to be made.

Despite these criticisms, the book is useful for readers who have no prior knowledge of ancient Near Eastern magic, and they will find the book an easy and pleasant read.

M J Geller,
University College London

Simon Varey (ed.), *The Mexican treasury: the writings of Dr Francisco Hernández*, trans. Rafael Chabrán, Cynthia L Chamberlin, Simon Varey, Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. xix, 281, £40.00, US\$65.00 (hardback 08047-3963-3).

Simon Varey, Rafael Chabrán, and Dora B Weiner (eds), *Searching for the secrets of nature: the life and works of Dr Francisco Hernández*, Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. xvi, 229, illus., £40.00, US\$60.00 (hardback 08047-3964-1).

These companion volumes will be greeted with enthusiasm by anyone interested in early modern medicine, ethnobotany, or colonial science. They make available in English translation the writings of the Spanish physician Francisco Hernández (1515–87) and provide a series of authoritative articles analysing his work and situating it in historical context. In what was arguably the first scientific expedition in the age of European imperialism, Hernández travelled in New Spain between 1571 and 1577 under orders from Philip II to gather information on the medicinal uses of New World plants. Over these six years Hernández visited the major hospitals, interviewed numerous European and Amerindian informers, cared for victims of epidemic diseases, and compiled descriptions of thousands of plants and hundreds of animals and minerals. The original manuscript of Hernández’s *Natural history of New Spain*—six folio volumes of text and ten containing illustrations of plants and animals—was the most complete repository of first-hand knowledge on New World *materia medica* at the time. It provided information on Amerindian medical knowledge, which was rapidly disappearing due