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# Notes on the *Picatrix*: Non- Heteronormative Sex, and Forthcoming Translation

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## I - Non-Heteronormative Sex in the Picatrix

Magic, virtually by definition in Western culture according to some scholars, is comprised of activities that breach social norms.<sup>1</sup> While self-professed magic users often claim higher and more salubrious goals for their magic, it is notable that magic of transgressive kinds remains a part of the picture in all periods, appearing even in many texts claiming that magic is part of a higher knowledge. The harmful intent (e.g., murder, adultery, wreaking vengeance upon enemies, etc.) behind a large number of rituals and recipes which one finds in pre-modern magical compilations provides ample evidence of the socially deviant aims of this type of magical practice; the text surrounding the ritual description may either highlight the illegal, unethical or counter-normative aims of these rituals, or indeed work to justify them. This transgressive tendency is further highlighted by the many frankly revolting – or dangerously psychotropic – ingredients that are often required as part of magical recipes (e.g., a recently severed human head, dried or fresh excrement, opium, henbane, mandrake, datura – or even combinations thereof). Moreover, whenever people indulged in these kinds of magical practices, it was generally to achieve those things which they strongly desired, yet were powerless to achieve by “normal,” socially legitimate means.

### **Picatrix cont'd**

Given this context, one might expect the kinds of operations which enable or facilitate sexual deviance to appear with some frequency among surviving spell collections. The first part of this short note will highlight such instances of sexual deviance, in particular with regard to non-heteronormative sexual activity, which we can find contained within the late-thirteenth century Latin version of the mid-tenth century Arabic compilation of astral magic entitled *Għayat al-Hakīm* (*The Goal of the Sage*), known as the *Picatrix* in Latin. Scholars have highlighted the many differences between the two versions of the text,<sup>2</sup> but the ones most relevant to our discussion here revolve around

spells intended to achieve lustful or sexual ends. Jean-Patrice Boudet has highlighted the very curious fact that there are far fewer instances of spells mentioning or pertaining to homosexual relations in the Latin version of the text when compared to its Arabic original.<sup>3</sup> Boudet attributes these differences to the more prudish nature of Medieval Christian culture with respect to sex, an argument which meshes well with the known distinctions between those two cultures.

That being said, the three instances where homosexual or other non-heteronormative sexual activity is unambiguously featured are explicit about their deviant character. One of these is all

the more remarkable in that it pertains to sex between two women specifically.

The first of these three passages occurs in Book II, wherein the signs of the zodiac and their effects on this world are discussed. In a section where the “sages of India” are cited for their descriptions of the “images, forms, and figures” relative to each of the three “faces” of the zodiacal signs, the third face of Libra is said to be for “evil works, sodomites, adultery, songs, rejoicing, and flavors.”<sup>4</sup> The order in which the list appears places enthusiasts of non-reproductive and/or homosexual sex precisely between deeds which are outright evil (*mala* cont'd on page 3

## **Notes and Queries**

### **Magic, Materials and Imagination: A Digital Exhibit**

This new museum exhibit will seek to demonstrate the significance of the imagination in the performance of magic from the creation of magic objects to interpretation of their results or effects. It will also explore some of the many tools used in magic built specifically to provoke human imagination. Although it focuses on pre-modern magic artifacts, it will also include various related modern versions of the same sort of tools or practises.

Very few pre-modern magic tools survive. Instead, we know about them through manuscript sources, as did most medieval practitioners. Part of the purpose of the exhibit, therefore, is to recreate them, not only to provide modern people a chance to see what they might have been like, but also to help us understand how they worked. We are also interested in the process by which magical objects are imagined. We have, for example, hired artists to re-create images from the very limited descriptions in the *Picatrix* and will feature their reflections

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### **Picatrix cont'd**

*opera*) and individuals who were clearly thought to be reprehensible and unlawful (*adulteros*); meanwhile, its place in the sentence stands distantly from the more benign sensorial pleasures.

The other two passages appear in Book III, Chapter 7, where the properties of each of the planets are described.<sup>5</sup> The first of the two passages, relating to Mars, has an extensive list of negative attributes, properties, and areas of influence.<sup>6</sup> Several examples of explicitly deviant sex feature prominently. Here is

the passage in its entirety:

Mars is hot and dry, an unfortunate planet, destructive, and the author of evil things. He symbolizes doom, evil deeds, the depopulation of homes and cities, dryness and the inhibition of rain, fire, combustion, differences, blood, spontaneous violent mental urges, bad and biased judgments, oppression, pain, the deaths of men and the damnation of all things,

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### **Notes and Queries cont'd**

on how they went about creating from them something that *looks* magical.

The exhibit will feature eight sections:

1. divination by animal organs (featuring a reproduction of an Etruscan bronze divination liver and a modern practitioner of divination using pig spleens);
2. bibliomancy (featuring a computer simulation of the Homeric Oracle from the Greek Magical Papyri and modern examples like the magic eight-ball);
3. astrological images (featuring images from the *Picatrix*);
4. skrying devices (including the Holy Almandal and crystals);
5. chiromancy (featuring a guide

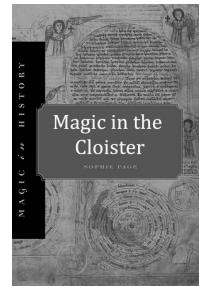
to read one aspect of your own hand);

6. divination by pouring molten substances into water (featuring examples of the final products of this process and modern versions from Germany and Ukrainian folk practitioners);
7. name and number divination (featuring a computer simulation of a sixteenth-century onomantic calculation and an eighteenth-century manuscript dedicated to the process); and finally
8. divination systems employing touch (featuring the Key and Psalter method of theft detection and modern examples like the ouija board).

A final interesting feature of this exhibit is its digital nature. With the exception of a few items, the entire exhibit will be available

## **20% Discount**

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for download to members of the Societas Magica (for display purposes only), although the artefacts would have to be printed and the simulations mounted on a touch screen device. In principle, a physical version of the display may also be available to members who can arrange its transportation.

The exhibition is being developed by Tracene Harvey, Frank Klaassen, and David Porreca and supported by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity (University of Saskatchewan), the University of Waterloo, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. It will open at the University of Saskatchewan in January 2017 and in subsequent months will appear at the University of Waterloo and the International Medieval Congress (Kalamazoo Michigan) in May 2017.

### **Picatrix cont'd**

destruction, quarrels, war, battle, terror, disagreement between men, anxiety or misery, penalties, wounds, prisons, depression, flight, litigation, stupidity, treasonous acts, and all things cursed without rhyme or reason – quasi-happiness, lies, ungratefulness, a mediocre life, shame, interruptions on roads, burial, the lack of comforts, discord, sharpness and wrath, doing things prohibited by laws, fear, quasi-legality, acts of treason, false oaths and assessments in all works, **evil deeds during sex with women in a prohibited fashion (such as do those who desire beasts, other**

**animals, and foreign women)**, killing sons and condemning creatures, killing fetuses in a mother's womb, depredations, acts of treason and deception, all manner of fraud, having misery, plots, thefts of clothes and shoes, attacks on the road, nighttime break-and-entry, opening doors, all manner of wicked deeds, and all things remote from truth and lawfulness.  
(Emphasis added.)

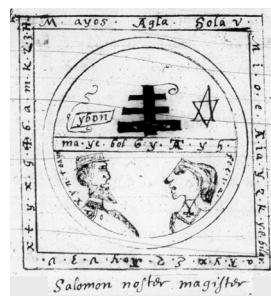
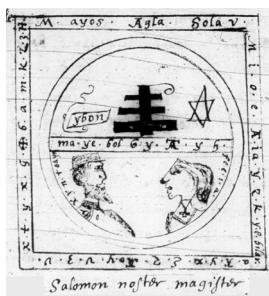
The latter of the two passages appears in the list of the things governed by Venus.<sup>7</sup> It should be no surprise that love and sex appear as part of the Venusian domain. What is surprising, however, is that not only does deviant sex appear under the banner of a “fortunate” planet, but that the example invoked clearly states that the sex in

question is between women. Indeed, Frank Klaassen reports that this is a unique occurrence in his experience of the magical literature of the Medieval and Early Modern periods.<sup>8</sup> Here are the portions of the passage relevant to love and/or sex, with emphasis placed on those phrases relevant to our argument:

Venus is... a fortunate planet. She signifies... delight in song, joy, illustrations, laughter, pictures, beauty, shapeliness, the beat of wind and string instruments, loving one's bride, seeking spices and things that smell good... She desires to sleep with women, to strengthen love with them and long for faithfulness from them.

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## **The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.**



We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.

Please contact David Porreca: [dporreca@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dporreca@uwaterloo.ca)

[www.societasmagica.org](http://www.societasmagica.org)

### **Picatrix cont'd**

She governs the desire to appear beautiful, to love freedom, nobility of heart, and joy... She desires to guard the desire for friends and a focus on the opinions of the world. She welcomes false oaths and is inclined toward desire. She desires to drink excessively. **She incessantly desires abundant sex in filthy ways, and to do it in inappropriate places such as some women are accustomed to doing with others.** She governs... delighting in merchants and living with them and **being loved by women, being loved by men...** She signifies the desire for all beautiful settled things which conform to her will.

Given these examples, we see how the Latin *Picatrix* conforms to the social norms of its time by treating non-heteronormative sex clearly as a negative. At the same time, the text's unique character in the historical record is further emphasized by its inclusion of the only known reference to lesbian sex in the magical literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. We hope this will encourage those with

background in the history of sexuality to situate these passages in their appropriate context and draw out more implications in future research.

### **II - Forthcoming Translation**

The *Għāyat al-Hakīm* has been the subject of multiple copies, editions, and translations over the course of its history. In addition to its journey from Arabic to Castilian Spanish to Latin, the text was also translated in whole or in part, into vernacular English, French, German, Hebrew, and Italian.<sup>9</sup> In more recent times, translations of this fundamental text have been published in German, French, and Italian.<sup>10</sup> The text has received a recent - and valuable - English translation by John Michael Greer and Christopher Warnock, but their text has drawbacks for scholars; while their work eventually did become invaluable to us, particularly on account of Warnock's obviously thorough knowledge of astrological practice, some of their marketing decisions also stood in our way at the outset. Their text appears in no fewer than seven different versions, each slightly different from the others with respect to cover art, design, and the inclusion of additional sections. For instance, the gothic-looking *Liber Atratus* version

includes black letter fonts and woodcut engravings, plus a passage on poisons from Ibn Washiyya's *Book of Poisons* which was never even a part of any *Picatrix* manuscript or edition. *Liber Rubeus* is stylized much in the same way but adds a passage from the Arabic version about the creation of a divinatory head (and is allegedly only printed when the Moon is in the 5th Mansion). The *Liber Viridis* includes loopy Renaissance calligraphic fonts, and lots of elaborate foliage ornamentation with an aesthetic focus on druidic "Green Magic." In addition, each of these editions appears in both hardcover and paperback form, and in illustrated and non-illustrated versions. The text of their translation, though based on the Latin edition by Pingree, is arbitrarily divided up into paragraphs for ease of legibility; however, this comes at the cost of not numbering each section in accordance with Pingree's Latin or Ritter-Plessner's Arabic editions issued by the Warburg Institute. All editions of Greer and Warnock's *Picatrix* inexplicably omit the section from 3.3.25 to 3.3.33, but then appropriately insert (in their respective places) the instructions for fabricating the magical rings that David Pingree had relegated to the Appendices of his edition.<sup>11</sup>

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## **Picatrix cont'd**

The decisions taken here are obviously designed to make a product that will appeal primarily to a popular audience of practicing astrologers and occultists; they leave plenty of room for a scholarly text focused on historical particulars (though of course, scholars and occultists need not be mutually exclusive groups).

Consequently, the authors of this note are pleased to announce that they are in the final stages of completing an entirely new English translation of the Latin *Picatrix*, also based on David Pingree's 1986 edition, along with up-to-date notes and commentary intended for advanced graduate students and scholars interested in the history and cultural context of premodern magic. In addition to an overview of the most recent research in Arabic and Latin magic (including other translations such as that of Béatrice Bakhouche, Frédéric Fauquier, and Brigitte Pérez-Jean, which are less accessible to the English-speaking world), the introduction will incorporate a set of translators' notes, a history of the text, and a distillation of a number of findings and results which have been presented by both

translators at various academic conferences over the past decade. We hope the work may also encourage scholars in the areas of cultural and intellectual history, as well as the history of medicine and sexuality, to draw upon the copious information available in *Picatrix* about many topics not intrinsically magical – including the understanding of sexual deviance briefly touched on here.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See Marco Pasi, "Theses de Magia," *Societas Magica Newsletter*, Issue 20, Fall 2008. In recent writings, Bernd Christian Otto pushes back against this view, which he once espoused more closely himself, noting that there is a "discourse of inclusion" revealed by growing research into works by self-professed magic users – "a fascinating and largely unexplored tradition of ritual texts and practices" that demands more attention than it has received. See Otto, "Historicizing Western Learned Magic," *Aries* 16 (2016), 162.

<sup>2</sup> David Pingree, "Between the Ghāya and the Picatrix I: the Spanish Version," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 44 (1981), 27-56, and more recently Constant Hamès, "La Ghāyat al-Hakīm: son époque, sa postérité en terre d'Islam," in *Images et Magie: Picatrix entre Orient et Occident*,

eds. Jean-Patrice Boudet, Anna Caiozzo, and Nicolas Weill-Parot, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011, 216-8.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Patrice Boudet, "L'amour et les rituels à images d'envoûtement dans le *Picatrix latin*," in *Images et Magie: Picatrix entre Orient et Occident*, eds. Jean-Patrice Boudet, Anna Caiozzo, and Nicolas Weill-Parot, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011, 162.

<sup>4</sup> *Picatrix*, 2.7.23, ed. David Pingree (London: The Warburg Institute, 1986), 77. All translations in this article are the authors'.

<sup>5</sup> No particular source is cited in relation to this section.

<sup>6</sup> *Picatrix*, 3.7.11, ed. Pingree, 115.

<sup>7</sup> *Picatrix*, 3.7.13, ed. Pingree, 115-6.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Klaassen, private conversation, 15 September 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Pingree, Introduction, *Picatrix*, xv, note 6.

<sup>10</sup> German: Hellmut Ritter and Martin Plessner. *Picatrix: Das Ziel des Weisen von Pseudo-Mağriti*. London: Warburg Institute, 1962; French: Béatrice Bakhouche, Frédéric Fauquier, and Brigitte Pérez-Jean. *Picatrix: Un Traité De Magie Médiéval*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2003; Italian: *Picatrix. Ghāyat al-hakīm, «Il fine del saggio» dello pseudo Maslama al-Magriti*, a cura di Paolo Aldo Rossi, transl. Davide Arecco, Ida Li Vigni, Stefano Zuffi. Milan: Mimesis, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> *Picatrix*, Appendix 10 - Appendix 15, ed. Pingree, 239-40.