Love Magic and Control in Premodern Iberian Literature

This book explores the complexity of Iberian identity and multicultural-multi-religious interactions in the Peninsula through the lens of spells, talismans, and imaginative fiction in medieval and early modern Iberia. Focusing particularly on love magic—which manipulates objects, celestial spheres, and demonic conjurings to facilitate sexual encounters—Veronica Menaldi examines how practitioners and victims of such magic are represented in major works produced in Castile. Magic, and love magic in particular, is an exchange of knowledge, a claim to power, and a deviation from or subversion of the licit practices permitted by authoritative decrees. As such, magic serves as a metaphorical tool for understanding the complex relationships of the Christian with the non-Christian. In seeking to understand and incorporate hidden secrets that presumably reveal how one can manipulate their environment, occult knowledge became one of the funnels through which cultures and practices mixed and adapted throughout the centuries.

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In loving memory of my guiding light, my mother María Cristina Ametrano Jackson-Menaldi. Ella me enseñó que siempre hay más para aprender y que quien aprende siempre tiene libertad.
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Growing up as an only child in the Midwest household of two academic Argentine immigrants, María Cristina Ametrano Jackson-Menaldi and José Luis Menaldi, I quickly learned and appreciated the quest for knowledge and the desire to preserve it in writing. I remember sitting in the office writing my own “book” to keep them company as they each typed their own. Little did I know that many years later their bookshelves would be the home to yet another Menaldi-authored book. Following their footsteps on a similar path, albeit in a very different field, I am forever indebted to them for fostering my passion and interest in languages, communication, and cultures.

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Beyond conference presentations, parts of my analysis explored here first appeared elsewhere in earlier forms. Namely, my contribution to Magic and Magicians in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Time edited by Albrecht Classen (De Gruyter, 2017) inspired some sections on Cantiga 125 in Chapter 1 and my contribution to A New Companion to the Libro de buen amor edited by Ryan D. Giles and José Manuel Hidalgo (Brill, 2021) presents ideas similar to those I explore in Chapter 3.

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Introduction

Love Magic as a Metaphor for Control and Admiration

What do deviant clerics, meddling old ladies, ruling queens, and Moorish necromancers have in common? Though unlikely companions, these characters share the ability to bend people and spaces to their will, through magic, resulting in amorous entanglements for either themselves or their clients. For the purposes of this book, the literary characters selected, along with their reflective historical counterparts, may at first appear to have little in common. They span four centuries, hail from various social spheres, and have been reproduced by equally varied authors. Despite these differences, a common thread linking them all is their described use of love magic. This common thread of amorous manipulations allows contemporary scholars another way to explore the complex Iberian identity and multi-cultural/ multi-religious interactions. I view love magic, especially in the context of fictional narratives, as a dualistic cultural phenomenon: one that simultaneously claims power but also resists and subverts it.

In premodern Christian Iberia, magic allows for the entrance of unorthodoxy and Islamicate knowledge while at the same time representing domination of another’s will, sexuality, and mental state. By mastering magic, or, at the very least, having a competent practitioner under one’s employment, one could alter circumstances and control what was previously uncontrollable. As such, magic serves as a metaphorical tool for understanding the Christian’s complex relationships with the non-Christian: a mixture of imitation and control with a pinch of destruction and acceptance. The strategic inclusion and appropriation of magic within Castilian texts—which, though not exclusively Andalusi or Islamic, was revived through translations—reveals another layer of attempted dominance and possible admiration of the Peninsula’s Islamic past. While the primary texts that anchor each of my chapters are products of Castile and later unified “Spain”, as they are put in dialogue with Andalusi, Aragonese, Portuguese, and other foreign production that entered through the Peninsula’s frontiers, I refer to Iberia as a whole.

My goal is not to replace any culture’s dominance on Iberian production, but rather to emphasize the interplay of various cultures and how their coexistence and conflict provided the groundwork for these fictions to

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prosper. As John Dagenais states, “if we ignore the presence of literature written in languages or dialects other than Castilian in the Middle Ages, our resulting image of literary activity in Medieval Iberia will be deficient and fatally skewed” (42). My hope is that by putting these canonical texts in dialogue with other contemporaneous productions, we have a wider view of the role of magic and Iberia’s cross-cultural interactions across time and space. To that end, while the majority of the texts are Medieval, I do incorporate some Early Modern material. In an attempt to highlight the fluidity of magic and shy away from concrete temporal boundaries, I use the term “premodern” throughout this book. By doing this, I also align with the current trend of recognizing Islam’s equal role between “East” and “West”.\(^2\) Despite these wide-ranging categories, I do not pretend to cover every moment of love magic in the Spanish literary tradition. Rather, through select close readings, I analyze one of the ways love magic could be understood within literature considering the rich cultural exchange across the centuries.

This book focuses on the presence of philocaptio and love magic as described in some of Iberia’s most studied texts from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries—Cantigas de Santa Maria, Libro del caballero Zifar, Libro de buen amor, Celestina, and Desengaños amorosos. Love magic, whether performed with or without mediation, establishes bonds and serves as a metaphor for dominance and control of an Other or Others and a means to identity formation and revelation of desires. Though at first glance the result of magic in these texts is a heterosexual union, I demonstrate that the manifestations of conquest depicted here, and by extension elsewhere, speak not only of dynamics between genders but also between sociopolitical classes, ethnicities, and religious practices. Both the characters in these texts—that is, who requests the magical interference, who creates it, and who is (unwillingly) affected by it—and the authorship or royal commission (be they minorities, women, clerics, or court-appointed writers) of the texts reveal these dynamics. Indeed, I am not the first to suggest some debt to al-Andalus and the greater Islamic world for this fiction, but the study of the incorporation of magical knowledge in these (and similar) texts remains understudied.

The first chapter, Chapter 1, addresses two episodes from the thirteenth-century Cantigas de Santa Maria [Songs of Saint Mary] commissioned by King Alfonso X el Sabio [the Wise] (r. 1252–1284), which contain fictional representations of love magic, as can be seen in Cantiga 104 and Cantiga 125. In the first song, Cantiga 104, a jealous concubine of an unfaithful married man turns to magic via her elderly lady neighbors’ instructions, using a consecrated Eucharist, to ensure his faithfulness to her and her alone. Not only does the interference of elderly women neighbors reoccur throughout the centuries in the texts selected here, but this particular narrative is eerily similar to a documented Portuguese Eucharistic miracle. Cantiga 125 tells the story of a lustful cleric who has his eyes set on a devout woman, who, after his normal
advances fail, turns to his pre-existing knowledge of necromancy and demonic control to achieve his desired romantic encounter. The accompanying illustrations contain magical lunettes and necromantic symbols that also appear in al-Qurtubi’s tenth-century Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm [The Aim of the Wise] (and later thirteenth-century Picatrix)—an Arabic grimoire translated (and renamed) in the same court (and at the same time) that produced the Cantigas.3 These incorporations show the melding of multiple cultures and attempted dominance of this knowledge by a Castilian and Christian king. Therefore, the magic represented in these songs embodies domination of others and subversion from orthodox practices in an attempt to underline the desired knowledge the king possibly hoped to incorporate into his reign.

Chapter 2 addresses two supernatural moments in the early fourteenth-century romance El libro del caballero Zifar [The Book of the Knight Zifar] presumably written by a Toledan cleric—when the Caballero Atrevido [Bold Knight] (a mirrored reflection of Zifar) descends into the Sulfuric Lake and when Roboán (Zifar’s son) enters the Fortunate Isles. Both moments demonstrate Andalusi appropriations and attempted dominance of a sovereign space through the marriage of supernatural women rulers and the Christian male intruders—whether they, the original rulers, are portrayed as deceptively demonic or fairy-esque. The effect of this representation once again allows magic to maintain a dual role for its designated readership within the Christian sphere of Castile. Magic and the skills required to master it are dangerous but, at times, an ideal way to preserve control of one’s circumstances.

The following two chapters, Chapters 3 and 4, look at the old, cunning, and magic-wielding mediators Trotaconventos and Celestina. Respectively, they appear in Juan Ruiz’s fourteenth-century Libro de buen amor [The Book of Good Love] and Fernando de Rojas’s fifteenth-century/twelfth of the sixteenth-century La Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea [The Tragic-Comedy of Calisto and Melibea] more commonly known as La Celestina. Unlike Chapter 2, these women are not sovereigns but rather more marginalized members of society, like the neighbors in Cantiga 104. Despite their circumstances, these women know how to take advantage of the cards they are dealt and turn their skills into a lucrative and self-serving business. They apply their skills in pre-existing social systems and, like the targets they enamor, bend the rules to their will. By looking at these two mediators of love magic, these chapters expose magic’s domination of women’s bodies and minds, and its function as a gateway to unorthodox knowledge and methods breaching accepted practices like those of chivalry or courtly love.

The last chapter, Chapter 5, focuses on seventeenth-century María de Zayas’s Desengaños amorosos [Amorous Disenchanted], more specifically one of the ten novellas contained within, “La inocencia castigada” [“Innocence Punished”]. A desperate rich nobleman turns to both a conniving old female neighbor and a Moorish necromancer to achieve his desired union with a married woman. Unlike the women before, this neighbor
merely sees an opportunity and takes it through trickery, and ultimately pays the price. However, the Moorish necromancer uses his magical knowledge to make a married woman unknowingly commit adultery with his client. The male practitioner’s foreignness opens discussion of necromantic love magic practiced by Moriscos, like those found in the *Libro de dichos maravillosos* [Book of Marvelous Sayings]—a magical spell book written in Aljamiado, which is Arabic script but in large part phonetically Romance.

I aim to break down previously constructed categorizations and borders, highlighting the fluidity of magic and, by extension, the ability of continual appropriations. This book works in conjunction with two existing books on magic in Iberian literature—namely Jennifer Corry’s *Perceptions of Magic in Medieval Spanish Literature* and Ryan Giles’s *Inscribed Power: Amulets and Magic in Early Spanish Literature*. Corry’s work, in part, conveniently catalogs, summarizes, and discusses many representations of magic in Spanish literature chronologically, with two of my five chosen literary examples included—*Libro de buen amor* and *Celestina*. She is one of the first to highlight the roughly equal distribution of men and women practitioners in the literary representations and the Iberian literature’s tendency to humanize the practitioners as opposed to demonizing them, which “removes the mystery from the figure of the witch but also the fear that accompanied it” (Corry 205). This humanization can serve as an “asset in political matters, as well as in didactic lessons, religion, and entertainment” (Corry 204). In a sense, this book continues her concluding points as I explore the varied representations of magical performance and what those authorial choices say about control and sociopolitical dynamics.

Giles’s most recent work focuses on the power of written amulets in premodern Spain. Like this book, and in accordance with interdisciplinary trends in academic fields, his book chapters consider both literary representations of magical amulets alongside contemporaneous amulets and magical treatises describing the creation of certain protective inscriptions. While his work, like mine, at first glance seems to focus more exclusively on Castilian, and by extension Christian, representations, he argues that to fully understand these manifestations of magic, one must necessarily turn to the preserved practices of the Peninsula’s Muslim and Jewish populations. Like him, these pages also dialogue with scholars of the history of magic, aiming to bridge some of the divides between Christian and Islamic (and Jewish) traditions of occult practices.4

This book is also indebted to existing works on the history of magic in the Peninsula—such as Michael Ryan’s *A Kingdom of Stargazers: Astrology and Authority in the Late Medieval Crown of Aragon*. While focused on Aragon and the royal interest in astrology of three subsequent kings, Ryan’s book also explores Iberia’s crosspoint of Christian orthodoxy and Islamic and Judaic Otherness through the curiosity, translation, and preservation of magical texts. For Ryan, occult astrological study linked magic to knowledge and power for Aragonese kings in a similar way that I see
love magic’s representation in Christian canonical literature demonstrating the power claims of competing philosophies and societies.

Iberian texts are not the only source of interest, as a large portion of the scholarship regarding magic’s literary presence has been dedicated to England and France, as evident with Corrine Saunders’s *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* and Michelle Sweeney’s *Magic in Medieval Romance from Chrétien de Troyes to Geoffrey Chaucer*. While focusing on English Arthurian sources and Chaucer, Saunders also addresses classical and biblical precedents expanding her attention of English sources through the lens of prohibitions, white magic, black magic, otherworldly enchantments, and miraculous/demonic interventions. Despite her Anglo-focus, Saunders’s claims that “magic and the supernatural create rich possibilities for writers to explore the limits of the human will, the relation of body and mind, and the place of the individual within the cosmos” (7). Regardless of the language in which magical acts are represented, their presence informs the readers (both past and contemporary) of sociopolitical concerns and anxieties, particularly in a territory, like Iberia, known for its plethora of translation of magical, mystical, and scientific knowledge.

Like Saunders, Sweeney explores the overlap and change between representations of magic in English and French literary sources, particularly the Medieval romance.5 Sweeney highlights how “magic does not require rational explanation and thereby provides the author with a great deal of freedom” (23). While I agree with her position regarding freedom and authorial release from cause and effect, why did the magical practices represented in the literature mirror documented contemporaneous examples of magical usage? Perhaps not verbatim, as a magical practitioner would not turn to a song or Arthurian romance for detailed instructions on how to summon or control a demon for personal gain, but one could find similar details in both the fictionalized act and the presumed historical one.6

Literary magic did not aim to answer the why or the exact specifics of how certain events came to be. It did, however, help establish said situations, which allowed its audience to have uncensored debates on pressing topics such as the morality of adultery and human cruelty without feeling as though the situation they heard was a factual re-telling of their neighbor’s woes. As a literary device, it granted the author the right amount of distance and freedom to explore societal concerns reflective of the interactions, tensions, and interests of Iberian society. With love magic in particular, a practice that essentially binds two or more people together, the author gains a fruitful tool for establishing control and altering Iberia’s identity through adaptation. In analyzing the possible influences of fictional magical details in Castilian texts, we see yet another way in which the various cultures and traditions of the Peninsula interacted and informed each other. As such, here I challenge, like other scholars before me, the epistemology of canonical mono-lingual mono-cultural premodern Castilian literature in addition to its anxieties and influences.
Convivencia, Courtly Love, and Categorizing Magic

This book begins at the start of thirteenth-century royal interest and commission of Castilian translations of earlier Arabic sources on science, medicine, and magic—among other topics. It ends with a closer look at the peak of anti-Muslim restrictions which lead to expulsions from Early Modern Spain and its remaining consequences shortly after. The reason for limiting my focus to these periods and selected examples is to illustrate the permeability of magical interest regardless of the source, character, or intended audience. While the swift overview below is complemented in later chapters with a more nuanced discussion of the historical relevance of each of my selected sources, its discussion here is necessary as it lays the foundation for the analysis to come. As a detailed historical commentary on premodern magic exceeds this book’s scope, the concepts and movements outlined below are brief.

Regardless of where magic is present, it is its persistence and adaptability that, in my opinion, complicates the selected literary texts’ perceived monolingual and mono-cultural canonical status within the Castilian-produced imaginary. This mashing exchange of traditions and cultures, in a way, epitomizes the notion of convivencia. With time, many premodern Iberian scholars have come to understand this term as a coexistence out of convenience peppered with both peace and violence. Chronicles, treaties, and fictional literature document many of these encounters. Much like the nuancing of this term, no representation can be clear-cut as solely one thing, thus by definition exclusionary of another. What is more accurate is a blurred grey melange splattered together by various networks within the Peninsula itself and throughout the Mediterranean.

This ever-changing mixture makes it so no one tradition remains exclusively central or marginal, but a potpourri. Love magic cannot, and should not, be viewed solely as a marginalized practice of undesired minorities, nor do I wish to suggest it always played a central position. To fully understand the power that magic (and love magic in particular) had—and arguably continues to have—one must piece together premodern instances of marginal practice, central desire, suppression, and encouragement. This jumbled combination can be understood once we, as modern scholars, release our tendencies of rigid exclusionary labels. It would be easier if such practices remained in a defined and controlled settling, or even along temporal divides. However, defining magic is not that simple as it permeates sociopolitical, cultural, and gender barriers. Were this the case, though, magic would also be less exciting to explore. As this study demonstrates, magical practices were not exclusively practiced by those in the supposed margins—be they women, minorities, or the poor—but instead functioned as a desirable knowledge at all levels of society—and among powerful figures within Christian, Jewish, and Islamic societies.