

BOOK REVIEW

Tabitha Stanmore. *Love Spells and Lost Treasure: Service Magic in England from the Later Middle Ages to the Early Modern Era*

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Michael D. Bailey

Iowa State University

Email: mdbailey@iastate.edu

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The vast field of practice that scholars variously term common, traditional, everyday, or practical magic was ubiquitous in premodern societies, and it has long needed more detailed study. The problem, of course, is that common practices leave fewer traces in historical records than exceptional ones. In addressing this issue, Tabitha Stanmore has produced an incisive and insightful book that deserves a wide readership within British studies and beyond.

Given that her topic is vast, Stanmore sensibly limits herself in various ways. She focuses only on England between roughly 1350 and 1650. She also presents only one aspect of common magic, which she, following her mentor Ronald Hutton, terms service magic. This was magic performed by at least semi-professionals for specific clients. Clearly this is not the whole of common magic, as almost everyone in premodern English society would presumably have known and used at least a few simple spells or charms (whether they would call them by such names, or even think of their practices as magical, is another matter). Yet, as Stanmore shows, service magicians engaged in a wide range of practices and operated at all levels of society. Hence, they are a good point of access to this world.

While this study is necessarily focused in some ways, it is admirably broad in others. To begin with chronology, Stanmore glides easily across the sometimes-fraught boundary between medieval and early modern eras. She does not try to efface differences, particularly as the Reformation reshaped many areas of religious belief and, more particularly in the realm of magic, growing concern about witchcraft affected reactions to all other forms of magical practice. Rather, she wants to study change over time—a seemingly straightforward step for a historian, but an important intervention in this topic, given that there remains a strong tendency, even among some scholars, to view “traditional” magic as essentially ahistorical and unchanging.

Stanmore also studies service magic at all levels of society. Some readers might immediately think of her service magicians as cunning folk, but she emphasizes how that term usually implies a practitioner of relatively low social status, either illiterate or of only limited literacy. There were service magicians of that sort, of course, but many also came from the educated ranks of society, including clergymen, physicians, and members of other professions. While ordinary people most often relied on magicians from lower social ranks, they could also seek out more highly placed practitioners when they needed particular services, and of course when they could find the economic means. Courtly elites, on the contrary,

would sometimes contract with ordinary magicians, but most often they maintained service magicians among their own retainers. Such people were not exclusively magicians but rather served other roles—as household physician, confessor, etc.—and offered magical services when needed.

Stanmore displays some of her most impressive breadth in her sources and methodology. This is a study with a strong statistical base. The book concludes with several rich appendices listing the various service magicians Stanmore has found, mostly through ecclesiastical and secular court records. Combining these judiciously with other more “anecdotal” sources (as she terms them), she provides a database of 555 cases of service magic. Stretched across three centuries and the whole of England, this might appear thin to those used to statistical samples drawn from modern records. There are also variances in these records across place and time. London is overrepresented, for example, a fact that Stanmore incorporates in her analysis at several points. Nevertheless, this database puts the study of this kind of magic on a firmer quantitative footing than it has ever enjoyed before.

Stanmore does not limit herself just to statistics. She moves easily between quantitative and qualitative analysis, and she incorporates “anecdotal” evidence from sermons, pamphlets, and even imaginative literature when her statistical sources run thin. The result is a mature and balanced study that offers compelling answers to its central questions: who were service magicians, what services did they supply, and how were they perceived by the larger society around them?

Her answers to these questions are not always surprising. Much of the value of *Love Spells and Lost Treasure* lies in Stanmore’s more rigorous confirmation of many hypotheses advanced by previous scholars, as well as her new discoveries. The most common use for service magic was to heal, ward off disease, or protect against malefic magic (i.e., witchcraft). Other main uses were divination of the future, or the detection of thieves and discovery of lost items. Magical means to find buried treasure emerges as a perhaps unexpectedly important use as well. Despite the heavy gendering of witchcraft in this period, the majority of service magicians were men. Specific kinds of magic were gendered in different ways, however, with women predominating in healing, leaving treasure-hunting a sphere for men.

Service magicians came from all levels of society, as did their clients. Practices were often similar across social ranks, although, as already noted, the relationship between magician and client could be quite different among elites. Courtiers also tended to have more political concerns, and hence more political purposes for the magical services they sought. Yet cash-strapped nobles might also engage in magic for economic gain, just as those lower down the social scale, seeking to find buried treasure or maybe just success at the gambling table.

Love Spells and Lost Treasure is rich in detail and broad in its implications. It offers both conclusions and research methodologies that will be of interest to anyone working on the history of magic, regardless of time or place. It also offers a window into an important aspect of English society that will be informative for anyone working on English history generally in the late medieval and early modern periods.