Article

The Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Democratisation of Magic in Post-Reformation England

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Abstract: The dissolution of the monasteries in England (1536–1540) forced hundreds of former inmates of religious houses to seek livelihoods outside the cloister to supplement meagre pensions from the crown. Among the marketable skills these individuals possessed were Latin literacy, knowledge of liturgy, sacramental authority and a reputation for arcane learning: all qualities desirable in magical practitioners in early modern Europe. Furthermore, the dissolution dispersed occult texts housed in monastic libraries, while the polemical efforts of the opponents of monasticism resulted in the growth of legends about the magical prowess of monks and friars. The dissolution was a key moment in the democratisation of learned magic in sixteenth-century England, which moved from being an illicit pastime of clerics, monks and friars to a service provided by lay practitioners. This article considers the extent of interest in magic among English monks and friars before the dissolution, the presence of occult texts in monastic libraries, and the evidence for the magical activities of former religious in post-dissolution England. The article considers the processes by which monks, friars and monastic sites became associated with magic in popular tradition, resulting in a lasting stereotyp of medieval monks and friars as the masters of occult knowledge.

Keywords: ritual magic; monasticism; dissolution of the monasteries; English reformation; monks; friars

1. Introduction

The libraries of religious houses in medieval England were one of the major depositories for texts of magic (Davies 2009, p. 36) and, while late medieval clerics in general were notorious for their interest in magic, religious men (professed monks and friars) fell under even greater suspicion for involvement in occult practices on account of their greater learning. The dissolution of the monasteries in the years 1536–1540 brought to an end a culture of monastic occultism and resulted in the dispersal of both magical books and men possessed of magical knowledge (a further smaller dissolution occurred in 1559 when the handful of religious houses re-founded under Mary I were shut down by Elizabeth I). By the second half of the sixteenth century, the clerical magic of the pre-Reformation world had become a largely lay phenomenon and a class of professional service magicians (cunning men and women) was developing.

The ‘democratisation of magic’, which was accompanied by a growth in lay literacy and the translation of many Latin magical texts into the vernacular, transformed magic from an illicit pursuit of learned clerics into a potential temptation for any literate person and a viable professional career for laypeople. However, the process by which this transformation came about remains obscure. While it is probable that no single explanation suffices for the complex phenomenon of the democratisation of magic in early modern England, this article examines one part of the puzzle, namely, the impact of the dissolution of the monasteries on the diffusion of magical knowledge into non-clerical contexts.
In his classic study of supernatural belief in early modern England, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas observed that ‘the Reformation ... robbed the priest of most of his magical functions’, while the clergy lost their ‘monopoly of learning’, including knowledge of the occult arts. (Thomas 1991, pp. 327–28). It was Thomas who coined the phrase ‘democratisation of magic’ (Thomas 1991, p. 269), a theme which has since been explored by scholars such as Davies (2009, pp. 61–67), Timbers (2014, pp. 54–59) and Bell (2012, pp. 108–15). Klaassen (2013, pp. 174–78; 2018, p. 170), while using the alternative terms ‘vernacularisation’ and ‘popularisation’, has focussed attention on the same phenomenon. Davies (Davies 2007, p. 172) has argued that ‘The void left by the clergy’s partial withdrawal from popular magic’ after the English Reformation resulted in the proliferation of lay service magicians.

Following the dissolution, ex-monks and ex-friars were assimilated into broader English society as parish clergy, schoolmasters and craftsmen, and those ex-religious who remained loyal to the papacy enjoyed enhanced prestige during the reign of Mary I (1553–1558), when there were also limited revivals of monasticism. Many former religious lived on into the latter decades of the sixteenth century, and even into the reign of James I. As Thomas observed, ‘the association in the popular mind between magic and the priesthood was only slowly eradicated’ (Thomas 1991, p. 328); this was not only because memories lingered but also because it took many decades for the old Catholic clergy to die out. By the time the last pre-Reformation religious expired, they had already, in some cases, passed the baton of monasticism to a younger generation of missionary clergy, such as the aged monk of Westminster, Sigebert Buckley, who clothed two young men in the English Benedictine habit in 1607 (Lunn 1980, pp. 92–95).

There is a danger of exaggerating the extent to which the clergy abandoned the field of magic to the laity in sixteenth-century England. Rider (2015, p. 322) has noted that ‘common magic’ was not always truly common, insofar as it often required a literate person (frequently a cleric) to write charms. Similarly, Davies (Davies 2007, p. 69) acknowledges that the requirement for service magicians to be at least semi-literate explains why cunning men and women tended not to be drawn from the labouring class, but were instead craftsmen, tradesmen or farmers. The transition from clerical to lay dominance of magic may have been a more gradual process than Thomas envisaged. The clergy were a group especially likely to be accused of magic, on account of ‘their access to sacred substances and to books’ (Rider 2015, p. 324); and just as the belief that Catholic priests were the most effective exorcists persisted in England long after the Reformation (Young 2013, pp. 220–22), so they continued to be associated with magical knowledge.

While some vernacular magical texts were produced in England even before the Reformation, participation in the transmission of illicit magical texts required Latin literacy. This was because no practitioner could be guaranteed to have access to vernacular texts, since after the dissolution magical texts usually circulated secretly and only in manuscript. Furthermore, the practice of ritual magic (sometimes called necromancy), which involved the conjuration of spirits to perform the will of the magician, required knowledge of the liturgy and the ability to adapt liturgical material to illicit purposes. In addition, many texts of ritual magic required the magician to be a priest (or at least a tonsured cleric who had received the minor order of exorcist), or to have access to a priest.

Nevertheless, it was not primarily the technical requirements of ritual magic that made the former members of monastic communities the ideal transmitters and practitioners of magical traditions, but rather the range of interests and climate of intellectual exploration that existed in late medieval monasteries. Monks, friars and canons had the time, facilities and opportunities to experiment with alchemy and astrological image magic, as well as the cultivation of herbs reputed to have magical properties. Furthermore, the size and range of monastic libraries rivalled only those of England’s two universities. We should not be surprised, therefore, if former religious took some of their occult knowledge with them after the dissolution and transmitted it to the common magical tradition.

The focus of this article is on male religious, on the grounds that no case has yet come to light of a former nun or other religious woman involved in magic after (or indeed before) the dissolution.
However, the study of women involved in learned magic is still a field of research in its infancy (Rider 2019, p. 348) and it is possible that previously unnoticed connections between English nuns (and former nuns) and magical practice will be uncovered in years to come.

2. Magic in the Late Medieval English Monastery

By no means were all the medieval magical practitioners monks, or even clerics, although the degree of functional Latinity required for engagement with magic meant that they were usually men in minor orders who had received the tonsure (Klaassen 2019, p. 201). However, monks, friars, university masters and students were the four classes of cleric who had the time to experiment with magic, in contrast to the overworked parish clergy (Kieckhefer 1997, pp. 151–56). The size and range of monastic libraries, combined with the high level of education received by monks and friars (a high proportion of late medieval mendicant friars were doctors of theology) meant that they had more opportunities to study (if not practise) learned magic than any other group. Furthermore, as Page (2013, p. 140) has argued, monks came under less scrutiny than masters at universities owing to the pedagogical duties of the latter, meaning that monasteries were the safest place to study and practise magic in medieval England. Furthermore, ‘monasteries provided a long-term intellectual context within which group, with common interests could develop. (Klaassen 2013, p. 51), while the turnover of personnel in a university resulted in a less stable environment.

The records of visitations of monasteries by bishops, which were intended to uncover irregularities and abuses, regularly mention instances of monks attempting to use magic or procure magical services, usually in order to find lost items. For instance, a thirteenth-century abbot of Selby, Yorkshire, was found to be spending large sums on consulting a magician in the hop of recovering the body of his drowned brother for burial. In 1440, the Augustinian abbot of Leicester, William Sadyngton, was accused of using the fingernail of a young boy to divine the future (Page 2013, pp. 26–27). Although Sadyngton’s accusers portrayed his activities as unworthy of his monastic profession, the library of Leicester Abbey contained numerous works on natural magic and divination (Page 2013, p. 28).

On the eve of the dissolution, Thomas Sall, the precentor of Norwich Cathedral Priory, kep. several houses to which people resorted for magical help (Maxwell-Stuart 2014, p. 97), and even abbots and priors were known to consult magicians for help in finding lost items (Thomas 1991, p. 324). In a notorious case, William Stapleton, a monk of St Benet’s Abbey at Holme, Norfolk, used ritual magic in 1528 in an attemp. to find treasure to pay for a dispensation from his monastic profession (Maxwell-Stuart 2014, pp. 98–100). Archaeological evidence from both St Augustine’s, Canterbury, and Glastonbury Abbey suggests that monks were engaged in alchemical experimentation. The Augustinian Bridlington Priory in Yorkshire produced the noted alchemical writer George Ripley (d. 1490). Booth (2017, pp. 195–216) has recently examined in depth the material evidence for alchemical activity in British monasteries.

Monks were also deeply involved in the practice of astrological image magic. In an extensive study of the occult library of St Augustine’s, Canterbury, Page has shown that the monks were interested in virtually all forms of natural magic, including those that strayed close to the edge of orthodoxy (such as techniques for the making of magical monsters (Page 2013, pp. 49–72). Astrological image magic could easily veer into practices reminiscent of witchcraft, such as the making of human effigies to exact revenge. A monk of Norwich, William Bockenham, may have been responsible for the transcription of such a rite in the fifteenth century (Cambridge University Library MS Dd.xi.45, fols 134v–9v). On a more mundane level, workshop. at Whitby Abbey seem to have been engaged in the manufacture of occult amulets (Gilchrist 2019, pp. 388, 392), perhap. for sale to pilgrims.

While texts of alchemy, astrology and various kinds of ‘natural magic’ filled English monastic libraries, texts of ritual magic involving the invocation of spirits were rarer. Page (2013, p. 22) has noted that the monks of St Augustine’s, Canterbury, who were fascinated by texts of natural and astrological magic, avoided collecting ritual magic texts. However, St Augustine’s provided a congenial environment for studying magic since individual monks were permitted to amass their own personal
book collections, and Page speculates that monks may have justified their ownership of occult texts on the grounds of their superior spiritual discernment gained through mystical practice. Michael Northgate, one of the major collectors of occult books at St Augustine’s, may have seen the monastery ‘as a refuge for men who wished to conceal their occult interests’. It is ironic that ‘repentant’ magicians sometimes entered monasteries to atone for their sins, given that monastic libraries often contained magical texts, and it is even possible that some individuals joined monasteries to learn more about magic (Page 2013, p. 23). Others, however, like a monk of Rievaulx accused of ‘nefarious magic spells and incantations’ (Rider 2012, pp. 160–61) seem to have felt it necessary to abscond from the monastery in order to practise magic.

The library of the Austin Friars in York, donated to the house by the alchemical writer John Erghome in the 1370s and 1380s, reflected an even broader range of magical interests than the library of St Augustine’s. In addition to works of natural magic, Erghome also collected copies of the ‘Sworn Book of Honorius’, the Ars Notoria and other ritual magic texts explicitly focussed on summoned spirits (Page 2013, p. 29). None of Erghome’s occult books survive, but one example of a surviving book in the ritual magic tradition from an English monastic context is British Library MS Royal 12 C 6, a treatise on learning shorthand derived from the Ars Notoria (a text of ritual magic that promised to enhance the memory of the magician and speed up the process of learning). The manuscript was produced for the monks of Bury St Edmunds in around 1400 (Haines 2019, p. 379). This suggests that, at the very least, the monks of Bury were seeking magical shortcuts to learning.

The study of magic in the medieval monastery served a multitude of purposes. At one end of the spectrum, some monks and friars effectively pursued careers as service magicians, with several even getting involved in magical scandals at court (Young 2017, pp. 33–35). At the other end of the spectrum, monks and friars collected magical texts solely for research purposes, in order to know what magicians were doing so that they could more thoroughly condemn their activities. Monastic involvement in magic cannot be reduced to a straightforward dichotomy between illicit behaviour and learned condemnation; many monks and friars seem to have found themselves in a hinterland of intellectual and spiritual exploration in which magical texts were accorded some value, even if they were not practising as out-and-out sorcerers. Klaassen (2013, p. 56) has noted that the Ars Notoria was ‘frequently collected with works that suggest a deep interest in affective religious devotion’, while Fanger (2012, p. 26) suggests that it may be necessary to broaden our understanding of medieval mysticism to embrace certain ritual magic texts that were clearly used in a devotional way. Indeed, Véronèse (2012, pp. 37–78) has questioned whether the Ars Notoria (at least in some versions) ought to be viewed as a magical text at all. John Erghome, the Augustinian friar who donated his occult library to the Austin Friars in York publicly repudiated magic but was involved in diffusing the prophetic and mystical writings of John of Bridlington; perhaps, then, historians of monastic occultism should not be seeking disobedient monks but rather individuals with a complex range of ‘magico-religious interests’.

3. Magic and the Dissolution

It is ironic that the dissolution which resulted in the dispersal of magical books from monastic libraries and magical knowledge via ex-monks and ex-friars was also, in part, justified by the alleged involvement of religious men in magic. Parish (2015, pp. 411–18) has shown how the anti-monastic propaganda of the Henrician Reformation watered the older suspicion that clerics with too much time on their hands might dabble in the dark arts, which thereby became ‘the starting point for a more broadbrush representation of Catholic theology and practice as quasi-magical’. Reformers were thus able to move from the familiar (complaints about corrupt clerics) to a radical rejection of Catholic orthodoxy and sacramental authority.

Identifying the involvement of monks and friars in ‘superstitious’ activities seems to have been part of the agenda of the commissioners deputed by the Lord Privy Seal, Thomas Cromwell, to dissolve religious houses between 1536 and 1540. In 1536, an informant named Richard Branktre accused William Love, the Cistercian Abbot of Coggeshall in Essex, of the reading of anti-royal prophecies.
Branktre also claimed to know, from testimony given by John Sampford (a previous abbot) and Nicholas Crane (a servant), that Love had given a drink to a young woman to cause a miscarriage. She nearly died as a result, and the abbot and others made preparations to bury her in the wood yard if she did. The administration of a potion to cause abortion was an instance of *veneficium* (occult poisoning), a practice closely linked with harmful magic. Branktre also alleged that Abbot Love ‘did unlawfully use one Robert Goswill, then young and now a monk there’, and claimed that the abbot used magic to find lost objects (Elton 1972, pp. 154–55). Accusations of sodomy were often linked with magic, as in the case of Lord Hungerford, executed for ‘treason of buggery’ in 1540 (Young 2017, p. 76).

Cromwell’s commissioners portrayed the members of monastic communities as dilettantes addicted to excessive curiosity. When they arrived to confiscate the valuables of Walsingham Priory in 1536, the commissioners reported that they found an entire secret alchemical laboratory, with ‘nothing there wanting which should belong to the art of multiplying’ (Wright 1843, p. 138). Some religious deployed the occult arts in open defiance of the Henrician regime, like the Dominican friar Dr Maydland. An agent of Thomas Cromwell, Jasper Fyloll, reported in 1535 that ‘friar Dr Maydland said he would like to see the head of every maintainer of the new learning upon a stake . . . and to see the king die a “violent and shameful” death’. Maydland declared that ‘he knew by his science of necromancy that the new learning should be suppressed, and the old restored by the king’s enemies from beyond the sea’ (Brewer et al. 1862–1932, vol. 9, p. 846). This was a reference to the widespread expectation that the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V would invade England and overthrow Henry VIII.

Reformers not only tried to blacken the reputations of living monks and friars, but also sought to reinvent revered monastic figures of the medieval past as necromancers. Parish (2005, pp. 45–70) has shown that monastic figures from the medieval past, such as St Dunstan, were reimagined by polemical writers like John Bale as demonic magicians. Yet the dissolution also had more practical consequences for the transmission of knowledge of magic. Klaassen (2013, p. 185) has suggested that one reason why the copying of texts of astrological image magic tailed off in England in the mid-sixteenth century was the dissolution, because monasteries were the principal location of intellectual exchange about this genre of magic. By contrast, the copying of texts of ritual magic continued unabated because, Klaassen argues, its transmission ‘depended on personal connections’ rather than the continuity of institutions.

It may be that some genres of magic were such specialist fields of interest that their narrow appeal to a small and dedicated group ensured the survival of manuscripts. As Klaassen (2013, p. 188) has suggested, the Protestant reaction against Scholasticism may have marginalised hitherto popular genres of magic, such as image magic, as intellectually redundant. By contrast, Catholics and Protestants shared the belief in angels and demons that underpinned ritual magic. The mathematician, alchemist and ritual magician John Dee (1527–1608) acquired the medieval catalogue of occult books in the library of St Augustine’s, Canterbury, and appears to have made strenuous efforts to obtain as many of the books in the catalogue as possible. Dee’s marginal annotations survive in many of the still extant books from St Augustine’s (Page 2013, pp. 133–40). For individuals with Dee’s range of interests, the dissolution was a potential windfall of otherwise unobtainable books, and Dee’s attitude to the dissolution will be explored further below. However, Dee was an elite figure whose knowledge equalled (and probably exceeded) that of the medieval monks whose works on magic he craved, and we can learn little about the democratisation of magic from Dee’s book collecting habits. The extent to which magical texts from monastic libraries found their way into the hands of less learned lay service magicians remains unknown.

4. Monks and Friars as Magicians in Post-Reformation England

A handful of former monks and friars can be identified with certainty as practitioners of magic after the dissolution, but it is likely there were many more. William Blomfild (fl. 1529–1574), a former monk of Bury St Edmunds, is one example whose career is better documented than most. Born in Bury, Blomfild seems to have entered the abbey in the town at an early age. He may have been a kinsman of the alchemist and cunning man Myles Blomeflyde (1525–1603) and first appears in the
historical record in 1529, when William Blomfild was questioned in London about holding Protestant views (Principe 2004, pp. 265–66). This occurred in the wake of the scandal caused by another Bury monk, Richard Bayfield, who abandoned his monastic vocation in order to flee abroad and become a supplier of Protestant books to England. Bayfield was apprehended and burnt as a heretic in 1531 (Young 2016, pp. 120–21). Blomfild abjured the heresies of which he was accused, but the fact that Blomfild does not appear among the records of those monks pensioned off after the dissolution of the abbey on 4 November 1539 (Blackwood 2001, pp. 310–11), makes it probable that he, too, had already abandoned his monastic vocation by that point and was no longer living at Bury.

On 29 July 1546 Blomfild’s servant John Morvill accused him of practising necromancy:

Upon [Morvill’s] promise of secrecy, Blomefyld prepared to make a circle that night, which the two of them should sit in (making it in the leads if the weather held up. but in the chamber if it rained). [Morvill] ran to Blomefyld’s house and fetched his book ‘to set the weather’. ‘Then,’ said Blomefyld, ‘the worst is I shall needs destroy part of the house here’. ‘Sir,’ quoth John, ‘what will you do with this little child here?’ ‘Mar[r]y!’ saith he, ‘I would that he were away. And so I carried [the child] to Father Beste’s house. And when I came again I did promise him as I did before; and whiles all things were a preparing to be done, Mr. Secretary Pagget came in unto him, and so prevented the matter. (Brewer et al. 1862–1932, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 667–68)

It is unclear, from this fragmentary account, why Blomfild was making a circle, but the domestic context suggests that he may have been engaged in treasure hunting (which often happened in houses). Blomfild intended initially to perform the operation on the building’s lead-covered roof (‘in the leads’).

Blomfild’s reported concern with controlling the weather may have been linked to his desire to draw a magic circle on the roof of a building; alternatively, necromantic rituals were often thought to cause storms, and Blomfild’s instructions to his servant to fetch a book of weather magic may have been to protect against this. Blomfild’s fear that the building in question might be damaged in a magical operation, and that a child inside might be harmed, may be linked to a belief that evil spirits often caused damage and harm when summoned. ‘Secretary Pagget’ was William Paget (1506–1563), who was Secretary of State from 1543. Paget’s appearance probably places the action in London. His servant’s accusation of necromancy does not seem to have damaged Blomfild’s reputation and, in 1569, he was appointed vicar of St Simon and St Jude, Norwich. Blomfild was not a popular vicar; but his problems derived not from accusations of practising magic but from his strident Puritan religious views. Blomfild’s later reputation rests on his tracts and poems on alchemy.

While Blomfild favoured the Puritan cause after his departure from monastic life, another former monk who dabbled in magic identified with persecuted English Catholics. John Coxe (alias Devon) was apprehended by customs officials on 14 April, 1561, at the port of Gravesend while trying to find a ship that would take him to the Spanish Netherlands. When John Coxe was searched, he was found to be carrying letters to Catholic exiles living in the Low Countries. Hauled before a local magistrate in Kent, John Coxe was questioned and admitted to saying mass contrary to the Act of Uniformity and believing that the new religion of England was not the true religion; he revealed that many prominent Essex families, including some of Elizabeth’s Privy Councillors, supported a network of ‘massing priests’ in the countryside. John Coxe confessed to saying mass at the home of Leonard Bilson, a former prebendary of Winchester, ‘for hallowing of certain conjurations to those of the said Bilson who practised by those means to obtain the love of my Lady Cotton, the late wife of Sir Richard Cotton, Knight’ (Jones 1998, p. 192), or as another source put it, ‘Bilson … to have his will of the Lady Cotton caused young Coxe a priest to say a mass to call on the devil to make her his lady’ (British Library MS Add. 48023, fol. 354v).

John Coxe’s reported youth, along with the fact that he was a monk, means that he can hardly have been a surviving monk of the first dissolution of the monasteries. It is probable, then, that Coxe was a former monk of the briefly re-founded Westminster Abbey (1556–1559), although Coxe is not mentioned among the monks pensioned off after Westminster’s second dissolution (Young 2017,
As a result of the arrest of John Coxe, the authorities raided the homes of Sir Edward Waldegrave at Borley and Sir Thomas Wharton at Beaulieu, both in Essex, which led to the arrests of four clerics for suspected involvement in a magical plot against Queen Elizabeth. One of these, John Ramridge, was also a former monk of Westminster (Knighton 2006, pp. 117–18). Peter Maxwell-Stuart’s (2014, 415n30) assertion that another of the magical practitioners convicted as part of the crackdown on magicians in 1561, Francis Coxe, was also a former monk seems to be an error based on confusion with John Coxe. Francis Coxe went on to publish a lengthy confession of his life in magic, but gave no hint of his earlier life.

It is possible that ‘friar Bacon’, mentioned as the giver of ‘help and counsel’ to a group of six clerks who attempted a conjuration to discover treasure recorded in Folger MS V.b.26 was a living English friar rather than the historical Roger Bacon (Harms et al., p. 505). The Folger manuscript dates to the 1570s, when a number of Franciscan friars from the Greenwich friary dissolved in 1559 were still alive and ministering to exiled English Catholics in the Low Countries (which is the context in which this manuscript or ritual magic seems to have originated). However, ‘friar Bacon’s’ help and counsel may be no more than an allusion to the use of a book attributed to Roger Bacon. In contrast to their monastic forebears, there is no sign that monks and friars of the revived English exiled religious houses on the Continent became involved in occult practices. This is scarcely surprising in light of Counter-Reformation anxiety to prove the Reformers wrong about the quality and piety of monastic life.

Hints of monastic influence may be detectable in some surviving manuscripts of magic, such as Cambridge University MS Add. 3544 (the ‘Cambridge Book of Magic’), a text of ritual magic composed at some point between 1532 and 1559. An immediate post-dissolution context for the composition of this manuscript is suggested by the date range within which it was compiled, the reuse of a vellum leaf from a late medieval gradual as a cover for the paper manuscript, and the content of the text (Foreman 2015, pp. xiv–xvi). The vellum leaf (now Cambridge University Library MS Add. 4435(17)) contains a four-line plainchant for the Conversion of St Paul (25 January) which does not belong to the Sarum rite (the standard liturgy of the medieval English church), opening up the possibility that the manuscript originated in a religious house where an alternative usage was maintained (Foreman 2015, pp. xv–xvi).

In and of itself, the reuse of a piece of medieval vellum to cover the Cambridge Book of Magic is merely an indication that the text was written after the start of the dissolution, when scrap. of this kind became widely available to scribes and bookbinders. However, it is clear from the content of the Cambridge Book of Magic that its compiler (who may have been called Paul Foreman) was literate in Latin and liturgically skilled; yet he was not a priest. It is highly unlikely that a layman or secular minor cleric would have possessed the requisite skill set to write MS Add. 3544, which means that it was probably composed by a man trained within a monastic or academic context. Finally, the author’s deep knowledge of herbalism and attempts to blend it with ritual magic, including an elaborate rite in which the magician ‘marries’ the herb valerian (Foreman 2015, pp. 74–79), points to a former monk of friar. Monasteries were renowned for their herb gardens and religious men for their herbal knowledge.

One possible interpretation of the Cambridge Book of Magic is that it was written by an ex-monk or ex-friar using skills learnt within the monastery to practise as a professional service magician (Foreman 2015, pp. xvii–xviii). However, the Cambridge Book draws on both Latin and vernacular sources and contains clear instructions as if it were written for the benefit of a disciple (Foreman 2015, p. vii). It is a practical text, containing a combination of simple ‘recipes’ and complex ‘speculative’ spirit conjurations, and represents a point of transition from the clerical magic of the Middle Ages to the vernacularised practice of service magicians lambasted by Reginald Scot in his Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584). If the Cambridge Book of Magic was compiled by a former religious, it is evidence of the involvement of such men in the democratisation of magic.
5. A Magical Reputation: Monks and Friars as Stereotyped Magicians

Whether or not former monks and friars really were a major part of the community of magical practitioners in post-dissolution England, monks and friars were certainly magicians in the popular imagination. Davies (2009, p. 37) has drawn attention to the phenomenon of clerics who wrote on the subject of magic (even when they denounced it) becoming magicians in the popular imagination over time. The thirteenth-century theologians Michael Scot (1175–c. 1232) and Roger Bacon (c. 1214–1294) are perhaps the best-known British victims of this trend before the Reformation. The efforts of polemicists like John Bale to portray pre-Reformation churchmen as necromancers, mentioned above, created an ideal environment for the reinforcement and perpetuation of stereotypes of the monastic conjurer. Robert Greene’s play *The Honorable Historie of Frier Bacon and Frier Bongay* (c. 1589) is perhaps the best-known example of a popular portrayal of Franciscan friars as duelling wizards (Greene 1963, pp. 53–59).

The reputation of Franciscan friars for involvement in magic was not altogether undeserved. Franciscan theology emphasised the importance of intellectual curiosity and of studying the entirety of nature without restriction (Boureau 2006, pp. 111–18), and medieval Franciscans pioneered alchemy. One of the most popular stories of sorcery in medieval England concerned a magical talking bronze head supposedly made by the Franciscan Roger Bacon (Davies 2009, pp. 37–38). Franciscans adopted a materialistic approach to the spiritual world that sometimes led them to promote devotional practices close to or indistinguishable from magic. However, balancing the cultural portrayal of historic friars such as Roger Bacon as magicians, Protestant propagandists tended to portray living Catholic clergy not as wicked necromancers but as frauds intent on faking supernatural feats (Young 2013, p. 147).

One post-Reformation rumour that persistently circulated about monks and friars, and which inspired many treasure hunters, was that they were successful alchemists who had hidden their fabulous wealth somewhere in the ruins of their monasteries (Dillinger 2012, pp. 24–25). In October 1574, in a letter about his ongoing search for hidden treasure, John Dee asked permission of Lord Burghley to consult manuscripts in an old chapel at Wigmore Castle in Herefordshire, which had belonged to one of the abbeys of the Augustinian Wigmore Abbey, ‘which had lain there rotting and tossed about unregarded’ (Strype 1709, vol. 2, p. 354). Although Dee declared that his interest in the Wigmore manuscripts was genealogical, the appearance of this request to study the papers of the abbot of Wigmore in a letter asking for permission to search for treasure suggests that Dee may have been interested in the manuscripts because he thought they would reveal the location of hidden treasure.

Dee was not alone in his treasure hunting ambitions. Although the early antiquaries who sought to save and recover what they could of the great monastic libraries declared their interest to be purely academic, even the Humanist scholar and royal librarian John Leland (c. 1503–1552) recorded a local Somerset rhyme that was supposed to identify the location of buried treasure (Dillinger 2012, p. 22). Rumours continued to circulate into the seventeenth century. The astral magician Elias Ashmole (1617–1692) heard from Richard Wakeman, town clerk of Bath, about a mysterious ‘Red Tincture’ that was supposedly found in the walls of Bath Abbey after the dissolution (Ashmole 1966, vol. 2, p. 588). Ashmole’s hop was that this ‘tincture’ was the philosophers’ stone, discovered by the monks and hidden in a wall for safekeeping. Rumours about alchemical treasure were not the only occult associations with monks and friars in post-Reformation England, and a widespread folk-belief that all Benedictine monks were skilled herbalists seems to have persisted in Protestant England well into the eighteenth century. So powerful was this belief that it enabled a number of missionary Benedictine monks to make a living as unlicensed physicians (Young 2013, p. 71).

6. Conclusions

The dissolution of the English monasteries resulted in the diffusion of occult knowledge that had hitherto been largely the preserve of monks and friars into a vernacular and common tradition. It has been the aim of this article to shed some light on how this occurred. With the exception of isolated figures such as William Blomfield and John Coxe, the personal presence of former monks and friars in the world of learned and unlearned service magic in post-Reformation England is rather elusive,
although it is highly likely that other monastic personnel whose identities are now lost to us joined the ranks of service magicians. The Cambridge Book of Magic, a manuscript of ritual magic produced at the time of the dissolution or shortly thereafter, shows signs of having been compiled by someone who was probably trained in a monastic context, and who subsequently worked as a service magician.

There can be no doubt about the significance of the indirect contribution of the monasteries to the democratisation of magical knowledge in Elizabethan England. Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, condemnations of magic frequently acted as advertisements for it, and the anti-magical polemic of reformers drew attention to the purported magical skill of men who were about to be cast on their own resources. The propaganda of the Reformation was responsible for creating a stereotypical view of monks and friars as learned in the magical arts, a perception which led individuals such as John Dee to value highly occult manuscripts recovered from dissolved monasteries. Although there is little sign that the post-Reformation monks and friars trained in missionary houses in Continental Europe continued to pursue the occult interests of their forebears, the works produced within the context of adventurous intellectual communities in medieval monasteries generally found a ready audience among literate laypeople in the later sixteenth century. In this way, medieval monks’ communal quest for magical enlightenment lived on in new ways, albeit no longer restricted to a small clerical elite.

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**References**


