



Issue 8

Winter 2001

Images of Desire

Geoffrey McVey

The idea of the autonomy of the imaginative faculty, particularly with respect to *phantasia* or creative imagination, developed along two seemingly distinct trajectories in the fifteenth century: along one, imagination held the key to celestial visions and revelation; along the other, it was the root of demonic seduction and deception. Daniel Walker, in *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, parallels this division of concepts in his construction of a system of magic that distinguishes “subjective magic” (in which the operator is also the subject) from “transitive magic” (in which operator acts on another, external subject). In this essay, drawn from research for my doctoral dissertation, I would argue that these apparent distinctions between the spiritual and the demonic imagination are more problematic than Walker’s work would suggest.

The trajectory of spiritual magic, typified by Ficino’s writings, is characterized by an emphasis on inner transformation through the cultivation of beneficial natural (generally celestial) influences. These influences are manipulated through an understanding of correspondences; by surrounding oneself with the substances and images associated with particular planets, one is able to attract the attention, so to speak, of the appropriate planetary spirits. The mechanism by which this attraction takes place is the weighting of imagination with the proper signs: rendering sense perceptions (the colour of gold, the scent of jasmine) into more rarified images in order to distill the essence of the planetary powers from them. When imagination is overcome by celestial phantasms, the operator is brought closer to the stars.

A key part of the process is the use of talismanic images, a subject that Ficino studies at length in his *De vita coelitus comparanda*. Brian Copenhaver, writing on the subject of Ficino’s use of scholastic philosophy, finds in *De vita coelitus comparanda* a set of very delicate intellectual maneuvers intended to give its author’s work on magic a sound (and orthodox) philosophical basis.¹ One may introduce the question of the use of talismans into the debate on

phantasia through its parallels concerning the issue of demonic influence. As early as Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*, the use of talismans by Christians was condemned as being one among many superstitions to be avoided.² Thomas Aquinas follows Augustine's position, while arguably being more lenient on the issue of amulets. The characteristic which, for Augustine and Aquinas both, divides the licit from the illicit is the use of signs. While stating in the *Summa theologica* that artificial forms only possess those properties impressed upon their matter, gaining nothing from being crafted or inscribed with figures,³ Aquinas shifts his position slightly in the *Summa contra gentiles* with the statement that the characters on talismans do have power, but only in a semiotic capacity.⁴ Copenhaver labels this quality the "noetic" power of talismans.⁵

The danger of this noetic power is the danger of uncontrolled or ambiguous speech: since signs act as a form of communication, Aquinas reasons that they must communicate ideas from one party (presumably the maker or user of the talisman) to another. Talismans, then, act only as semiotic tokens of an interaction or contract between the people using them and the (demonic) powers to which they are addressed. Furthermore, by arguing that these demons can be neither morally good (because their intervention rarely promotes the highest good, the pursuit of reason)⁶ nor particularly intelligent (because they can be coaxed through ritual imprecations and threats),⁷ Aquinas doubly reinforces his position that no use can come from contact with them.

Ficino is only able to defend his own position through a selective reading of the *Summa contra gentiles*, taking as

his point of departure Aquinas' statement that the figures or shapes of objects, while still accidents, resemble their substance and thus can give an indication of their essential nature.⁸ Instead of siding with Aquinas on the essential identity of natural and artificial forms, however, Ficino follows his own interpretation of Avicenna, according to whom artificial forms are substantially different than their natural counterparts.⁹ In other words, a talisman possesses a different substance than an amulet, and can therefore be expected to have different properties impressed upon it by the heavens. Although Aquinas rejects this possibility,¹⁰ Ficino holds that artificial forms draw to themselves and become infused with the properties of the bodies which they are made to resemble through the inscription of signs.

Ficino specifically invokes Aquinas' authority in *De vita coelitus comparanda* as a means to extend the permissible uses of talismans.¹¹ What Ficino does not mention is that Aquinas quite explicitly restricts the influence of the stars to bodies.¹² In order to align himself with orthodox theology, Ficino must find a middle ground which can include both the corporeal ("our bodies") and the incorporeal ("thought, art, and fortune"). This crucial meeting point, which Copenhaver neglects in his otherwise thorough work on the subject, is at the level of imagination.

While Aquinas recognizes the power of "a strong imagination" to influence the spiritual substances of another body, he excludes the intellect and the will;¹³ imagination acts only as an organ of the body. Ficino, however, holds to a definition of imagination which emphasizes its open and intermediary function. Not only is human-

ity predisposed to certain behaviour under the influence of the planets,¹⁴ but other modes of thought and action draw one to those planets: "Very often, then, in human affairs we are subject to Saturn, through idleness, solitude, or strength, through Theology, and more secret philosophy, through superstition, Magic, agriculture, and through sadness. We are subject to Jove through civil and ambitious business, through natural and common philosophy, and through civil religion and laws."¹⁵

The focus of Ficino's work in the *Liber de Vita* is the many ways in which one may improve one's life by aligning it with planetary, imaginal forces — "the imaginations and minds of the heavens,"¹⁶ as he puts it. The passage above makes it clear that this harmonization is not only accomplished through overtly magical activity, but also through one's ordinary pursuits. Ficino's move away from Aquinas' view on talismans is not, however, the most important difference. There is one other important detail that both separates them and places Ficino more in line with the demonic interpretation of imagination. Whereas for Aquinas, talismans (and magic in general) operated through their *noetic* power, for Ficino, they worked *erotically*. As he explains in the well-known passage from his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, *De amore*, "the whole power of magic consists in love. The work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity in nature."¹⁷

In *De vita coelitus comparanda*, moreover, he emphasizes the seductive nature of talismanic images: they are among the "divine lures" by which one may draw demons to mortals.¹⁸ Already in *De Amore*, Ficino has

ascribed the mechanism of love to the transferral of images from the lover to the beloved.¹⁹ Love works through imagination, and the underlying imperative of magic becomes the discovery of the images by which one may entice higher powers into aiding lower ones. Despite the language of “common love” and “common attraction,” there appears to be little in the way of reciprocity in the magical seduction intended by Ficino: the *magus* does not use talismans made from amber in order to become more amber-like, but only to entice (*allici*) higher, solar powers to himself by using the amber as his lure (*illices*).

This is a vital point: the shift from the use of imagination as a faculty for interpreting and manipulating signs to its use as a locus of desire. It is in this respect that Ficino’s position on imagination connects with that of my second example. In 1484, the year of Martin Luther’s birth, Pope Innocent VIII issued a bull declaring that “in some parts of Northern Germany... many persons of both sexes, unmindful of their own salvation and straying from the Catholic Faith, have abandoned themselves to devils, incubi, and succubi.”²⁰ This bull gave ecclesiastical support to the text that could be considered a representative of a different trajectory of thought than that which developed from Ficino, namely the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

It is far beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to survey or reproduce the vast amount of modern literature which has already been written on the subject of witchcraft in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The only element of that literature which is relevant to the current discussion is the association of witchcraft and imagination: whether authors of anti-witchcraft manuals accepted or denied the existence of witches, they con-

nected the power of demonic magic with disturbances of the inner senses. That power might be one of delusion (witches do not *actually* fly to midnight sabbaths or change their shape, but are deceived into thinking that they do) or manipulation (witches work with demons to distort the phantasies of others), depending on the view of the author. However, the significant factor is the representation of *phantasia* as a faculty subject to the influence of powers which are unambiguously negative. In contrast with Ficino’s ambivalence, it will become evident that the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and works like it had a clear notion of what constituted the “demonic.” More specifically, the demonic is characterized in these works as being fundamentally uncreative, able only produce flawed imitations of divine creations and to perform elaborate sleights of hand in order to create the appearance of creation or transformation. Since demons use *phantasia* as the instrument of their manipulations, it may be argued that the representation of that faculty, in the literature which follows the style of the *Malleus*, makes it demonic as well. I will concentrate, therefore, on the ways in which *phantasia* and imagination are “demonized” in the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

“The penalty of death,” write the authors of the *Malleus*, “is not inflicted except for some grave and notorious crime, but it is otherwise with the death of the soul, which can be brought about by the power of a phantastical illusion, or even by the stress of temptation.”²¹ This one sentence expresses the clear tension between Kramer and Sprenger’s desire to justify their zeal and the theological imperative to limit demonic power: witches must be tried, they

argue, as the instruments through which demons endanger the souls of others. The authors’ position on the power of demons is thoroughly orthodox and strongly Thomist; they rely, in fact, on many of the same passages used by Ficino for very different purposes. What makes their arguments valuable for the present study are the strategies by which they emphasize the dangers of *phantasia*, singling it out as a locus of demonic influence.

The basic structure of the authors’ argument may be found in their chapters on the question of whether and how witches are able to induce infatuation or desire in others. Encompassed by this question are such issues as whether demons have power over the intellect, the composition of the inner senses, and what sort of changes spirits are permitted to make in bodies. Just as Ficino would struggle with the limitations of Aquinas’ theology in order to show that talismans could bring benefits to all parts of life, so Kramer and Sprenger did their utmost to expand the dangers of demons without deviating from orthodoxy. The devil, they argue, is unable to influence the intellect directly in the manner that angels are (through revelation), but he can still use the powers of persuasion.²² Moreover, demons can persuade others “invisibly” through the manipulation of the inner senses, causing phantasies to be mistaken for substantial objects or beings: “Devils can stir up and excite the inner perceptions and humours, so that ideas retained in the repositories of [their subjects’] minds are drawn out and made apparent to the faculties of fancy and imagination, so that such men imagine these things to be true. And this is called interior temptation.”²³

Here is an interiorized version of the danger Aquinas ascribed to talismanic images: in the *Summa contra gentiles*, it was uncontrolled speech, while here it is uncontrolled *phantasia*, with communication with the demonic being implicit. The second quotation above suggests that the faculty assumed to be in use by the ordinary mind (“awake and having the use of his reason”) is that which recalls, rather than constructs, images. The sign of demonic interference is the spontaneous creation of images beyond the limits of intentionality, images which remind the individual of the alterity of her own *phantasia*.

The interpretive structure of the *Malleus Maleficarum* is entirely dependent on the existence of witches and the threat of demonic influence which they represent. Even with its psychology so strongly linked to the concepts of demonic activity and manipulation, the text still requires an element of human malice in order to lend it its sense of urgency. Again adhering closely to Thomist doctrine, the authors write that witches are the necessary link between devils and the rest of humanity;²⁴ this connection, by which witches are granted tremendous power while being simultaneously denigrated as weak or deluded, parallels the role of *phantasia* within the human soul. In the *Malleus*' depiction of the human faculties, imagination is given the function of preserving images, but memory preserves instincts: memory is tied in Aquinas to the virtue of prudence, and thus to the beginning of moral behaviour.²⁵ *Phantasia*, however, is amoral; part of its danger comes about because of the seeming ease with which phantasms can overcome the rational mind and bypass the powers of judgment. *Phantasia* is characterized in the Middle Ages as being easily

disturbed — because of diet, illness, weather, or the influence of the stars — and therefore unreliable at the best of times. Furthermore, the *Malleus* makes clear the link its authors wish to make between *phantasia* and desire, since they place *phantasia* at the heart of their chapter on the causes of love magic: it would not be an exaggeration to claim that, for these authors, it is as much *phantasia* that seduces as demons.

Where Ficino calls for the purposeful seduction and manipulation of invisible powers through the use of images, the authors of the *Malleus* concern themselves with the seduction of men and women *by* powers that are just as invisible. At the intersection of imagination and desire, the spiritual and the demonic become all but indistinguishable.

1 Copenhagen, “Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the *De vita* of Marsilio Ficino.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 17 (1984): 523-554.

2 Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 2.20.30, 29.45. It is clear from these references that Augustine not only opposes the use of talismans — objects bearing images — but unmarked amulets as well. Copenhagen (*ibid.*, 526-7) points to the late antique distinction between stones whose virtues were considered “describable,” and which fit into a general medical taxonomy of elemental qualities, and those which were “indescribable.” It was these latter, meant to be worn rather than ground up and taken internally, to which Augustine objects.

3 *Summa theologica* II-II:96, 2, ad.2. This section contains a number of relevant comments on the subject of talismanic magic. It is noteworthy that this question also includes the subject of whether it is legitimate to call upon demons “for the purpose of acquiring health or the like”; the topics of images and the demonic are thus linked in Aquinas’ thought.

4 *Summa contra gentiles* III:105. For Augustine’s position on the same subject, see *De doctrina christiana* 2:29.45. Augustine’s mistrust of amulets is also based on their capacity to act as signs: unlike Aquinas, he does not require written signs to be necessary for signification. Unless an amulet’s properties

fell into the categories of “describable” (n. 2 above), they could, in Augustine’s view, only act as part of a signifying system.

5 Copenhagen, 532

6 *Summa contra gentiles* III:106.4: “Besides, it pertains to a well-disposed intellect to bring men back to things that are proper goods for men, namely the goods of reason. Consequently, to lead them away from these goods, by diverting them to the least important goods, is the mark of an improperly disposed intellect.” (“Adhunc. Intellectus bene dispositi est reducere homines in ea quae sunt hominum propria bona, quae sunt bona rationis. Abducere igitur ab istis, pertrahendo ad aliqua minima bona, est intellectus indecenter dispositi.”) Aquinas’ argument is based on what he deems the triviality of demonic knowledge, useful only for “the finding of stolen goods and the catching of thieves, and such things.”

7 *ibid.* III:106.8: “Besides, a well-disposed intellect is attracted by truth, takes pleasure in it and not in lies. But the magicians use certain lies in their invocations, by which they entice those whose help they employ.” (“Adhunc. Intellectus bene dispositus veritate allicitur, in qua delectatur, non autem mendaciis. Magi autem in suis invocationibus utuntur quibusdam mendaciis, quibus allicant eos quorum auxilio utuntur.”)

8 *ibid.* III:69.22

9 See Copenhagen 540-46 for an excellent overview of the mediaeval debates on the origin of the properties of composite substances, and the differences in Avicenna’s and Aquinas’ views. Both philosophers are essentially struggling with the long-standing question of the “occult” properties of various materials, those qualities which cannot be deduced from their elemental composition. The passage in *De vita coelitus comparanda* which makes most explicit Ficino’s view on the subject is as follows: “The figures and numbers of natural parts, however, possess a property that is inseparable and peculiar to the species; namely, those heavenly things which have been destined to be with the species.” Particular figures are always connected to planetary bodies, and act to draw the powers of those bodies into the materials which bear their signs. (Ficino, *The Book of Life*, 142; *Opera Omnia*, I, 555)

10 *Summa contra gentiles* III:103.3

11 Ficino, *The Book of Life*, 110

12 *Summa contra gentiles* III:92.2-4

13 *ibid.* III:103.5. Writing on the subject of

fascination and the "evil eye," Aquinas argues against Avicenna's position by stating that it is not a matter of a direct influence upon the body, but that "it causes a change in the body that is united with the soul." See also *Summa theologica* I:117, 3, ad. 2, on the same subject.

14 Ficino, *The Book of Life*, 91-92

15 *ibid.*, 161, 93

16 *ibid.*, 138

17 Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, 127.

18 Ficino, *The Book of Life*, 87: "No one,

furthermore, should marvel that the soul can be, as it were, allured through materials forms... The congruities of these forms, therefore, are what Zoroaster called the divine lures, and Synesius agreed, calling them magic charms." *Opera Omnia* I, 561: "Nemo rursus miretur per materiales formas animam quasi allici posse... Congruitates igitur eiusmodi formarum, ad rationes animae mundi, Zoroaster divinas illices appellavit, quas & Synesius magicas esse illecebras confirmavit." See also Couliano, 137-38 for commentary on *allici*, *illices*, *illecebras*.

19 Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Sympo-*

sium, 55-6, 115.

20 Quoted in Summers, *The Geography of Witchcraft* (Kegan Paul, 1927), 533, and reprinted in Summers' edition of Kramer & Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum* (New York: Dover, 1971), xlv.

21 Kramer & Sprenger, 3.

22 *ibid.*, 49.

23 *ibid.*

24 Kramer & Sprenger, 2.

25 *Summa theologica* II-II, 48.

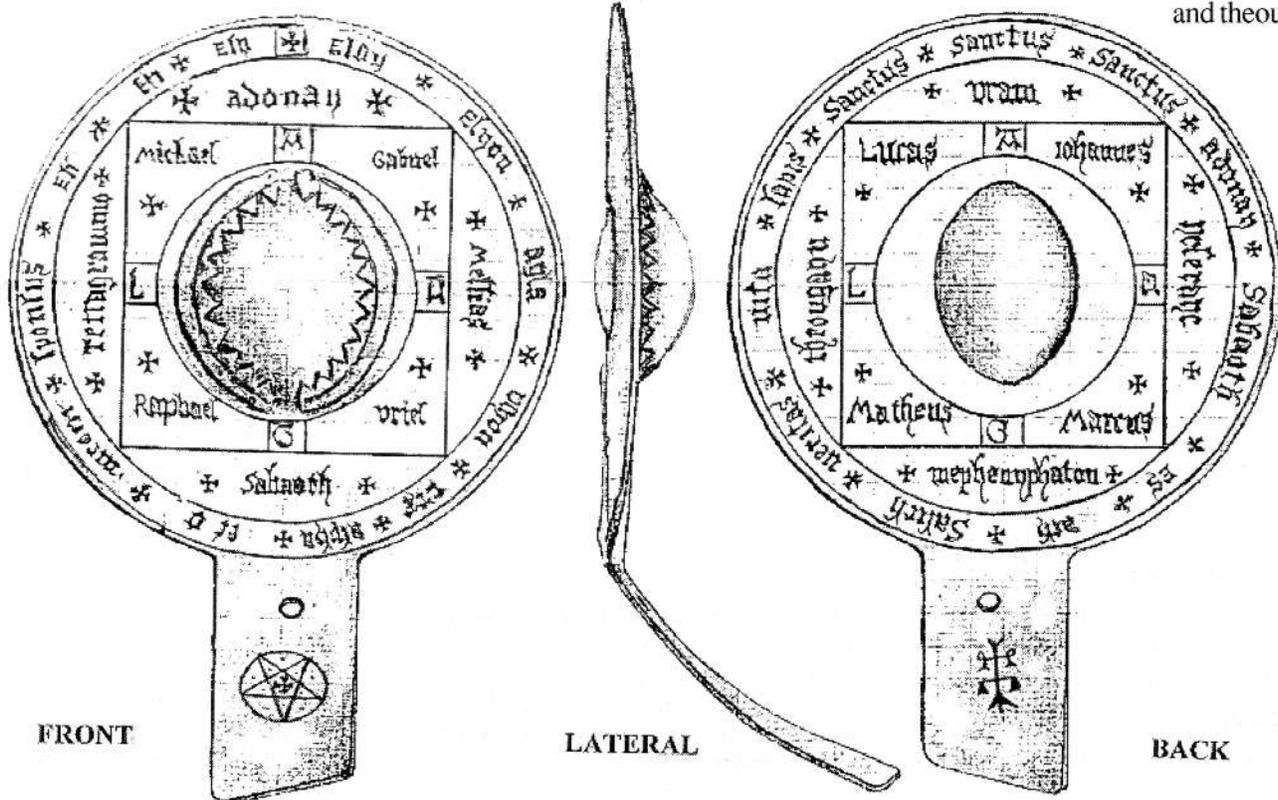
Notes and Queries

A Unique Magical Mirror from the Sixteenth Century

W.L. Braekman

In the winter of 1999, German archeologists discovered during a soil examination at Rostock in Mecklenburg a remarkable, probably unique object. Scientists date this object, which is exceptionally well preserved, in the sixteenth century. It is now in the care of the *Landesamt für Bodenkulturmerkmalepflege*, the regional counsel for the preservation of soil finds.

This brass object found in a refuse pit is more than probably a small magical hand mirror with a curious bent handle (12 cm high in all). In the centre of the circular mirror (some 8.5 cm in diameter) an oval piece of rock cristal of some 3 cm is fixed. It is surrounded by cabalistic signs and names engraved in the polished brass perimeter (see the drawing). These signs are mostly names of God (Adonay, Eli, Eloy(y), AGLA, rex, alpha et o, etc.) and signs of the cross, but also include the names of the four evangelists and such curious names as ephenophaton and theougayn.



From the *Grundstückregister* of Rostock, it appears that in the sixteenth century the site belonged to the then well-known physician and professor of mathematics, Heinrich Brucaeus (1567-1593). It may be assumed therefore that once the mirror may have belonged to him.

Although magical mirrors from so many centuries ago have only exceptionally come down to us, the use of them and the purpose of their use has been well-known in Europe since

Roman times. The technique is as follows: the magician or his medium (usually an innocent child) stares in a reflecting surface, such as a mirror, a polished piece of crystal, or an oiled fingernail. After the performance of a purification ritual and the recital of incantations, an angel or demon is expected to appear, who will answer questions and provide information of all sorts¹.

The recent find of a real, very early and intact magical mirror used for

such practices is an event that deserves to be brought to the attention of all who are interested in the forbidden arts in general and in *specularii* and catoptromancy in particular.

¹ For further reference, see e.g. G.L. Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York, 1929), pp. 51, 79, 185 and *passim*; R. Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites. A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Thrupp Stroud, 1997), p.97 ff. Cf. Also W.L. Braekman, *Middeleeuwse witte and zwarte magie in het Nederlands Taalgeviel* (Kon. Acad., Gent, 1997), p. 437-440 for Dutch examples of mirror magic.

Societas Magica Sessions, International Medieval Congress, Kalamazoo Michigan, May 2002

1. Origins of a Conspiracy: History of the Early Literature against Witches

From Fantasy to Fact: Early Literature against Witches and its Classical Antecedents
Marguerite Johnson, The University of Newcastle

The Roots of Johannes Nider's Concern with Witchcraft in his Formicarius
Michael Bailey, University of Notre Dame

Vernacular Preaching and the Popularization of Nider's Formicarius in fifteenth-century Germany
Steve Sargent, Union College

2. Heavenly Bodies: Astral/Corporeal Correspondences

Written in the Stars: A Re-Examination of Ovidian Love Conventions in Courtly Literature

Tracy Adams, University of Auckland

Astrology and Image Magic at Central European Universities in the 15th Century
Benedek Láng, Central European University

How to Seduce Angels
Geoffrey McVey, Syracuse University

3. Latinity, Authority and Magic

Latin and Vernacular Charms in Medieval England

Lea Olsan, University of Louisiana at Monroe

The Language of Magic in Romance in History

Mickey Sweeney, University of Missouri - Rolla

Words, Rituals, and Authority in Florentine Platonism

Christopher S. Celenza, Michigan State University

4. Magic, Christianity and the Demonic

Strange Angels

Michael H. Moore, University of Houston

Drawing Distinctions: Magic and Science in CGM 328

Elizabeth Wade, University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh

Prophecy and Disorder: Divination, Demon-Summoning, and Discernment of Spirits at the University of Paris

Wendy Love Anderson, University of Chicago

5. Miracles and Magic (co-sponsored with the Hagiography Society)

'It is a trifling matter for God, my lord': St Oláfr's Practical Magic in the Heimskringla
K. A. Laity, University of Connecticut

'Even now God shows new things to the strenghtening of our faith': Discerning Spirits in the De spiritu Guydonis and the Liber visionum of John of Morigny
Nicholas Watson, Harvard University

Is there Something about Marian Images? A Relationship between Miracles and Iconoclasm

Anna Russakoff, New York University

6. Gower and Magic (co-sponsored with the John Gower Society)

'Thurgh the craft of Artemage': Gower's Nectanabus and Medieval Ritual Magic
Keith Stiles, Western Carolina University

Greedy Lover forced to eat Imaginary Food: Magic, Curiosity and Self Deception in Book VI of the Confessio Amantis
Claire Fanger, Independent Scholar

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

We are looking for essays of 1500 to 2000 words covering recent research in the history of magic and related topics. Essays may be bibliographic in orientation but need not be. Some of the topics we are considering for future issues include

Arabic, Renaissance, and Jewish Magic.

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.

Proposals for essays, smaller pieces, or notes on all topics of potential interest to members of the Societas Magica will be welcome. Please contact Lea Olsan, ENOLSAN@ulm.edu.