

Stephanie Elizabeth Churms, *Romanticism and Popular Magic: Poetry and Cultures of the Occult in the 1790s*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Pp. x + 303. £59.99. ISBN 9783030048099.

Romanticism and Popular Magic draws attention to the survival of occult practices in late-eighteenth-century Britain and uncovers their presence in the poetry of the Romantic *fin de siècle*. Instead of addressing the supernatural and the occult at large, the book focuses on ‘popular magic’, a cultural formation that Stephanie Elizabeth Churms describes as a set of ‘practices deployed as part of a service-driven, material and economic trade’ – not the more familiar philosophical or proto/pseudo-scientific varieties of the occult, but ‘the everyday charms and spells that existed at a point of intersection between the marvellous and the mundane’ (19). Churms’s methodology revolves around a historicist contextualisation of (predominantly canonical) Romantic writing against the background of such demotic forms of occult activity.

The study opens with a more general account that situates popular magic in the varied landscape of late-eighteenth-century manifestations of occultism. Interested in ‘the social reach and impact of occult practice’ (8), Churms focuses especially on cunning men and women and their ‘multifaceted roles as healers, detectives, and advisors’ (21). Acknowledging the relative scarcity of contemporary written or printed evidence of popular magic in the period, she manages to recover a corpus of contemporary texts (pamphlets, booklets, chapbooks, and illustrations) that deals with the subject. The recurring concern of the book is the relationship between the Romantic occult and its importance in the political debates that followed the French Revolution. Analysing the discursive currencies of the magic with writers such as Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine, the third chapter provides a fascinating discussion of how the charge of rhetorical obscurantism – the idea that language formed ‘a tool of ideological bewitchment’ (82) – became a strategy used by conservatives and radicals alike to discredit their opponents.

The main part of *Romanticism and Popular Magic* is dedicated to author-centred case-studies that trace the reverberations of popular magic and its political appropriations in British poetry of the 1790s. After a short chapter on John Thelwall’s Welsh exile and his adoption of an occult persona in the final years of the decade, Churms offers what for many readers of her book will be the most rewarding part of its discussion: a densely interwoven account of the socio-political uses of the occult in Wordsworth’s contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* and in the literary responses these elicited from Coleridge and Robert Southey. Reframing the 1798 collection as ‘a volume invested in curses, spells and the psychological effects of a belief in magic’ (147), Chapter 5 argues that the occult was key to the social agenda Wordsworth pursued in *Lyrical Ballads*. Departing from the critical tradition that reads his engagement with the supernatural as part of his avowed programme of moderating contemporary readers’ appetite for gothic excitement, Churms suggests that Wordsworth’s poetry of 1798 is ‘so bound up with surviving cultures of material occult practice’ (134) that it cannot plausibly be seen as a distancing from them. Discussing texts that she subsumes under the rubric of ‘spell poems’ (143) (‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’, ‘The Thorn’, ‘The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman’, ‘The Mad Mother’), Churms focuses on marginalised female figures and the ‘social empowerment’ (140) they derive from assuming occult identities. Rather than dismissing popular manifestations of the occult as naive folk superstition, to the Wordsworth readers encounter here ‘magic becomes charged with the ability to act as a political tool for the disenfranchised poor’ (139).

The subsequent chapter emphasises Coleridge’s rejection of Wordsworth’s emancipatory use of popular magic. It reads a handful of his canonical poems from the latter half of the 1790s to argue that they reflect not only his renunciation of radicalism, but also his

gradual acknowledgement of the dangerously occult nature of radical rhetoric. Highlighting Coleridge's depiction of 'popular magic and superstition as incarcerating, tyrannical forces' (178), Churms contrasts his scepticism with what she describes as Wordsworth's liberationist treatment of them. Structurally similar to this discussion, the book's final chapter turns to Southey's 'ambiguous response' (218) to *Lyrical Ballads* in his 1799 *Poems* and beyond – texts that here emerge as symptomatic of his 'conflicted political sympathies' (215) at the turn of the century. It is in these two chapters, in particular, that Churms's historicist methodology pays off, uncovering allusions to late-eighteenth-century British popular magic in attentive readings of texts such as 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' or Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer*.

Although Churms's book deals with popular magic in its complex relation to larger topics such as social power, revolutionary politics, and public eloquence, its focus on a small group of poets and a narrow slice of their writerly output prevents it from becoming a more comprehensive literary and cultural history of the Romantic occult. Its unconventional subject matter and fresh close readings, however, make *Romanticism and Popular Magic* a stimulating invitation to reassess major writers and texts.

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