**Concepts of Magic in Medieval Europe**

From ABC-CLIO’s World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras website

Ruth A. Johnston

Web: 11 September 2013

ancient Iranian religion

The Catholic Church (the only expression of Christianity in the Western world at the time)

adversary or foe

forbidden behavior

non traditional

a spell, charm

ointment

In medieval times, the ability to read the stars and know charms and spells was originally associated with the Zoroastrians and wise men (Magi) of the East, so it was called "magic." The Church and the civil authorities outlawed and **prosecuted** the practice of magic, but there were few trials. Most common superstition and magic went on as part of daily life.

"Real" magic in the Middle Ages came in two forms, although it was not always easy to tell them apart. Natural magic was just a part of nature, while other beliefs were harmless **superstitions**. The other kind of magic was **occult**, **demonic** magic that called on spirits. It was not accepted by most of society, and certainly not by the Church.

**Natural Magic**

Normal medical practice involved natural magic: a medicinal herb could have more strength if it was picked at dawn or at midnight. Its magic was increased by using it in combination with other herbs or substances or by preparing it with certain rituals. If a plant looked like a snake, its sap would help with snakebite—that was natural magic. The **principles** of natural magic were sympathy and **antipathy**. Sympathy meant that things worked on or cured what they resembled or had some **affinity** for. Antipathy was the opposite; if two animals were antagonists in the natural world, then a remedy from one could help cure wounds caused by the other.

Natural magic blurred quickly into a more **explicit** magic that was in a gray area between what the Church encouraged and what it **condemned**. Some felt that superstitious rituals and taboos merely drew on the principles of the stars and the world, while others felt that they amounted to calling on spirits and **invoking supernatural** power in unorthodox ways.

Incantations had to be spoken over the preparation or use of medicine. There were many **variants** on Latin and other languages that created magical phrases to add power to a medicine or salve. Charms were special incantations to speak over **ailments**, usually phrases with reference to the Christian religion.

Amulets were objects carried to give magical protection against certain problems. A hare's foot was a common amulet that protected its wearer from danger. Rosemary could keep away venomous snakes and evil spirits. Mistletoe could ward away **conviction** in a court of law.

Exorcisms were rituals to drive out demons that were causing illness. They could be carried out by priests under rituals prescribed by the Church, but they were done more often as folk remedies.

Astrology, the magical science of the stars, came to Europe through Arabic books of **lore**. It appeared to be very scientific, and medical schools began to **incorporate** its teachings. Astrology was a part of natural magic, rather than occult magic; the stars had certain powers, and these powers were **morally neutral**. It was a matter of scientific study to learn what the stars were influencing or predicting. Many European kings, including the scientific emperor Frederick II, had astrologers to tell them when they should do various things.

polytheistic (worshipping many spirits/deities)

an imposter, a fake

period of Church trials against non-believers

distortion

Alchemy was a form of natural magic that evolved into the true science of **chemistry**. In early forms, alchemy invoked stars and spirits or used charms and amulets. While the goal of the alchemist was to produce gold, the actual practice of alchemy involved many practical **techniques** still used in chemistry. Alchemists **distilled**, melted, classified, and observed. Their laboratory equipment began as the **apparatus** of natural magic but became the tools of science.

**Occult Magic**

Occult magic often had its roots in pre-Christian pagan religion. Just as Christians had prayer rituals to invoke the help of the saints, pagans had used rituals to invoke the help of their gods and spirits. The chief aims of occult magical practices were usually love charms, charms to become pregnant, or charms to inflict death on an adult or unborn baby. While there are records of both men and women using charms and potions, women had a greater **reputation** for this knowledge.

Since the early Middle Ages, European rulers had tried to outlaw occult magic. Since they themselves believed in natural magic, they did not try to outlaw the simple use of **folk remedies** and charms. They did try to regulate charlatans who traveled about performing exorcisms or curses.

The Church listed sins of magic in its manuals for **penance**, and both **theologians** and preachers spoke strongly against magic…. Theologians tried to define the line between natural magic and occult magic. The Church also **condemned** magical use of herbs or even **holy relics** in ways that seemed superstitious rather than properly faithful.

During the Inquisition in Toulouse, the inquisitors asked about magic. Some people accused others of witchcraft. The accused confessed, often under torture, that they had used wax images to inflict pain and death, had carried out rituals to **dedicate** themselves to the devil, and had made charms and potions to harm others. The inquisitors recorded their testimony and permitted them to **repent** of these things as sins, but the **civil authorities** tried them as witches, and most were executed.

**Necromancy** was different from superstitious common magic in that it intentionally called on the devil and demons. The most common kind of necromancy was a perversion of the rites of exorcism so that instead of chasing away demons, the ritual invoked their power. While some of the rites invoked demons' names or used magical actions similar to medical magic, other rites explicitly worshiped demons by making images and praying to them. Some magic rights used circles or triangles, and some **sacrificed** animals or other substances.

Teacher’s Guide

**Name of Text:** Concepts of Magic in Medieval Europe

**Question Composers:** Temoca Dixon and Marcia Motter

Standards

**Nevada State:** H1. [6-8].16 Identify characteristics of a civilization

**CCSS:** RHST.6-8.1, RHST.6-8.2, RHST.6-8.3, RHST.6-8.4, RHST.6-8.10; WHST.6-8.2, WHST.6-8.4, WHST.6-8.9; SL.6.1; L.6.1, L.6.2

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Text Dependent Questions | Teacher Notes and Possible Textual Evidence for Student Answers |
| What do we learn about magic in the first paragraph? | Line 7: “Magi” were wise men from the east and used magic. Line 7” it developed from an ancient Iranian religion called Zoroastrianism . People who followed it were Zoroastrians. Lines 6 and 7: they could read the stars, and know charms and spellsLine 8: The Church and civil authorities outlawed and prosecuted the practice of magic but there were few trials. Line 9/10: common superstition and magic went on as part of daily life. Reason: provides historical background |
| Identify the two types of magic and explain the difference between them.  |  Lines 13-15: 1. Natural magic was just part of nature…, common, acceptable.2. Occult Magic: demonic magic called on spirits, not accepted by the ChurchReason: Orients Students to the two types of magic discussed in the text |
| What are the principles of natural magic? | Lines 13-14: Natural magic was just part of nature, while other beliefs were harmless superstitions. Lines 20-24: a medicinal herb could have more strength if it was picked at dawn or midnight; Its magic was increased if used in combination with other herbs or substances; The principles of natural magic were sympathy and antipathy. Reason: Students identify the characteristics of one form of magic. Reason: Students identify the characteristics of one form of magic.  |
| Using context clues, find synonyms for the following words: sympathy and antipathy.  | Sympathy: support, assistance, cooperation.Antipathy: antagonism or oppositionReason: Students find/create meaning for unfamiliar words within the text.  |
| Based upon your understanding of sympathy and antipathy rewrite the sentences in lines 24-27 that will explain and provide an example of what sympathy and antipathy is.  | Sympathy meant that objects or materials could fix problems that they looked like or had the same characteristics as. An example of using sympathy in natural magic could be carrying a toy car in your pocket when you take a driving test.Antipathy is when two things are completely different from each other. An example of using antipathy in natural magic would be putting a picture of a snail in your opponents shoe before a running race. Reason: Allows students to extend their text based knowledge and apply it to a new situation to demonstrate fluency of the words sympathy and antipathy. |
| Using lines 35-62, list and describe the five types of natural magic.  | 1. Incantations: spoken over the preparation or use of medicine. Added power to medicine or salve.2. Amulets: Objects carried to give magical protection against certain problems. 3. Exorcisms: rituals driving out demons causing illness. 4. Astrology: science and power of the stars, natural magic, provided timing for certain actions5. Alchemy: invoked stars or spirits and used charms and amulets. They distilled, melted, classified, and observed.  |
| Using a Venn Diagram to organize your thoughts, choose (2) two of the types of natural magic to compare and contrast. | -Incantations and Amulets worked by adding power to a situation or object for healing or protection. -Alchemy and Astrology both invoked power from the stars and approached the subject from a scientific point of view-Alchemy and Amulets employed objects from the natural world-Incantations and Exorcisms were both rituals and were both mixed with references to Christian tradition-Incantations and Exorcisms were spoken over an object or person-Amulets and Alchemy used objects from the natural worldReason: It is an opportunity for students to make multiple connections between points in the text. |
| How did alchemy magic evolve into present-day chemistry? | Lines 60-62: Alchemists distilled, melted, classified, and observed. Their laboratory equipment began as the apparatus of natural magic but became the tools of science. Reason: Students link historical practices to present day.  |
| In some instances, the Church used forms of natural magic in its practices. Provide examples from the text where the Church condones this form of magic.  | 20 & 29-30: implies that the Church condones natural magic because it was part of normal medical practice 31:superstitious rituals and taboos merely drew on the principles of the stars and the world51-52: the stars had certain powers, and these powers were morally neutral.37-38: Charms were special incantations to speak over ailments, usually phrases with reference to the Christian religion. 45-47: Exorcisms were rituals to drive out demons that caused illnesses and were prescribed by the Church and carried out by priestsReason: to demonstrate specific instances where magic is not only accepted by the Church, but actively practiced by members of the clergy. |
| Using what you learned about occult magic in lines 66-82, provide evidence for the author’s claim in lines 12 and 13. (“Real” magic in the Middle Ages came in two forms, although it was not always easy to tell them apart.”) | Natural Magic versus Occult Magic: 68-71: both used folk remedies and charms to induce healing/ occult magic charms also induced to cause harm73-74: Church did not outlaw folk remedies or charms- both permitted, difficult to regulate41,42,66, - Both used herbs and objects (i.e. amulets, rosemary, mistletoe and relics)79 “Tried to define” infers that it was difficult.  |

Vocabulary

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **These words merit LESS time and attention** (They are concrete and easy to explain, or describe events/processes/ideas/concepts/experiences that are familiar to your students.) | **These words merit MORE time and attention**(They are abstract, have multiple meanings, and/or are a part of a large family of words with related meanings. These words are likely to describe events, ideas, processes or experiences that most of your student will be unfamiliar with.) |
| **Line #** | **Word** | **Definition** | **Line #** | **Word** | **Definition** |
| 8 | prosecuted |  To begin or carry on a court action against in order to enforce the law. | 14 | occult |  Of, pertaining to, or with the aid of the supernatural. |
| 14 | superstitions |  A belief that is not based on fact. | 24 | principles | A basic law or belief on which action or behavior is based.  |
| 14 | demonic | relating to a demon or other spiritual force | 24 | antipathy | A feeling of strong dislike |
| 29 | explicit | Said or written in a clear and direct way.  | 25 | affinity |  A close resemblance; likeness in certain characteristics. |
| 30 | condemned  | called wrong, evil, or inadequate; strongly disapproved of | 32 | invoking | To call out to (a god, muse, or the like) for help, support, protection, or inspiration.  |
| 38 | ailments | Illnesses; sicknesses | 33 | supernatural |  Having to do with forces separate from or higher than natural laws. |
| 50 | lore | That which is known or believed about a subject, especially that transmitted by tradition, oral means, or obscure writings.  | 36 | variants | From others of the same type. |
| 58 | chemistry | A basic science dealing with the structure and function of elements and their compounds.  | 43 | conviction | The state of having been proved guilty.  |
| 60 | techniques | A particular way of doing something.  | 50 | incorporate | To include as part of a larger thing; blend.  |
| 61 | distilled |  To subject a substance to heat to the point of vaporization, and then to cooling to produce condensation. | 52 | morally neutral |  Neither good nor bad. |
| 62 | apparatus |  Tools or equipment made for a particular task. | 78 | penance | In some Christian churches, a sacrament consisting of confession of and regret at having sinned, acceptance of punishment, and forgiveness. |
| 71 | reputation | The condition of being known for something.  | 86 | dedicate | To devote to a particular person, cause, or course of action.  |
| 75 | folk remedies | Medicine or cures that are developed and used without the benefit of modern medical science.  | 89 | civil authorities |  A person who exercises authority over others, like the head of a city government.  |
| 78 | theologians | Someone who studies religion.  | 91 | necromancy | Witchcraft or sorcery; black magic.  |
| 80 | condemned | To call wrong, evil, or inadequate; strongly disapprove of.  |  |  |   |
| 81 | holy relics | An object from the past that is related to a god or religion.  |  |  |  |
| 88 | repent |  To regret past actions or behavior and decide to change for the better. |  |  |   |
| 97 | sacrificed | To make an offering of to a god. |  |  |   |

**Writing prompt:**

*During the Middle Ages, Inquisitors investigated and then declared if a person was or was not a witch. Based upon the text and the answers to your questions, write a report for Inquisitors that would allow them to determine if a person was practicing Natural Magic or Occult Magic. Be sure to explain the differences between Natural and Occult Magic, as well as giving specific clues and criteria that the Inquisitors will need to look for.*
**Some possible answers to this question are:**

**Natural Magic:**

35-38: Incantations: spoken over the preparation or use of medicine. Added power to medicine or salve.

40-43: Amulets: Objects carried to give magical protection against certain problems.

45-47: Exorcisms: rituals driving out demons causing illness.

20 & 29-30: implies that the Church condones natural magic because it was part of normal medical practice

31:superstitious rituals and taboos merely drew on the principles of the stars and the world

51-52: the stars had certain powers, and these powers were morally neutral.

37-38: Charms were special incantations to speak over ailments, usually phrases with reference to the Christian religion.

45-47: Exorcisms were rituals to drive out demons that caused illnesses and were prescribed by the Church and carried out by priests

68-71: both used folk remedies and charms to induce healing/ occult magic charms also induced to cause harm

73-74: Church did not outlaw folk remedies or charms- both permitted, difficult to regulate

41,42,66, - Both used herbs and objects (i.e. amulets, rosemary, mistletoe and relics)

**Occult Magic:**

66-67: roots in pre-Christian pagan religion, used rituals to invoke the help of their gods and spirits

86: use of wax images to inflict pain and death

86-87: a person carried out rituals to dedicate themselves to the devil

87: a person made charms and potions to harm others

91: necromancy (intentionally calling upon the devil and/or demons

93: perversion of the rites of exorcism (using an exorcism to invoke the power of the devil and/or demon instead of chasing it away.

94: using a demon’s name

95: using magical actions that were similar to medical magic to worship the devil/demons

95-96: praying/making images of the devil and/or demons and worshiping them

96: using circles or triangles

97: sacrificing animals or other substances.

68-71: both used folk remedies and charms to induce healing/ occult magic charms also induced to cause harm

73-74: Church did not outlaw folk remedies or charms- both permitted, difficult to regulate

41,42,66, - Both used herbs and objects (i.e. amulets, rosemary, mistletoe and relics)