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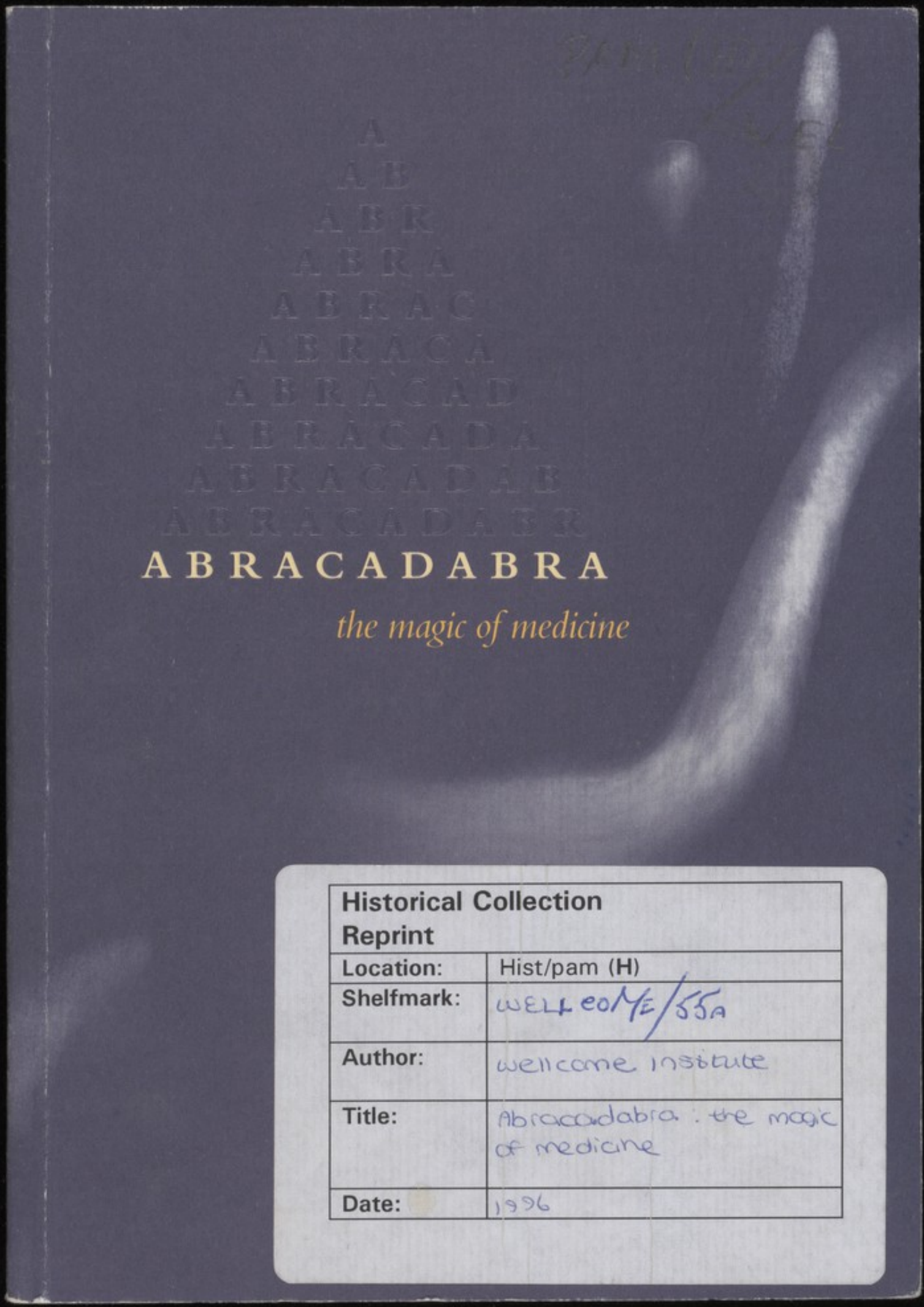

ABRACADABRA

the magic of medicine

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MAGIC OF MEDICINE

ABRACADABRA

An exhibition at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine

May 1996

Ken ARNOLD • Martha BALDWIN • John MACK

Contents

Magic, whose magic?

In preparing this exhibition I have been struck more than once by a chain of reaction to the idea of investigating the magic of medicine. Initially, responses have been encouraging: what a good idea, the connection makes obvious sense. Occasionally, however, this initial enthusiasm has been dampened by my descriptions of the range of material I have proposed to include. On further consideration, the subject of magic has begun to seem awfully difficult. At least once or twice, I have subsequently been met with a basic refusal to conscience that some specific item or tradition could in any way be considered magical. Religion but not magic; science but not magic; native belief but not magic; some other object but surely not this one.

Cumulatively, those responses have shown me that many people find little difficulty with the idea of magic so long as the term is not applied to the realm with which they are most concerned. To describe Christian, Islamic or Andean material as 'magical', or to apply the term to any 'serious' modern material would be either insensitive or illegitimate. Even anthropologists tend now to avoid the word, since it is so often used as a shorthand for 'primitive illogicality'. What is meant precisely by magic has rarely been specified by those who have quizzed my use of it, but it is clear that it tends to be thought of as a pejorative, or at best, un-serious and imprecise label. It is for this reason that a number of colleagues in a variety of disciplines have been clearest about what should be left out of the exhibition.

The subject of magic is, undoubtedly, extremely difficult to pin down. Its sheer slipperiness means that it readily defies standard disciplinary divisions. And though lip-service is often given to interdisciplinary approaches, the truth is that most of us still prefer subjects that come clearly contained and defined. For some, the distinction between magic and religion has been absolutely crucial. Others have been more concerned to separate magic from science. Even within the world of the occult, the distinction between white and black magic is often felt to be of paramount significance. Little wonder that the most profound students of the subject – Weber, Durkheim and Evans-Pritchard, for example – have studiously avoided hard and fast definitions.

In distinguished company then, this exhibition also works without a clear definition of what precisely it is about. The policy for selecting material that has evolved during the research has erred towards inclusion rather than exclusion. Visitors will therefore find magic defined both literally and metaphorically and deliberately entangled with science, faith and belief, folk and learned practices. What for me has emerged from this accumulated evidence is an increasingly strong impression that many fascinating ideas and beliefs, practices and products have emerged precisely at the interaction of what are habitually separated as magic and medicine. Medicine is virtually always inextricably bound up with aspects of the spiritual and psychological, and dwelling on the consequent implication that illnesses and treatments cannot be dealt with in isolation often seems to raise the curtain on the magic of medicine. If any sort of maxim has emerged from this strategy of bringing together science and art, ethnography and history, medicine and folklore, it is that medical magic lies most clearly in the eyes of those who behold it.

That said, a couple of generalities might provide a little guidance through the complexity and confusion of this immense subject. First, most magical systems and ideas seem to embrace a holistic vision in which parts of that whole are felt to share an identity with it – so that in witchcraft, for example, burning someone's hair will be regarded as affecting the person from whose head it was taken. Second, though there is no general agreement on the details, most studies have also suggested that, at a level removed from its stated aims, magic also serves one or more social function: defining group identity in times of stress, reinforcing social solidarity, imposing justice or alternatively systematic persecution, and levelling power differentials.

Ken Arnold

Part I

Justified by deeds: the borders of magic and medicine

In 1984, while in the final stages of fieldwork on the island of Madagascar in the western Indian Ocean, I fell ill. The symptoms were clearly bronchial, but, as a naive anthropologist, I was not clear whether this might be a form of pneumonia. Language was no assistance. My mastery of the local tongue – Malagasy – did not extend to more detailed medical conditions; indeed I was not at all sure whether or not there was an indigenous word for the more alarming condition which seemed a possible diagnosis.So-called orthodox medicine was unavailable – this was in a remote village in the high extremities of the rainforests of the island. The road to the nearest 'qualified' doctor was treacherous: it would take several days to traverse. I was referred to the local healer, the *ombiasy*.

The initial consultation was somewhat unexpected. Spluttering and wheezing made the immediate problem easy enough to identify. But further discussions elicited additional, apparently unrelated details, such as the fact that, though married for a number of years, my wife and myself had yet to have children. It seemed implausible that this should have been a matter of choice.

The *ombiasy* wore round his neck a necklace of beads strung with stems of wood and root taken from the many unique plant species which exist in Madagascar's forests. Shavings from these, mixed with local alcohol, were my available medicine. Strips from the green plastic surround of a cartridge case were added to deal with the 'infertility' issue. Since the early-19th century Madagascar has been one of the most successful arenas of missionary activity. An invocation to the ancestors – including references to the beneficial intervention of Jehovah – and the addition of coins to the liquid, completed the preparations of the medical solution. I drank the resulting decoction.

In due course I recovered; and in 1985 I returned to Madagascar hail and healthy – and with our daughter's birth now imminent.

The kinds of question we tend to raise about such experience would be largely implausible to the Malagasy. Would the patient – would I – have got better anyway,

especially since recovery ensued when I left the area and had a different, 'healthier' diet and access to more regulated and reliable systems of heating? Or do the plants perhaps have some pharmacological effect which traditional wisdom has, through long experience and observation, matched to particular sets of symptoms – like Madagascar's rosy periwinkle now seen as effective in the treatment of leukaemia? In other words, is the invocation really necessary to the procedure? Or, more fundamentally, are the ancestors – and, for that matter, Jehovah – not irrelevant?

This may not be the place to argue what are in the end complex questions of indigenous philosophy; for now it is more important to be clear that the invocation is more than just a magical spell of some kind. At one level, Malagasy ideas of the ancestors are about precedent and authority. They state what is, after all, fundamental to scientific method also: that is, the perceived continuity between similar prescriptions that prove to be effective on successive occasions. In that sense, the ancestors are central both to ritual processes and to all the routines of daily life. The idea of the ancestors incorporates all those people who in the past have witnessed the efficacy of traditional procedures and whose presence, through invocation, assures ongoing vitality – including the veracity of medical treatments. Indeed, the link of ancestors with efficacy is such that new procedures which are seen to work are also described in ancestral terms, despite the fact that they are fresh and innovative rather than well-tried, tested approaches. When Air Madagascar introduced a jumbo jet into its fleet of planes its first flight was preceded by a sacrifice and appropriate ancestral invocation. The ancestors, in short, are much more than some piece of arcane baggage weighing down a 'traditional' society before the march of scientific progress.

Thus the so-called witch doctor, butt of many a caricature, often turns out to be far from an unthinking charlatan. His characteristic necklace of bits and pieces is no less an assemblage of potential remedies than the contents of a Gladstone bag, and his invocation less a magical utterance than, in the Malagasy case, an assertion of precedent. However, the rationale that underlies and explains magical practice is often obscured by our own misgivings about what we imagine is going on. The image by which magic is opposed to medicine, science and, come to that, to religion has a long and tenacious pedigree in western thought. The Christmas story already establishes the opposition, though thoroughly misunderstood in modern times. Magi and magic are related terms. The three travellers of the Gospels are less wise men than magicians and the three 'gifts' (as we now interpret them to be) are less symbols of wisdom than of a magical practice which the Judaeo-Christian saw as fundamentally challenged by the faith. In an image redolent of a thousand missionary accounts in Africa and elsewhere, the tools of the magician's art – gold, frankincense and myrrh – are offered up as a precondition of religious conversion. The wisdom of the Magi lies less in what they are, than in what they become when they relinquish magic.

Likewise, Islam also sees magic as an opposed and antithetical mode of explanation. Some years ago we were thinking about an interdepartmental exhibition on magic in the British Museum. Our colleagues who dealt with the Islamic world explained that they were unable to contribute because of the offence that would be given by inclusion of Islamic practice in such an exhibition. Magic, in these conceptions, is accorded an evolutionary status as pre-Christian, pre-Islamic.

This is to convert what is in large part a system of explanation, and a practical means of interceding in human affairs, into a system of belief. It is a commonplace of anthropological literature that witchcraft, and with it the countervailing action of magic, tends to increase at times of communal tension. In a famous study of a Central African society, population increase was convincingly shown to be associated with an increase in the incidence of people being accused of witchcraft. This led to a significant upturn in the incidence of calls on magicians' powers of seeking out and neutralizing evil. And in the end the tensions led to villages splitting up into units, and groups moving off to establish new settlements. In these instances magic has a powerful and practical application as a mode of explaining discordant circumstances. In times of harmony, of course, neither witchcraft accusation nor magic is especially prominent. If 'magic' is faith, then it is, like Japanese Buddhism, a very pragmatic state.

Indeed, even if magic is in some sense a question of 'faith', then it is certainly not a matter of blind faith. In the newspapers in early 1996, the search of a genial and suitably attired South African 'witch doctor' for the supposedly decapitated head of King Hintsa, said to have been removed in a military encounter in the 19th century, was splashed over the broadsheet and the tabloid press alike. Eventually a skull was discovered, not in a museum, but in a field in the Scottish Highlands. While the British press was prepared to go along with this story, and indeed paid all the expenses incurred by the 'witch doctor' in his search, it is notable that in South Africa the 'witch doctor', far from being welcomed home as a returning hero, was disavowed by his own people. To them he appeared to be milking international publicity to gain political advantage at home. On his return, his own tribal council insisted that the head be subjected to DNA testing, to establish the true identity of the skull – and, of course, to expose (as they saw it) the political prank being perpetrated. Who was being gullible? The British newspapers fell silent on the issue.

Perhaps the western idea of magic is most apparent in those activities which involve an outside actor and where no direct contact with 'the patient' is implied. Where there is contact, for instance by the ingestion of some herbal remedy, we are sometimes prepared to admit magic to the field of medicine. We have a vocabulary which grants at least temporary membership to the club of legitimate medical activity – we talk of 'traditional' or 'alternative' medicine. The manipulation of the body to release tension and ease pain is no longer inevitably seen as a branch of the laying on of

hands, but osteopathy. At least, in these cases a physical condition is treated by a physical means. Yet magic also embraces the world of spirits, and the inducement or casting out of malign influence.

As far as the early missionaries were concerned, those objects known universally as nail fetishes were one of the great emblems of their challenge in Africa. These were produced by the Kongo peoples who live around the mouth of what was the River Congo, now the River Zaire, on the Atlantic coast of equatorial Africa. From the late-15th century there were already mission stations in place in this area of northern Angola and coastal Zaire. Indeed, one of the first African 'converts' to Christianity was King Alfonso I, the then ruler of the Kongo kingdom. And, as missionary activity expanded in the area, adherence to belief in the efficacy of nail fetishes was increasingly identified as one of the great obstacles to the advancement of the evangelizing message. There are two reasons why so many such objects ended up in museum collections across the Western world. One is that they were given up as a token of conversion: the harvest of souls paralleled the harvest of 'fetish'. The second is that they seemed to Europeans at the time as the quintessential engine of 'primitive magic', a trophy of a supposed state of ignorance.

The word 'fetish' comes from the Portuguese and has a technical sense, referring to an object made up of a whole assemblage of materials. In this case a carved figure is generally obscured by a mass of nails and blades; it is often hung with bits of cord, cloth, netting or bells and usually has a cavity in the abdomen or at the top of the head which has magical substances packed into it. It looks, as one early and ill-disposed observer put it, "like a scarecrow". The generic term for such objects in Kikongo is *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*), a word which covers a whole range of uses and is, as a result, impossible to translate simply and adequately. It can mean a fetish (as here), a charm of some kind, a power object or a spirit. There are *minkisi* which are used for purposes of divination, others for healing, to detect witches or thieves, to identify adulterers, and yet others to pass judgement and to punish miscreants. Although the most publicized (and published) *minkisi* are figurative, they may also be simply assemblages tied up in a bundle of cloth or stuffed inside a gourd or shell. This emphasizes their most basic common feature, that they are conceived as containers – containers of magical or medicinal substances, and containers of mystical power.

Each type of *nkisi* may also have a further name associated with its function. The larger figures with nails are generally known as *Nkondi*. The word comes from a term meaning 'to hunt', and refers to the powers of the figure, once activated, to seek out and nullify opposing influences. In this capacity *Nkondi* are capable of searching for and opposing witches who, thus confronted, are induced to let go of their victims. Likewise they can be used more aggressively to curse an enemy. Here we seem to be closer to the medieval European conception of magic. There have been suggestions

that the practise of nailing images has some affinity with that of sticking pins in dolls, and even that the image is a paradoxical version of what Kongo saw from the late-15th century onwards: the Catholic image of the crucified Christ. But neither speculation can be historically verified.

What is certain is that from the powerful capacity of *Nkondi* to confront mystical forces comes a series of other functions which take us well beyond our usual expectations of 'magic'. Thus they are used not just for cursing but for swearing oaths, and even for such things as securing alliances between villages or descent groups. The idea of nail fetishes as quasi-legal documents confounds missionary zeal in unequivocally identifying them as icons of 'primitive' belief. Indeed, when used for making personal oaths they have a distinctly moral, even moralistic, overtone. In order to secure his purpose the client offers the operator of the so-called fetish an item of clothing or leaves some of his saliva on the nail or blade. He swears his commitment to whatever behavioural edict he intends to follow and the nail is then driven into the image. His spittle or the fragment of his clothing thus pinned to the figure identifies the person concerned. The force of the oath derives from the perceived power of the object relentlessly to hunt down and ultimately to punish deviation, including the transgression of the oath-taker from his oath. *Nkondi* in this aspect acts as a kind of moral police force.

So, the nail fetishes are an interesting example of how far the reality and range of magical systems is removed from mumbo jumbo. Magic is not easily defined. At one level it merges with medicine, at another with religion. All are intensely experiential and client-based procedures. At this level, medicine and magic significantly overlap in a way that is fundamental. Illness is, after all, not simply a medical condition but an existential one: it is potentially life-threatening, it raises in a direct and personal context the most fundamental of questions. How else can we explain the massive withdrawal from beef-eating throughout Europe on the basis of a dozen or so cases of Creutzfeld–Jakob disease in the UK in early 1996?

Magic has something of a belief system about it: it explains illness, death and misfortune; but it is in the end only a way of acting upon the world. It is both mystical, and yet severely practical. From the client's point of view, the procedures by which magic *and* medicine act to secure health may not be at all clear. Like fax machines, E-mail or word processors, how they do what they do is to most of us 'magical'. The critical thing is that the procedures appear to work. We take doctors and witch doctors on trust. They are both justified by deeds.

John Mack

Part II

Abracadabra! or magic in medicine

'Abracadabra', a mysterious word of unknown origin, has long been thought of in the West to possess a magical power. When written in a triangular configuration and worn around the neck, 'abracadabra' was believed to have the power to relieve agues and tertian fevers. First appearing in a poem by Serenus Sammonicus, a second-century physician and disciple of the Gnostic Basilides, the word continued to be associated with the magical ability to take away lethal diseases. Belief in this power of the word endured; one finds, for example, references to Londoners wearing amulets inscribed with 'abracadabra' during the plague of 1665.

The general alliance between magic and medicine has a long history in the West. Drawing heavily on pagan folk traditions, magical practices in healing the sick were frequently condemned by learned physicians and theologians in the Middle Ages. However, the use of magic in learned medicine gained an important new theoretical respectability during the Renaissance from the recovery of ancient Hermetic and Platonic texts. Soon after the rise of the printed book, the Italian natural philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) translated the recently discovered Corpus Hermeticum, as well as works of Plato and Plotinus. Drawing heavily from the ideas of his translated texts, Ficino was clearly convinced that the universe was organized as a great hierarchy and that all its parts were connected through hidden correspondences. Towards the end of his life Ficino produced an important work of his own on medicine and astrology, *De vita libri tres* (1489). In it Ficino argued for the application of a knowledge of the planetary positions to the physician's treatment of diseases. In Ficino's estimation the wise and religious physician could control disease by directing astral influences into the sick body. Since he believed that celestial forces also affected all non-human things on earth – plants, animals and stones all being common medical ingredients – the wise physician could select those medicaments most imbued with celestial forces sympathetic to the sick human body. Moreover, by using talismans and incantations, the physician or magus could increase his knowledge of the natural world by enhancing his sensitivity and receptivity to planetary influences and thus uncover the occult correspondences existing between the terrestrial and heavenly worlds.

Ficino's association of astrology and medicine was to prove remarkably enduring throughout the 16th and early-17th centuries. The English physician Robert Fludd endorsed the use of medical astrology and was convinced that humans drew astral influxes into their bodies while breathing. The belief in a natural sympathy between parts of the human body and particular plant species was widespread and warmly endorsed by Fludd. Often summarized in the therapeutic principle of 'like curing like', this doctrine deliberately rejected the prevailing Galenic assumption of cures by opposites. Moreover, this new principle found support in the doctrine of signatures, a theory commonly practised in folk medicine and by unlearned healers. In it nature was assumed to have endowed specific plants with distinctive signs to mark their healing powers, an idea that came to be widely advocated by 16th-century botanists and physicians. Thus the physician's task became one of decoding the natural signs and recognizing, for example, that yellow flowers would cure jaundice or that lugwort would cure consumption. Even learned physicians, such as Paracelsus and van Helmont, shared this belief in signatures.

During the Renaissance, many learned physicians revived the ancient conviction that specific parts or organs of the body had special affinities to particular planets. Some physicians expounded on the elaborate sympathies and correspondences between diseased body parts and their astral counterparts. In this way medical botany became closely associated with astrology. The Swiss medical reformer Oswald Croll believed that gathering medicaments at precise times of the zodiac enabled the physician to regulate carefully the sympathetic action of the planets on the human body. Similarly, the physician and writer Nicolas Culpeper in his *Physical directory* of 1650 urged apothecaries and physicians to be attentive to lunar and planetary phases when gathering medicinal plants, administering medicines and performing phlebotomy.

As representatives of the Renaissance tradition of natural magic, Marsilio Ficino, Cornelius Agrippa and Giordano Bruno all maintained that magical power resided in certain natural objects. In their opinion, experts possessing extraordinary powers of cognition, like themselves, could learn to manipulate these objects to restore health. Hence they commonly recommended the use of amulets to cure disease. In their estimation particular gems, stones, roots or precious metals worn about the neck possessed a magical sympathy to certain disease By the 17th century, many physicians continued to endorse the use of amulets in the treatment of disease, but they offered new mechanical explanations for the efficacy of cures attained by such a therapy. Oswald Croll, inspired by Paracelsus, designed an amulet composed of precious gems and metals to be worn around the neck to ward off plague. Van Helmont also elaborated an amulet to be worn as a prophylactic against plague, but his chosen principal ingredient was macerated toad.

While belief in the magical powers of amulets was widespread, commentators were quick to delineate between natural magic, which was inoffensive to God – and indeed

engaged man's God-given talents – and black magic, which invited the presence of the Devil. Amulets bearing inscriptions of scriptural verses, crosses, Hebrew letters or magical numbers were commonly condemned by learned physicians or clerics. But using cures like elk horns to calm epileptic fits, or frog's skin to relieve urinary incontinence were generally deemed morally innocuous and medically beneficial.

Drawing on the practices of folk medicine and the lofty philosophical principles of natural magic, other early-modern physicians believed that a well-trained physician could transfer the essence of a disease afflicting a human patient to a plant or brute animal. Hence, according to Andreas Tentzel, it was possible to transplant dropsy or consumption from an afflicted human to a swine or dog. One had only to soak the chemically treated blood of the patient in bread, and feed the slop to the beast. Tentzel also claimed that he could cure human discord by having enemies exchange and swallow small amounts of their adversary's blood. These too, he would first subject to various chemical treatments. He also recommended such a practice to disaffected or quarrelling spouses. Robert Fludd continued to recommend cures by transplantation. He gave his reader instructions on preparing a 'magnet' from human hair, urine or toenails. He believed these magnets had sufficient powers of attraction to imbibe diseased spirits lurking outside the body. Furthermore, Fludd accepted the medieval Arabic tradition, endorsed by Paracelsus and Tentzel, of preparing medicinal mummy. Mummy was the collected sweat of a cadaver, believed to be concentrated and strengthened by celestial effluvia. The corpse of a criminal hung and left to desiccate in the air was an especially prized source of such mummies. Such medicines were believed to be powerful enough to work at a distance and need not be directly applied to the patient, whose diseases would vanish magically. Another cure-at-a-distance recommended by Fludd, and this despite much criticism, was the 'weapon-salve' – the practice of treating a weapon in order to heal wounds it had earlier inflicted.

While most of these elaborate magical preparations required the knowledge of a skilful physician, other magical therapies owed their efficacy to powers inherent in the operator. Kings, princes, saints and holy men were all widely believed to possess magical abilities to cure disease. Saints' relics – spurious or not – always commanded a place in the medical market and in the belief system of the common man. Paintings of saints commissioned during the illness of a relative were believed to possess magical healing powers. In England and France it was common knowledge that the king could cure scrofula merely by touching the sufferer. Charles II touched thousands of persons afflicted with this painful and disfiguring disease. During religious services attended and orchestrated by members of the Anglican clergy, the king touched the patient, quoted from the New Testament, and gave the afflicted a coin. The touch, the Gospel verses and the coin were all thought to possess magical powers since they had been issued by the king. In England the custom of royalty touching the diseased

survived well into the 18th century. Most who believed in it viewed these royal healing powers as a personal gift of God and as a sign of the monarch's divine right to lead the nation.

Magical cures by touch were not, however, always the exclusive preserve of kings. The Irish virtuoso Valentine Greatrakes also claimed to possess healing powers which enabled him to touch patients and 'stroke out' their illnesses. Greatrakes' many documented cures were the rage of London in 1666, and numerous physicians and natural philosophers published pamphlets to explain the efficacy of his cures. Some, including Greatrakes himself, claimed that it was the healer who possessed occult powers. Henry Stubbe, the zealous critic of the Royal Society, proclaimed that God had granted Greatrakes his gifts, endowing him with a magical 'sanative temperament' which allowed him to perform his cures. In Stubbe's estimation, Greatrakes' body possessed a peculiar odour and chemistry which allowed his mere touch to produce heat in his patient. Others, such as Robert Boyle and Henry More, were more sceptical, postulating instead mechanical or spiritual actions to explain his surprising cures.

Many early-modern natural philosophers and physicians held that music had a magical natural affinity to certain diseases. The Neapolitan natural philosopher Tommaso Campanella recommended the ringing of church bells seven times a day during times of pestilence. Such an action would, he argued, rarefy the surrounding air, dispel the noxious vapours and drive out the diabolic spirits hovering about a village. Furthermore, he believed the noise of cannon and the striking of brass vases would enhance the church-bells' destructive effect on the plague. Likewise, many physicians also accepted the folk practice of curing the madness brought on by a tarantula bite through listening and dancing to music. The German physician Hermann Grube endorsed the musical remedy, even though he had never seen such a patient or such a spider. Since the disease was confined to a remote region of southern Italy, physicians typically based their endorsements on the testimony of native physicians as well as the philosophical principle of a magical affinity between sound and disease.

While learned physicians thus advocated numerous applications of magic to medicine, they were none-the-less worried that their practices might be associated with black magic. Hence they took great pains to distinguish themselves from quacks, wise-women, witches, exorcists or poisoners. One common way of doing this was to flaunt one's university credentials: title pages of medical books frequently trumpeted their author's qualifications. Theologians and church officials were equally anxious to stop the spread of witchcraft and they compiled manuals for inquisitors defining in detail the illicit activities of those who had dedicated themselves to the Devil. Heinrich Krämer and Jakobus Sprenger, two Dominicans, compiled and early manual on witchcraft, the *Malleus maleficarum maleficas et earum heresim … conterens* in 1486. Among the many crimes they attributed to demonic intervention were causing

disease, depriving men of their reason, making men impotent, and inflicting barrenness upon women and cattle. Highly indebted to this legal manual on witchcraft, the court physician Johann Weyer published his own discussion of witches, *De praestigiis daemonum & incantationibus ac veneficiis* in 1563. In it he cited numerous instances of poisoners to whom the Devil had granted knowledge of sympathetically harmful plants and minerals with which to harm an unfaithful spouse, a dispossessed relation, or a neighbour's cattle. Similarly, Cardinal Girolamo Gastaldi ascribed some outbreaks of plague in early-modern Italy to 'plague spreaders' who had, he declared, maliciously smeared magical unguents on the door latches of victims. He urged swift justice for such agents of the Devil. Another disease ascribed to diabolic intervention was lycanthropy, where the afflicted believed themselves transformed into wolves. Numerous 16th-century physicians discussed case histories of this disease brought about by diabolical magic.

While believers in natural magic had frequently been suspected of heresy and of invoking demonic forces, fearful reactions to these associations cannot on their own account for the decline of magical medicine. More significant for the challenge to such beliefs was probably the general scepticism and secularism with which Enlightenment philosophers treated all things magical. Thus in Diderot's enormous *Encyclopédie* of the 1740s, for example, contributors of medical articles were markedly cynical about the efficacy of magical remedies. De Jaucourt stated unequivocally that belief in talismans, amulets, precious stones and bizarre works like 'abracadabra' relied on nothing other than "ignorance, love of life, and fear of death". He also noted that a sick man's realistic assessment of the inefficacy of standard medicaments could prove a strong encouragement to human credulity. And since most magical remedies where painless and at best ineffective, they proved far more palatable than bloodletting, enemas or emetics. Thus even educated men continued to use magical remedies in times when reason and hope failed them, and this despite their suspicion that magical cures were only "pious frauds triumphing over good sense and reason".

Historians have offered numerous reasons to explain the slow decline in the belief of the efficacy of magic in medicine. Some have pointed to Isaac Casaubon's re-dating of the Hermetic corpus in 1618, and to the consequent loss of esteem among learned men for a philosophy based on natural sympathies. Others have cited the damage inflicted to astrological medicine as a consequence of the acceptance of the Copernican universe as an important contributory factor. Yet others have felt that botanists' rejection of the doctrine of signatures in the late-17th century was a crucial turning point. While for others still the rise of a mechanical philosophy, within which all natural phenomena came to be seen as the result of the movement of particles, dealt a fatal blow to animistic conceptions of the universe, the basis of magical thinking. Recently, scholars have also pointed to changing standards of evidence among physicians

– to chemical experimenters beginning to test the efficacy of old remedies and to sceptics refusing to believe in third-hand reports and scorning the testimony of unlettered men.

While any of these explanations may seem plausible, and cumulatively they make it abundantly clear that ideas about magic were altering dramatically, it is important to note that such intellectual changes would have affected extremely few people. A complete rejection of magic by the majority of learned professionals was by no means universally influential in other circles. Even the rational sceptic of the *Encyclopédie* noted that wearing amulets to ward off diseases was still widely practised in 18th-century France. At the level of folk practice, and more recently especially among the growing range of options offered by the world of complementary medicine, it is becoming clear that ideas about faith, belief, spirit and maybe even magic still today seem to have a role in the art of curing.

Martha Baldwin

Part III

Abracadabra: the exhibition

Introduction

There is something mysterious and even awe-inspiring about any act of healing. This commonly held reaction, prompted sometimes by a giddy gratitude at the success of a particular medical intervention, is in itself indication of a widespread sympathy for the idea that medicine might be inherently magical. This exhibition attempts to explore the links between magic and medicine that have been expressed, modified, rejected and reinvented throughout medical history and across countless cultures around the world.

An equally strong thread running through much of the history of medicine has been the organized attempt to uncover and exploit rational, scientific causes for health and its failings. The tension created between a belief in medicine as inherently miraculous and a conviction that it could be improved only through scientific study, has meant that the definitions of what is magical what rational have been hotly debated. A second theme of this exhibition, therefore, is to examine the motivations behind these arguments: that is, the attempts to rid medicine of its embarrassing occult associations and the ability of magical practices either to survive such attacks or be revived.

Key factors in the evolution of the nature and content of magical medicine have been religious beliefs, scientific methods and social customs. Organized religions have frequently condemned private or secret magic while authorizing official magical beliefs and practices; scientists have attempted to reinterpret purportedly magical phenomena in rational terms, but have also continually unearthed new mysteries; and societies with less and less room for indigenous magical beliefs have simultaneously been most drawn to exactly those aspects of 'exotic' cultures that they have found elsewhere in the world. The resulting overlaps between the history of magic and those of religion, science and the societies that support them provides the third strand of interest for this exhibition.

Even within a single society at a given time, the practice of magical medicine is likely to have a variety of forms, serving different types of patients at different social levels. One branch of magical medicine has tended to be strongly allied with folk traditions, while another, going back at least to such Greek magical philosophers as Pythagoras, has been a part of learned book-based medicine – the former characterized by amulets

and charms passed on from one generation to the next; the latter by lengthy, dense, intellectual treatises. And while the humble, everyday, almost technological practice of the one, and the abstract systems and theories of the other have often seemed far apart, much of the history of medical magic has, in fact, been based on the evolving relationship between the two. The high-water mark for learned magic in the West came in the Renaissance, with, a subsequent decline in the following centuries; while magical folk remedies have, within much shorter cycles, been discovered, forgotten and then revived. It is the interaction of these high and low magical cultures across a variety of societies and at different times that provides the fourth strand of interest for this exhibition.

Introductory exhibits

A.1 Islamic amulet on membrane. Date unknown

This amulet is a fine example of Islamic calligraphy. It contains numerous magical diagrams in which individual letters are used to convey cryptic meanings. It has been suggested that it is painted on a placenta. The use of amulets has a long history in both Eastern and Western medical traditions, often being employed as an indirect treatment to protect patients and their environments alongside other direct measures aimed at curing symptoms of ill health. **Oriental collections**

A.2 'Robert Macaire mesmerises an old lady in front of an audience'. Coloured lithograph by Honoré Daumier. Paris, 1829/1841

Macaire was a common satirical figure of the time, who represented the quintessential con man. Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) was an Austrian physician who investigated the influence of magnetism on nervous disorders. His theory of 'animal magnetism' suggested that celestial bodies, the earth, and living bodies all affected each other by invisible forces. A rash of medical applications of mesmerism followed the publication and popularization of his theories. **Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 16475**

A.3 'The dissolution, or the alchymist producing an aetherial representation.' Coloured etching by James Gillray. London, 1796

The Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger (1759–1806), is shown as alchemist fanning the flames of a furnace, thereby 'dissolving' – both chemically and constitutionally – the House of Commons contained in the flask. Alchemy was employed as an artistic theme from the 16th century onwards, sometimes seriously, sometimes as a subject of ridicule. **Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 12184**

A.4 Saint Valentine. Hand-coloured engraving. Anonymous. Poland, 1800?

In this Polish image, Saint Valentine, the 3rd-century bishop of Terni, is depicted as 'patron of serious disease'. The falling position of the man at the saint's feet indicates epilepsy. The gesture of the saint indicates that he is mediating for the Sacred Heart of Jesus to cure the sick man. **Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 18488**

A.5. Saint Peter cures a demoniac by casting his shadow upon him. Etching by Rémy Vuibert, 1639

This incident is described in the New Testament, *Acts 5*: "And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people … they even carried out the sick into the streets … that, as Peter came by, at the least his shadow might overshadow some of them … and they were healed every one". The demons of illness are shown expelled in a puff of smoke from the man's mouth. Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 24790

A.6 'Pilgrims at the Holy Lake on Mount Zouquala'. Watercolour drawing by Frank Dadd (1851–1929). 1891

A certain Dr Koettlits described travelling from Adis Abbaba to visit the Abyssinian holy mountain of Zouquala as follows: "this I found to be a veritable Lourdes, or Pool of Siloam, for it is especially celebrated for its remarkable curative powers. The Abyssinians, being Christians, have dedicated the lake to the Virgin Mary".

Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 23177

A.7 'Particulars of a curious circumstance which took place at the house of a well-known fortune teller'. Broadsheet. London, *c.*1820?

The story relates how a "strange appearance that was witnessed" by six women, who between them paid 3s 6d in order to view of their future sweethearts. "The figure of a tall & unnatural person" that they saw filled them with horror; but the police, who were then called, could find no trace of the apparition except a "curious odour". Fortune tellers were also sometimes used as sources for other information, including elements of folk medicine. EPB BF8

A.8 'Moses presents his brazen serpent to the people'. Reproduction of wood engraving. *c.*1890

This image relates to the Biblical story of Moses revealing a brass serpent to cure people afflicted with snake bites (Numbers 21:6). John's Gospel also refers to the story, in which he likens the lifting up of Moses's serpent to the resurrection of Christ. Similar figures depicting serpents were later also claimed to have magical and medical powers.

Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 18284

A.9 'Australia: the medicine man and his magic markings'. Colour process print. England, mid-20th century

The caption to this picture reads: "His secrets consist principally in the power of projecting certain magic crystals into the patient's body and the art of looking solemn. The design on his head … is the hand of the Oruncha, the mythical creature from whom he derives his powers; the long black line represents the Oruncha himself, and round it in a sacred pattern are figured the magic healing crystals". Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 21429

The magic of medicine: mysterious properties

Much of the magic of medicine, from ancient through to modern times, has been felt to reside in the materials and artefacts used to effect cures. Precious metals, gems, stones, roots and plants have all been worn for their inherent magical powers, while seemingly every culture has produced man-made amulets to protect people and their possessions from evil influences. Magnetism, electricity and other less physically obvious phenomena have also, at one time or another, been added to the list of magically curative substances.

While often condemning the use of talismans originating in folk practice, established religions have themselves not infrequently sanctioned their own magical substances such as relics, saints' shrines, springs, fountains and other sources of holy water. Many of these religiously charged objects and materials, along with their associated customs and rituals, have been held to have curative powers. The fact that religious images have also been credited with similar special qualities has, in turn, led to the suggestion that art, and indeed other acts of creation, are in and of themselves somehow magical, and that the skills of the artist or creator might therefore be akin to the magician's.

It has often been hard to isolate magical objects from the ideas that explain their specialness. A particularly important philosophical tenet underpinning the magical designation of many natural substances has been the theory of 'like curing like' – of red minerals, for example, alleviating complaints associated with the blood because of their similar colour. Another source of theoretical inspiration came from alchemy – a science whose significance was in equal parts theological, astrological and technological, and whose primary goal of finding the philosopher's stone promised both mountains of gold and a medicinally effective substance of immeasurable effectiveness.

Theories of sympathetic action and alchemical methodology, along with many other magical speculations, have filled libraries with learned texts. These books have themselves sometimes gained a magical aura of their own. One such genre was simply referred to as the 'Black book', copies of which many sorcerers, alchemists, physicians and learned men secreted on their premises. Not only were these books thought to be magically charged, but so too were the symbols, incantations and even specific words they contained. One

such was 'Abracadabra', which either when written in triangular form and worn around the neck or when correctly spoken was thought to possess a magical ability to cure illnesses.

1.1 **Selection of amulets and charms.**
(a) Coral, acorn and glass necklaces, broom and heart pincushions, cow's heart stuck with nails, donkey's shoe, heart-shaped charms Surrey, Sussex and London, late-19th/early-20th century
(b) Glass perfume bottle and amulet in the form of a hand making the sign of the manofica. Italy (?), 19th century

These charms and amulets were variously worn to protect people against sore throats, warts, cramps, diarrhoea and nightmares. The cow's heart was made by a dairyman of Bethnal Green in order to catch the man who cursed his cows. Most of the charms were gathered by Edward Lovett (1852–1933), a City banker, who collected material associated with British folk customs. Though himself not a believer in magic, he was particularly interested in superstitions. The Christian religion has often opposed such objects, but it too has sanctioned and produced its own versions to tempt people away from those of which it disapproves. Loaned by (a) the Cuming Museum and (b) the Science Museum – A641969

1.2 **Oswald Croll, *Basilica chymica* … (Geneva, 1635)**

The figure on the pages displayed shows a steel amulet containing 'plague cakes' composed most notably of pulverized toads and stamped with zodiacal signs. Elsewhere in the work he also illustrated much more elaborate anti-plague amulets explicitly for use by the rich. Though differing in form and composition, amulets were crucial elements used in both folk medicine and more learned medical practice. EPB 1675

1.3 **The fountain of life. Gilded and painted triptych. Anon., Greece, date unknown**

Works of this kind commonly show damage to the paint where people have picked off fragments to eat for their curative properties. The theme of the fountain of life draws on three strands of belief: the existence of a real fountain of youth, the Christian idea of the Virgin as the Fountain of Life, and the Roman tale of a spring at Balukli responsible for many miraculous cures, some of which are illustrated in this icon. Iconographic collections – icv 17843

1.4 ***Ex voto* offering to the 'Madonna del Parto'.**
Oil painting on canvas. Rome, late-19th century

Votive offerings are vowed to a saint or deity while a patient is ill, and are then created and given as an offering upon recovery. In this example, the Virgin and Child seen in the top right of the picture are in the form of the Madonna del Parto, the statue made by Jacopo Sansovino for the church of Sant'Agostino, Rome, *c.*1518, which is still revered as a cult object today. This particular image shows an incident in which a man walking along the Via del Nazareno in Rome was struck on the head with a flower pot. Iconographic collections – icv 17767

1.5 **(a) A child 'returning to the hospital after being bathed'. Photograph. 18 September 1937**
(b) Bottle of medicinal ('holy') water: 'Aqua antipestilenziale di S. Marin della Scala'. Italy, 1920s

The boy and woman had made a pilgrimage to Lourdes in the hopes of curing the boy. The miraculous water of Lourdes is either drunk on the spot or bottled. "Go drink at the spring and wash yourself there" was one of the messages given to the peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous by the Virgin at her appearance in 1858. This was the event which turned the southwestern French town into a site of international pilgrimage. Holy water from many sources is believed to be medically effective. The example shown was bought in a Roman pharmacy.

(a) Iconographic collections – icv 49506L; (b) loaned by the Science Museum – A67460

I.6 **Francis Barrett, *The magus, or celestial intelligencer; being a complete system of occult philosophy* ... (London, 1801)**

The coloured engraving seen on the pages of Barrett's work displayed is of "a specimen of the book of spirits, which must be made with virgin parchment". Barrett shows this book of sorcery open at pages containing the conjuration for the chief of spirits. More learned magical traditions often gave a prominent place to the idea that the books in which occult knowledge was laid out were themselves imbued with mysterious properties. EPB 12317/C

1.7 **Goa Stone in gold case. 19th century?**

Goa stones were artificially manufactured versions of stones formed inside the stomachs of animals (bezoar stones). Originally, Goa stones were made in India from a paste of clay, crushed shell, amber, musk and resin. Bezoar stones were introduced into Western medicine by the Arabs, and remained in the London pharmacopoeia, for example, until the mid-18th century. Used for all sorts of complaints, including the plague, they were especially recommended for poisons. The value of this particular stone can be judged from its elaborately tooled gold case, though by 1915 it was only fetching about £30. Loaned by the Science Museum – A642470

1.8 **Collection of iatrochemical and chemical receipts. Germany, 17th/18th century**

The work is open at the start of an epitome of Paracelsian medical principles. The pen illustration is of an alchemist at work in his laboratory equipped with drug jars, a furnace and other apparatus. Paracelsus (1493–1541) initially acquired his fame as a medical practitioner. His highly influential advocacy of an empirical and experimental approach to pharmacy and therapeutics was inspired by a deeply mystical philosophy, which gave considerable space to elaborate analogies between chemical changes and human lives. WMS 4095

1.9 **(a) Collection of 10 watercolour drawings of alchemical apparatus. 1782**
(b) Copper alembic head. Europe, 18th century?

The basic form of much alchemical apparatus remained relatively unchanged for centuries. However, the importance of minor modifications is indicated by the enormous number of texts devoted to the subject. The considerable symbolic significance attached to the alchemical process heightened this concern – furnaces and vases were commonly referred to as 'cosmic'. The work shown here is unusual in using laminated parts to reveal the insides of the equipment. The same technique of presentation was used in popular anatomical sheets (fugitive sheets) to show the insides of human bodies.

(a) WMS 879; (b) loaned by the Science Museum – A631321

1.10 **Copy of the roll of alchemical symbols 'Rotulum hieroglyphicum G Riplaei Equitis Aurati', known as 'Ripley's scroll'. German, late-16th century**

The scroll is named after the 15th-century English alchemist George Ripley. The first section displayed shows an alchemist holding an alembic within which are eight scenes depicting the stages of the process of producing the philosopher's stone – a substance thought to have unlimited medical powers. The male figure in yellow and the female figure in white represent gold and silver, respectively. The science of alchemy was shrouded in secrecy, and often expressed only in the most arcane of symbolic languages. It made much use of the theory of a limited number of elements and the idea that metals and other inanimate matter consist of body, soul and spirit. WMS 693

1.11 **(a) Pseudo-Apuleius, Herbarium. Mid-13th century**
(b) A piece of 'mandrake'

The herbarium is open at pages illustrating the unearthing of the mandrake, a plant considered to have medical powers of virtually panacean proportions. The plant was said to take both male and female human forms, and that small demons lived inside them. It was also believed that the plant let off a deafening scream when uprooted. As the illustration indicates, it was therefore often extracted using dogs tied to the plant. The sample of 'mandrake root' (actually black briony) displayed was collected by the folklorist Edward Lovett of Croydon in the early-20th century.

(a) WMS 573; (b) loaned by the Cuming Museum

1.12 **John Dee's obsidian mirror and case. England, 16th century**

The 16th-century English magus, John Dee, owned various 'shew-stones' through which he conjured up visions. These polished translucent or reflective objects were traditional divinatory instruments which gained much popularity in the 16th century. This obsidian mirror was probably brought by the Spanish from Mexico. Dee believed that good angels were 'answerable' to it, but only rarely employed it for such practical ends as alleviating illnesses. Instead he preferred to use it as a research tool. The label on the case was written by its 18th-century owner, Horace Walpole.

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The fountain of life. Gilded and painted triptych. (EXHIBIT 1.3)

Below: Painted *ex voto* offering to the 'Madonna del Parto'. (EXHIBIT 1.4)
Opposite above: Goa Stone in gold case. (EXHIBIT 1.7)
Opposite below: Carved wooden figure of a witch. (EXHIBIT 2.8)

Engraving of Saint Valentine. (EXHIBIT A.4)

Pierre Boaistuau [*c.* 1520–66]. 'Histoires prodigieuses'. (EXHIBIT 2.2)

'Compendium rarissimum totius Artis Magicae sistematisatae per celeberrimos Artis hujus Magistros'.
(EXHIBIT 2.13)

Honoré Daumier's lithograph: 'Robert Macaire mesmerises an old lady in front of an audience'.
(EXHIBIT A.2)

Top: Sri Lankan wooden disease mask. (EXHIBIT 4.7) **Above left: Willem König's print: 'Arch-follower of the fruitless art of alchemy and possessor of the quintessence of fools'.** (EXHIBIT 3.3) **Above right: Francisco de Goya's print: 'Hilan delgado'(They spin linen).** (EXHIBIT 3.1)

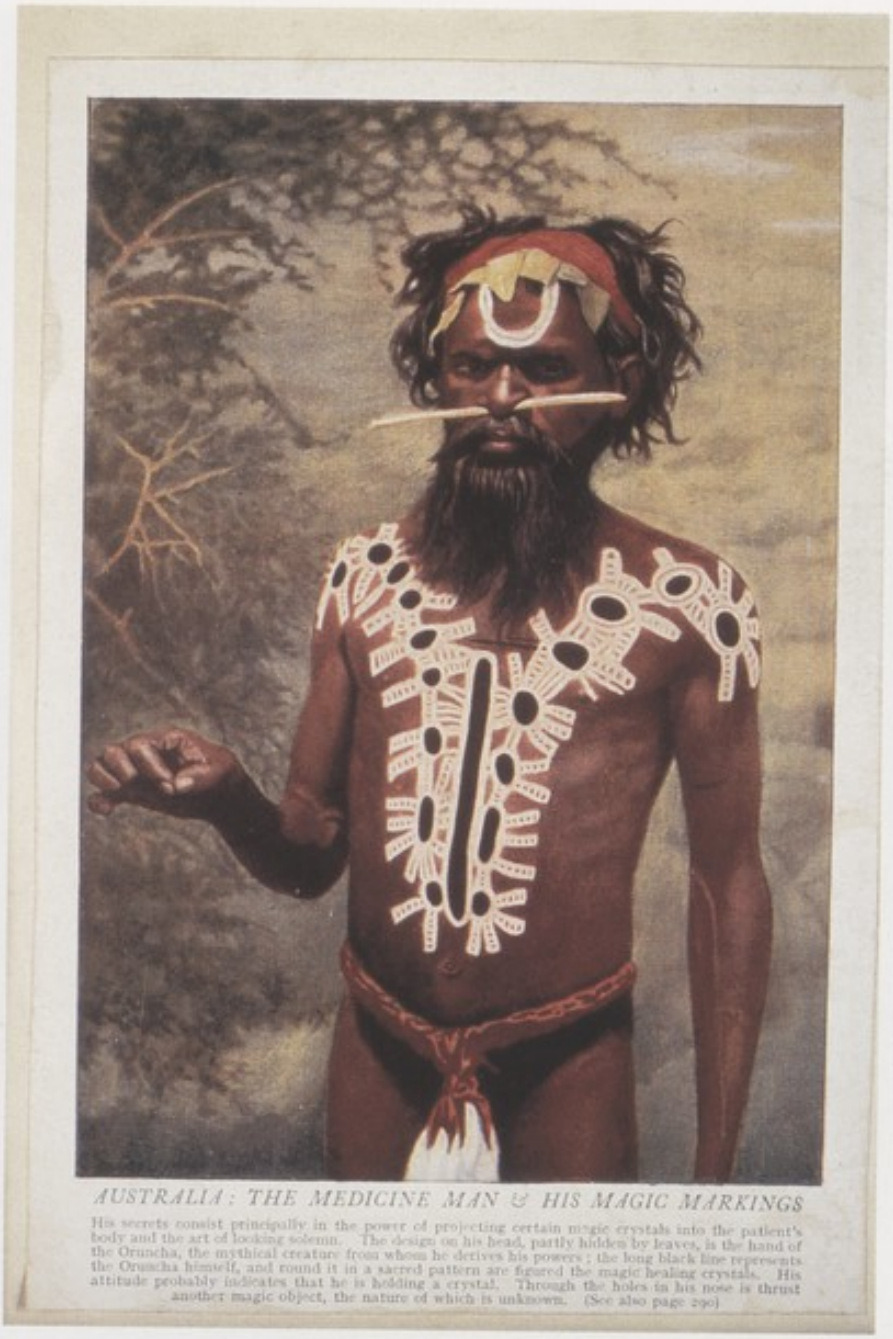
Composite Armenian manuscript. (EXHIBIT 4.6)

Below: Persian astronomical and astrological manuscript. (EXHIBIT 4.2)
Opposite: Ethiopian magical scroll. (EXHIBIT 4.1A)

Palestinian amuletic necklace. (EXHIBIT 5.11D)

Kongolese power figure (*nkisi*). (EXHIBIT 5.4A)

Below: 'Nigog's magic pillules'. Pen and wash drawing. (EXHIBIT 6.5)
Opposite: A child 'returning to the hospital after being bathed' at Lourdes. (EXHIBIT 1.5A)



AUSTRALIA: THE MEDICINE MAN & HIS MAGIC MARKINGS

His secrets consist principally in the power of projecting certain magic crystals into the patient's body and the art of looking solemn. The design on his head, partly hidden by leaves, is the hand of the Oruncha, the mythical creature from whom he derives his powers; the long black line represents the Oruncha himself, and round it in a sacred pattern are figured the magic healing crystals. His attitude probably indicates that he is holding a crystal. Through the holes in his nose is thrust another magic object, the nature of which is unknown. (See also page 290)

'Australia: the medicine man and his magic markings'. (EXHIBIT A.9)

The magic of medicine: miraculous powers

While the physical substances employed in medical magic have commonly been identified as *the* essential factor, curative powers have equally often been attributed directly to those who use them. When special objects and materials are employed, the gifted healer is credited with the power to control them. At other times, medical magicians do their work at a distance, out of sight of the patient upon whom their actions have an effect. Shamans and magi are also frequently thought able to cure through touch, particularly by laying on of hands.

The skill of healing by touch has often been attributed to a person's ability to channel divine powers. The prophets of many faiths have thus performed extraordinary cures and even resurrections – mostly through acts of exorcism. A pattern has also been set for established churches subsequently using tales of these miraculous events in their missions to convert unbelievers; while those who subsequently have joined the faith have often brought with them their own forms of religio-magical practices. Rulers of peoples, nations and states have also claimed the ability to cure through divine power – various European royal families in the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, touched sufferers from the 'king's evil' (scrofula). By a similar extension, numerous priest-physicians have also claimed to cure with God's blessing.

Along with God-given skills, other types of magical medicine have instead taken the form of systematic knowledge that could be taught and learned. For the 16th-century English magus John Dee, for example, magic was a highly refined area of knowledge – a sort of theologically inspired technology – through which nature could be understood and mastered even in its most hidden depths.

At the centre of many systematic forms of magic has lain astrology. In Western intellectual traditions the alliance of macro- and microcosm implied that patients, their ailments and potential cures were all affected by the same source of influence (i.e. the 'heavenly bodies'). Consequently, an understanding of the cosmos was essential to medical practice. Astrology also stood as the queen of the divinatory arts, the medical aspects of which provided a means of predicting, and thus avoiding, threats to health.

The same was true of astrology's many daughter sciences: the study of faces, hands, cards, plants, entrails, tea-leaves, and so forth.

Every cure affected by a gifted healer was matched by the possible threat of a curse; for each patient implicitly had previously been a victim. That certain people were able to perform magico-medical practices meant that the realms of sorcery and witchcraft had also to be taken seriously. The history of this darker side of magical medicine has regularly been accompanied by the same sociological pattern: witches tend to be thought of as elderly females on the fringes of ordinary society who fly through the air at night, gathering for sexually charged festivals of blood sucking, organ devouring and infant consumption. For many who were relatively powerless to affect others by any alternative means, cursing someone with bad luck or ill health was the only option left.

2.1 *A collection of thirty-eight old wood cuts … illustrative of the New Testament* **(London, 1818)**

The illustration displayed shows two miracles as related in the sixth chapter of Mark's Gospel: Christ walking on the sea, and Christ healing the sick on the shore of Gennesaret: "as many as touched him were made whole". In some Gospel accounts of Jesus's medical miracles he is described as using specific substances, such as spittle, or particular actions and words to cure. Theological opinion has differed widely on the significance of these miracles: some have insisted that they be taken literally, while others have instead stressed their symbolic and allegorical importance. **EPB suppl/C/Bib**

2.2 **Pierre Boaistuau (*c.*1520–66). 'Histoires prodigieuses'. France, 1560**

This work is a compendium of prodigies and freaks of nature: multiple or monstrous births, wild storms, Siamese twins and the like. The volume is the author's own copy dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I. The picture shown accompanies a tale of two princesses who could not be harmed by fire. One was Emma (d. 1052), mother of Edward the Confessor, who is said to have cleared her name from slander by an ordeal by fire. From the 17th century on, the question of whether to reject, rationally to redescribe or simply to leave such phenomena up to theology became a crucial philosophical issue. **WMS 136**

2.3 **Drawing of 'Astrological man' in Heymandus de Veteri Busco, 'Ars computistica'. Holland?, 1488**

The human figure is shown surrounded by the signs of the zodiac relating to the body parts that they particularly effect. The correspondence between the two is graphically depicted with thick cords. The occult correspondences between terrestrial and heavenly worlds provided the foundation for much magical thinking. Diagrams reflecting this idea like that shown were common in medical works up until the end of the 17th century **WMS 349**

2.4 Thomas Dowland. Oil painting by J Bowring. London, 1788

Dowland was a medical botanist and astrologer who, as can be detected from a letter visible in the painting, practised in Shadwell, London. In this portrait he is seen drawing up a patient's horoscope, which he would then interpret astrologically. The cabinet in the background contains herbs that Dowland would dispense according to their astrological suitability. Works by occult writers such as Cornelius Agrippa and William Lilly can be seen on his bookshelf. Iconographic collections – icv 18193

2.5 Robert Fludd. Anonymous engraving. 17th century

Fludd worked as a physician with a flourishing practice in London. He was also an occult philosopher, whose more than 20 books and tracts expounded magical ideas based on continental Hermetic and Rosicrucian works. His philosophy and his professional practice reinforced each other through an anatomical scheme that was as much mystical as physical. His intellectual aims were nothing short of a complete reformation of knowledge. Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 2988

2.6 *The divine pymander of Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus* ... (London, 1650)

The work's preface declares that it "may justly challenge the first place for antiquity, from all the Books in the World". The book itself has elaborately tooled covers, decorated with crowns, floral and faunal motifs and masonic symbols. The writings of Hermes (the Greek name for the Egyptian god Thoth) had enormous influence on European magic and mysticism. However, a severe blow to the credibility of the Hermetic corpus was dealt by Isaac Casaubon, who in 1618 showed that the works were medieval rather than ancient in origin. EPB Spec Coll (bindings)

2.7 (a) John Dee (1527–1608). Line engraving by F Cleyn, 1659
(b) John Dee's wax and gold discs. England, 16th century

Dee was a English Renaissance figure, with particular skills in mathematics and chemistry. For part of his life he was assisted in occult investigations by one Edward Kelley. Though in Dee's opinion Kelly practised a more 'vulgar' magic than his own, they did together conduct extended consultations with angels. It was probably under Kelley's influence that Dee had these discs inscribed for use in the angelic conferences. The gold disc has representations of four castles that appeared in a vision. Wax discs were used beneath his 'shew stone' (mirror) and as supports for a magic table, which no longer survives. (a) Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 2423; (b) Trustees of the British Museum

2.8 Carved wooden figure of a witch. France, early-20th century

The carving fits a number of traditional tropes relating to witchcraft: a hooded old woman with a cat perched on her shoulder grinds some concoction in a mortar. The Church taught that witches were servants of Satan, hell-bent on upsetting the established social order and civilization. It was these ideas in particular that led to their ferocious persecution in 16th- and 17th-century Europe. Loaned by the Science Museum – A135868

2.9 **(a) Elizabeth Sawyer. Etching, 1794, after a line engraving. England, 17th century**

(b) Witchcraft charms: ram's horn and keys, fairy or adder beads and sailor's pin cushion. England, early-20th century

The legend on the engraving reveals that Sawyer was "Executed in 1621 for Witchcraft". The charms displayed were used to protect people and their belongings from being bewitched. The pincushion represents an updated form of an ancient practice, which originally used a real heart (a cow's or sheep's) pierced with pins to ward off storms. The simplest form of sorcery simply links the performance of one physical action to the occurrence of another – the two often relating to each other symbolically.

(a) Iconographic collections – icv 26316; (b) loaned by the Cuming Museum

2.10 **(a) John Lucas Riemant, 'Collectanea chiromantica'. Germany?, 1676**

(b) Plaster casts of male hands. England, 1920s

The writer of the manuscript on palmistry also wrote another astrological and divinatory work in the Wellcome Collections, but nothing more is known of him. The casts are thought to have been used as an aid in palmistry. The art of reading hands rests firmly on the astrological principle that even the parts, proportions and markings of the hand are influenced by the stars and planets. Most cheiromancers are primarily interested in six principal lines, among which the 'line of the liver' relates to the subject's health.

(a) WMS 4212; (b) loaned by the Science Museum – A64329

2.11 **Caspar Magninus, 'De linearum, nevorumque prognostico faciei humanae contingentium codex …' Italy, mid-17th century**

The idea that examining someone's face might reveal the innermost secrets of their character has had a long history. A variety of governing principles and methods of study have been used by different physiognomists at different times. The notion that wrinkles on the forehead might reflect astrological influences has encouraged some to use them for divinatory purposes.

WMS 465

2.12 **(a) John Browne, *Adenochoiradelogia: or, an anatomick-chirurgical treatise of … Kings Evil-swellings, Together with the royal gift of healing* (London, 1684)**

(b) Copper tally and silver touch-piece. England, late-17th and early-18th century

The frontispiece in Browne's work shows a ceremony taking place in which the king is stroking the faces of the sick. This curative action was meant to draw on remarkable curative powers invested in members of the royalty. The king or queen would also give the afflicted a coin (touch-piece) some examples of which are shown. The copper tally was used for admittance to one of Charles II's ceremonies; the silver coin was given at one given by James III 'The Old Pretender' – issued in exile after his father, James II's death. The royal tradition of touching for the King's Evil, scrofula, assumed particular importance for the Stuarts because of its association with the divine right of Kings.

(a) EPB – Spec. Coll. (Bindings); (b) loaned by the Science Museum – A641054 and A641064

2.13 **'Compendium rarissimum totius Artis Magicae sistematisatae per celeberrimos Artis hujus Magistros'. German?, *c.*1775**

This general work on magical arts contains thirty-one extraordinary watercolour drawings of various demons as well as cabalistic and magical symbols. The illustration shown is of 'The Prince of Darkness: Dagol'. The extent to which magic has been influenced by demonic ideas has been hotly debated for centuries, for it provides the distinction between white and black magic. Established Churches have often declared any activities not explicitly sanctioned to be the Devil's work, and accusations of Devil-worship have sometimes been used to persecute particular individuals or social groups. WMS 1766

2.14 **A Mesmeric Consultation the Hôtel Bullion, Paris. Oil on canvas by an unknown artist. 1778/1784**

In 1778, Franz Anton Mesmer set up a consulting room in Paris, where he installed his 'magnetic tub' containing a 'mesmeric fluid'. By using 'animal magnetism' he claimed to be able to cure a multitude of ailments. The magnetic fluid in the tub could be applied by patients to the affected parts through cords or iron rods attached to the tub. The Magnetizers (initiates in Mesmer's healing art) could also cause beneficial effects with their hands, and even just their looks. In this picture Mesmer himself appears top right, holding a wand. Iconographic collections – icv 17651

Section 3

The magic of medicine: attacks and decline

Set against a shifting backdrop of how to divide the natural from the supernatural worlds, the history of the interaction of medicine and magic in the West is one of continual struggle. Just as strong as the urge to find and practice magical medicine has been an equal and opposite one to disentangle the two – to save the latter from being tarnished by the former. To this end numerous campaigns have been mounted: religious and moral crusades against witchcraft, scientific attempts to debunk some and redescribe other magical phenomena, and sceptical efforts to trivialize and bury the whole occult edifice.

Early Christian attempts to suppress paganism often had the effect of turning magicians into agents of Satan, while later religiously motivated attacks on witches and their practices, spearheaded by Heinrich Krämer and Jakobus Sprenger's manual on Witchcraft, *Malleus maleficarum* ... (1486), did nothing to reduce belief in the reality or effectiveness of witchcraft. Particularly virulent waves of witch-hunting were commonly associated with religious tensions. However, scepticism about a witch's power to affect either good or ill was publicly voiced as early as the 16th century: Johann Weyer suggested in 1563 that most witches were harmless old women suffering from mental disorders. But such ideas did not gain wide currency until the early-18th century. By then, belief in witchcraft was not only falling out of fashion among intellectuals but also fading in popular belief. The last execution of a witch in England was in 1684, the last trial, that of Jane Wenham, was in 1731, and in 1736 the Witchcraft Act removed the offence of being a witch, replacing it with that of pretending to be one. In France the last execution was in 1745; in Germany, 1775.

Philosophical scepticism about magic was, in learned circles at least, fuelled by scientific theories that refused to believe the reality of anything that did not have a material and mechanical explanation. Intellectual recourse to supernatural causes became less and less common, with ordinary technology rather than magic providing a means of controlling nature. Standards of evidence also changed: direct sensual experience and experiment replaced a reliance on written descriptions. Many magical claims were also challenged, debunked or trivialized. Isaac Casaubon, for example, showed that the

Hermetic corpus was nothing like as old as had been claimed. Magic of all kinds could increasingly be swotted up from cheap 'how to' manuals – much of it turning out to involve sleights of hand. Little wonder that magical practices increasingly became the butts of satirical jokes.

Medicine also gradually came to be aligned with this new world view. Even physicians who continued to use cures that were attacked by others for being occult were, nevertheless, often at pains to offer new mechanical explanations for their efficacy – thus distancing their practice from those of wise-women, witches, exorcists, quacks and the like.

Within this new intellectual framework, supported by societies and cultures that no longer had room for old beliefs, the power of magic and witchcraft was reduced to that of folk practices and superstitions. Many of these changes took particular effect in 18th-century Europe. But the story is not simply one of gradual decline; for this period also saw a growth of various sects of spiritualists, an increasingly mystical interest in ancient civilizations like the Egyptians, and a public clamour for all sorts of mysterious phenomena, most notably that which took its name from the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815). All this suggests that the picture of magical powers being gradually eroded is only half accurate: for it was clearly accompanied by survivals and revivals. Not infrequently decline and revival could be detected in the sensibilities of one and the same person: even those who publicly decried magical cures as 'pious frauds' were willing to try anything in times of private despair. This 'illogically' mixed economy of, on the one hand, commitments to free will, material causation and scientific explanation and, on the other, an indulgence of mysterious, magical phenomena – just in case they did work – has been with us ever since.

3.1 'Hilan delgado'(They spin linen), 'Aguarda que te unten' (Wait till you have been anointed) and 'Devota profesion' (Devout profession). Aquatints with etching by Francisco de Goya. Spain, 1796–1812

These three prints come from Francisco de Goya's series 'Los caprichos' (The caprices). Many of them depict scenes of witchcraft, employing such common stereotypes associated with witchcraft as cannibalism, Sabbaths and human skulls. Goya was himself sceptical about magic, but his exact intentions in these darkly satirical images are not clear. Nonetheless, they do manage to convey the misery, ignorance and terror associated with witchcraft while retaining a sense of mystery. **Iconographic collections – icv 26279, 26294 and 26292**

3.2 'Thierischer Magnetismus'.
Etching attributed to Johann Michael Voltz. Germany, 1815

The picture shows a goat-headed doctor caressing a sleeping ewe-headed woman. The image satirizes the notion of animal magnetism – Franz Anton Mesmer's idea of being able to harness invisible forces for medically beneficial ends. Curiously, the 18th century was a period characterized both by a flood of scepticism about magical

phenomena and huge numbers of reports of marvellous happenings and healings, of which mesmeric examples were probably the most famous. Iconographic collections – icv 12200

3.3 **'Arch-follower of the fruitless art of alchemy and possessor of the quintessence of fools'. Line engraving by Willem König after Voost Van Sasse. Holland, *c.*1720**

This satirical Dutch caricature shows a dwarfish and unintelligent quack occupied in alchemical work, the meaning of which he clearly does not understand. The real butt of the joke is the vanity of the alchemist's obsession. Though the practice of alchemy declined dramatically during the 17th and 18th centuries, some practising alchemists could still be found late into the 19th century. Iconographic collections – catalogue no. 17843

3.4 **Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Krämer, Malleus maleficarum maleficas et earum hersim ut phramea potentissima conterens (Paris, *c.*1507)**

First published in 1486, and into its 14th edition by 1520, this work ('A hammer against the witches') constitutes *the* book most responsible for whipping up the European witch craze. It convinced many people both of the existence of witches and of the need to destroy them. EPB 6050

3.5 **Copy of frontispiece to Matthew Hopkins, *Discoverie of witches* (London, 1647). Etching (1792), after a woodcut**

The picture shows Hopkins – proclaimed as the 'Witchfinder-General of England' – looking at two witches surrounded by their familiars. He was an unsuccessful lawyer whose fervent hatred of witches coincided with the anxieties and fears of Civil-War-torn England in the 1640s. Through thorough and merciless extractions of confessions, he had more people hanged for witchcraft in two years than had been in the entire previous century. Iconographic collections – icv 26320

3.6 **Reginald Scot, *Discoverie of witchcraft* ... (London, 1584)**

Scot's book aims, in part, to unmask the trickery of so-called witchcraft: "the lewde dealing of witches and witchmongers is notablie detected, the knauerie of coniurors, the impietie of inchantors, the follie of soothsaiers ... [through to] the horrible art of poisoning". The illustration displayed shows a juggler's trick called "the decollation of John Baptist", in which a man's head is seen to be cut off and laid in a platter – a trick done by "one Kingsfield of London, at Bartholomewtide, An 1582". Scot's argument against the existence of witchcraft was that by then neither God nor the Devil any longer produced miraculous events. EPB 5879

3.7 **Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus triumphatus: or, full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions* (London, 1726)**

Glanvill's book, first published in 1681, is in two parts: the first contains philosophical considerations arguing for the possibility of witches, and the second proves "the real existence of apparitions, spirits and witches." It represents the last major work that defended the belief in witchcraft, attacking the effect of witches on civilized society. EPB 24716/B/1

3.8 **Sample of *Mumia* (hand and flesh of mummy) in glass jar. From *materia medica* collection originally owned by The Royal College of Physicans of London. 18th century?**

Along with unicorn's horns and human skulls, mummies were some of the most prized medicaments to be found in 16th- and 17th-century apothecaries' shops. *Mumia* was recommended for any number of complaints, especially blood clots and hard labours. Samples also commonly found their way into cabinets of curiosities. Scepticism about its effectiveness was voiced from the 17th century on. Royal Society member, Nehemiah Grew, for example, warned against trusting in "old Gums, which have long since lost their virtue".

Loaned by the Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain – RCP/MM 72/73

3.9 **(a) James Primrose, *Popular errours. Or the errours of the people in physick* ... (London, 1651)**
(b) Antimony cup in leather case. Europe, 17th century

The last section of Primrose's work contains his "verdict concerning the antimonial cuppe". As Primrose explains, antimony cups were made by alchemists and sold at high prices along with lavish promises about the numerous diseases that they could cure. He goes on to give specific arguments against their use for a variety of ailments. Primrose was not, however, sceptical about the power of talismans or magical products in general. His purpose was simply to attack the quackery involved in selling this particular product. (a) EPB 42207/A; (b) Loaned by the Science Museum – A134134

3.10 **Pierre Le Brun, *Histoire critique des pratiques superstitieuses* (Paris, 1702)**

The title of this work goes on to exclaim that these superstitions have "seduced the people and embarrassed scholars". The work also describes how to discern what are in fact natural effects. Its tone is typical of much 18th century work on magical subjects. Contributors to the *Encyclopédie* published from 1751 to 1780, for example, were uniformly cynical about the efficacy of any magical remedies. They were, however, forced to admit that amulets and the like were still widely used. EPB 32603/A

3.11 **J Cecil Maby and T Bedford Franklin, *The physics of the divining rod* (London, 1939)**

This work is an example of a genre sought to 'rescue' practices not well understood in scientific terms from their associations with the occult. One of the dominant scientific strategies employed against magic from the 17th century on was to isolate what had to be admitted as 'real' amongst the range of phenomena claimed as magical, and then redescribe it in terms of 'legitimate' science. Other less credible phenomena were instead dismissed as figments of over-gullible imaginations.

Loaned from the Harry Price Library, University of London Library

3.12 (a) H P L Gibson, *Magician's manual* (N Y, 1933).
(b) Walter Dorsey Evans, *Magic and its professors* (London, 1902).
(c) *Magic at home.* Translated by Professor Hoffman (London, 1890)
Along with the scientific debunking of magic, much of its power ebbed away as it was reduced to a form of entertainment, often one that could be learned by anyone purchasing how-to books like these displayed. Published at least since the 17th century, the increasing availability of such works trivialized powers that had previously been mysterious and marvellous, turning them instead into no more than diverting pastimes

Loaned from the Harry Price Library, University of London Library

3.13 **Cracked mirror and plaster model of a coffin. London, 1890–1910**
The coffin is inscribed "to the memory of many senseless superstitions killed by the London Thirteen Club. 1894". The club, based in Southwark, London, was active in combating magic. A founding member was a local councillor, R W Bowers. For some, ridding the world of magic turned into something of a moral crusade.

Loaned by the Cuming Museum

3.14 *Secret remedies: what they cost and what they contain* (London, 1909)
This book was published by the British Medical Association in order to unveil the secret remedies sold by "quacks taking advantage of human foibles". Believing that their secrecy was a major key to their popularity, it's method was simply to juxtapose "analytical facts and advertising fancies" – that is, the chemical composition of the medicaments (often "cheap new or old fashioned drugs") and the bold and ornate claims made for them.

Modern medicine collection – XQV

Section 4

The magic of medicine: eastern traditions

This section of the exhibition is based on the extraordinary range of materials from different cultures kept in the Oriental Collections of the Institute Library. Almost all of the great learned and codified medical traditions from the Middle to the Far East and the Pacific have incorporated magico-medical beliefs. As in the history of western medicine, repeated interaction between different cultures, and especially between learned theories and folk practices, have meant that the details, meanings and importance of the magical content has continuously evolved.

The extremely eclectic range of material shown here includes items from Persian, Armenian, Yiddish, Turkish, Indian, Tibetan, Chinese and Sinhalese medical traditions, and covers such practices as exorcism, astrology, palm reading and other divinatory arts, and the use of all manner of charms and amulets. These latter magico-medical tools, worn to protect people against witchcraft, the evil eye, sickness, accidents and any other conceivable danger, seem to have been a part of almost every medical tradition – western and eastern, ancient and modern. Examples represented here come from Ethiopia, Indonesia, India and Germany.

The relatively recent eruption in the West of interest in alternative therapies has thrown many of these eastern traditions into sharp relief – identified, scrutinized and reworked as they have been, to answer a variety of contemporary Western questions. Often, this has led to a radical reinterpretation, or as others would insist a gross corruption, of the traditional beliefs. As a consequence, the magic and mystery so sorely missed in modern scientific medicine is often particularly highlighted in these 'exotic' cultures. This is a recent example of a phenomenon that has occurred for thousands of years, in which magic has appeared most noticeably at the meeting of different cultures: for example, the Roman fascination with ancient Egyptian culture, the Islamic influence on medieval Western and Indian ideas, and the Jewish influence on 16th- and 17th-century Europe.

4.1 **(a) Ethiopian magical scroll. 19th century**
(b) Silver charm case. Ethiopia, 1880–1920
(c) 'Medicine' flasks in cloth bag. Ethiopia, 1880–1920

The Ethiopian manuscript contains prayers for undoing charms, and for protection against the evil eye, malicious devils, colic, chest pain and rheumatism. It is made from two strips of vellum, written in black and red ink. The charm case contains a piece of paper with a written talisman. The bag containing the bottles is decorated with bead-work and small coins, and is thought to have been used by an Ethiopian priest.

(a) Oriental collections – Ethiopian Ms IX; (b and c) loaned by the Science Museum – A658350, A658352

4.2 **Astronomical and astrological manuscript. Persia, 17th century**

This comprehensive work on astronomy and astrology includes sections on the seven planets, the constellations and the signs of the zodiac. It also contains descriptions of a number of amulets for various wished-for outcomes (e.g. victory in war), and a series of love charms.

Oriental collections – Persian MS 373

4.3 **(a) Da'ud b. 'Umar al-Antaki (d. 1599)**
'Tadhkirat 'uli-l-albab wa-l-jami' l-'ujab'. Cairo, 1675
(b) Brass divination bowl and brass incense burner with inlaid silver. Persia(?), 19th century

This is the ornately decorated title page of an Arabic manuscript, whose title is 'memorandum for the learned, being a collection of marvels'. It is a medical handbook composed by al-Antaki, which deals particularly with *materia medica*, but also reflects al-Antaki's interest in the philosopher's stone and the application of astrology to medicine. Many of the alchemical, astrological and other divinatory traditions of Western medicine were influenced by practices and theories that originated in the Middle East. (a) Oriental collections – Arabic WMS Or.33; (b) loaned by the Science Museum – A639333 and A639348

4.4 **(a) Hebrew amulet on vellum with case. Undated (*c.*18th century)**
(b) Anonymous collection of Yiddish and Hebrew prescriptions, magical charms, folk medicine and nursery rhymes. German, 17th/18th century

The word 'Abracatabra' (*sic*) can be seen in decreasing form on the left page of the opening in the folk medicine collection. If uttered properly, this charm was believed to cause illnesses (i.e. their demons) to disappear. The amulet in its pouch was used for the protection of Moses David, son of Esther, from the plague. The tradition of employing amulets to protect people and their possessions has a Jewish history of more than 3000 years. Since the 16th century, the Jewish influence on Western occult sciences has been extremely significant.

Oriental collections – Hebrew MSS A7 and A19

4.5 ***'Ilm-i feraset wa 'ilm-i qiyafet.*** **Turkish manuscript claiming to be a translation of 'Imam Shafi'i's treatise. Copied in 1517 by al-Muhammed**

The work is mostly on physiognomy, but also relates to palm reading. It also contains the story of how Plato's character was unflatteringly evaluated by an Indian physician.

Unlike his outraged disciples, Plato is said to have accepted the judgement, vowing to reform his character through self-discipline. Oriental collections – Turkish Ms 19

4.6 Composite Armenian manuscript copied by the scribe Khachatur *dpir*. 1795

The main text in this manuscript is a work 'Concerning the heavenly movements' composed by the 13th-century Armenian philosopher Hovhannes Erznkac'i. The illuminated page displayed shows an astronomer gazing through a telescope. The sun and moon can be seen just below a band of cloud which supports the signs of the zodiac.

Oriental collections – Armenian MS 7

4.7 Wooden disease mask in the form of a human face. Sri Lanka, 19th century

Masks like this were used in healing rituals, where the demons responsible for the illness were exorcised from the sufferer. Loaned by the Science Museum – A62943

4.8 *Yantra potak*. Sinhalese manuscript on palm leaves. Sri Lanka, 19th century?

This is a set of Yantras or illustrated charms, incorporating numerous line-drawings and geometrical designs relating to the general protection of the reader.

Oriental collections – Sinhalese MS 336

4.9 Natal horoscope in Sanskrit and Hindi. Rajasthan, India, 1804

This horoscope was drawn up in 1804 in Rajasthan. It may later have been prepared for display, since such charts are not traditionally mounted in boxes. Made after an individual's birth, horoscopes are then consulted when he or she is thinking of marrying, travelling, making business deals and so forth. It also describes what influences might cause ill health. The section displayed shows the sun deity riding on a seven-headed horse. It is possible that this may be related to one of the primary Indian astronomical texts 'The solar treatise' (*Suryasiddhanta*). Oriental collections

4.10 Tantric painting. India, 19th century?

This image illustrates aspects of the Indian magico-religious system called Tantra. The symbols aligned with the spine and skull of the cross-legged meditator indicate centres of energy, representing in ascending order states of increasingly refined consciousness. This path starts at the base of the spine and reaches the head, which carries the symbol of a thousand-petaled lotus. Tantric sects have long formed a secretive and iconoclastic tradition within Hinduism. Oriental collections – Sanskrit MS beta 511

4.11 Hindi divinatory manuscript. Punjab, India, 1865

This manuscript was probably produced in a rural area and was copied for a merchant called Gopal Singh. It may have been consulted by dropping a stone or coin on the diagrams, each of which gives eight possible answers to a specific question. The answers are provided at the end of the manuscript. Examples of questions include "should I educate my son?", "should I take a remedy?", "is it worth calling the doctor?", "will the patient recover?", "should I steal?", and "should I meet with a king?"

Oriental collections – Hindi MS 310

4.12 Shaman's bell necklace and thigh-bone trumpet. Tibet, 20th century

This necklace and trumpet were parts of the elaborate costume worn by Tibetan shamans. Built on ancient foundations, Tibetan medical theory incorporates a broad diversity of phenomena: cosmic and climatic as well as physiological, pathological and therapeutic – but all within a unified rational system of natural laws. As with any established theory, however, many practitioners operate outside the framework endorsed by professional organizations. Loaned by the Science Museum – 1987-716 and A17517

4.13 Two rhinoceros horn cups. China, late-19th/early-20th century

In China, the teeth of the rhinoceros (or sworded cow, as it is termed) were ground up into medicines; its horns were carved for ornamental purposes, and drinking from cups like these was thought to be healthy. The cups were also said to reveal the poisonous nature of their contents by sweating. They were extremely expensive and would only have been used by the wealthiest members of society. In the Western medical tradition, rhinoceros horns were also a highly valued part of *materia medica.*

Loaned by the Science Museum – A39566 and A642583

4.14 Thai medical manuscript. *c.*19th century

This samut dam (black folding book) contains diagnostic descriptions of boils and other skin complaints and medicinal recipes for their treatment. Patients are instructed to learn the name of the guardian spirit for each month and of the associated boils and their sites on the body. The severity of the boils are described in alarming terms: for example "Death after three days". Oriental collections – Thai MS 10

4.15 Malay manuscript comprised of love charms and amulets for invulnerability and safe child delivery. Undated (*c.*late 19th century)

This manuscript written in an Arabic script known as *jawi* was originally collected by Dudley Hervey (1849–1911), a British administrator who served in The Straits Settlement (Malaya). Like other 'scholar-officials', Hervey gathered information and material concerning the area in which he was stationed; but unlike many others, he duly acknowledged the considerable help he was given in this endeavour by his Malay *Munshi* (interpreter) Muhammad Jaafar. It was Jaafar, for example, who questioned local magicians about the use of these amulets. Oriental collections – Well Mal 2E

4.16 Amuletic inscriptions written on bone.
Karo-Batak language. Indonesia, 19th century

These amulets have text on one side, and magical symbols drawn on the other. The larger one is an amulet against bullets, while the text on the smaller one is a series of short instructions, mainly for offerings associated with safe passage when travelling.

Oriental collections – Batak MSS 331834 and 331831

Section 5

The magic of medicine: ethnographic context

At the same time that the place of magic was being eroded in much learned Western culture, the colonial enterprise of conquering many other parts of the world provided extensive exposure to societies with indigenous magical beliefs. It was this relation between the West and peoples throughout the rest of the world that determined how these unfamiliar ideas and practices were absorbed, and many would say hopelessly and tragically misunderstood. As has happened in so many cultural interactions, the unexpected tended to be labelled as 'strange' and exotic, and often then dealt with as something threatening. This is where the hackneyed notions of devil-worshipping, cannibalistic witch doctors come from. The role of collectors and recipient museums in this process of creating 'magic' out of indigenous beliefs cannot be underestimated

For many of the peoples represented by this selection of magico-medical objects, the separation of magic from medicine is meaningless. In many of their languages the distinction simply cannot be made. Furthermore, the same ideas are found in any number of other areas of their lives and world view: the weather, warfare, family relations, ancestors, courtship etc. In their own terms then, identifying an overlap between magic and medicine would often seem at best a rather unnecessary simplification through which a complex and realistically holistic view of the world was artificially carved up.

Though fraught with many difficulties, a focused concern with magical medicine does make more sense when approached by ethnographers and anthropologists. The distinction of magic from ritual and religion or from science and technology is by no means universally agreed: though many adopt a working definition of magic as ritual motivated by specifically desired ends, which tends not to draw on divine powers, and which is resorted to when no appropriate technology is available. What *is* almost universally agreed is that there seem to be as many different magical systems as societies studied, and that few if any do not undergo changes inspired by influences from without as well as within the indigenous cultures. Borrowings between cultures often happen in both directions: industrially manufactured objects, for example, come to be

used as part of traditional talismans, while 'exotic, primitive' beliefs are adopted in industrialized and post-industrialized countries.

One of the more interesting outcomes of this anthropological scrutiny of how magic and medicine overlap in other cultures is the light it sheds on medicine and its history in the West. It has been pointed out for example that in modern scientific medicine a large proportion of the population 'believe' in the practices commonly used on them without having even the first inkling about what is done or why. "Aha!" some might exclaim: "the magic of medicine".

5.1 **Medicine-bag made of basket work containing various traditional medicines. Faravohitra, Madagascar, late-20th century**

The various 'medicines' including a 'spirit-medicine' in the bag are made from plants, earth and a metal cartridge case. Traditional healers in Madagascar (*ombiasy*) draw on a knowledge of both medicinally effective flora and appropriate rituals and sacrifices. They also possess divining skills. Illnesses are commonly thought to have more than a purely physical cause, with medicines rarely being prescribed without associated charms and invocations. Trustees of the British Museum – 1984 Af 14.309-12 and 324

5.2 **Medicine woman's axe made of iron, brass wire and wood. Asena people, Mozambique, early 20th century**

Many of the objects and equipment associated with shamans and medicine men and women have a function which is both symbolic and practical, the significance of which can in turn be transferred to the use of those objects in other contexts. Weapons, for example, are often thought to have a magical and spiritual as well as directly physical effect on enemies. Trustees of the British Museum – Af 1933 .5-11.18

5.3 **Tortoise shell device used to hunt 'witches'. Malawi (Nyasaland), 20th century**

This tortoise shell is filled with a 'medicine' made of shell and earth, and was used in the practice of witch finding. The idea that witchcraft is the cause of much ill-health is a common one among many African people, and indeed throughout the world. Other frequently diagnosed causes of illness are sorcery, ghosts, broken taboos, and evil spirits. Equally common is the subsequent recourse to shamans for some 'medicine' to fight the spiritual tormentor. Loaned by Horniman Museum – 3-130

5.4 **(a) Power figure (*nkisi*) made of wood, iron nails, string and cloth. Kongo people, Zaire**
(b) Power figure (*nkisi*) made of carved wood, mirror, iron and paint. Yombe people, Zaire. Both 20th century

Figures like these are thought of as containers. The Yombe piece, for example, has cavities behind the mirror and in the head. They contain a range of natural elements

that give the figures an empowering spirit also known as *nkisi*. They can be used to heal, to catch thieves and adulterers, and in various forms of divination. The term 'fetish', commonly applied to these figures, derives more from their impact on Western thinking than any indigenous use. It was initially applied by the Christianizing colonial missionaries who collected them, who tended to have little sympathy for the associated practices of 'devil-worship' that they found in 'darkest Africa'.

(a) Trustees of the British Museum – 1979 Af 1.1752; (b) loaned by Horniman Museum – 36.176

5.5 **(a) Female 'medicine' figure. Yombe people, Zaire**
(b) Wooden 'medicine' figure. Bena Lulua people, Zaire
(c) Ivory 'medicine' figure. Luba people, Zaire
(d) Wooden 'medicine' figure. Songe people, Zaire.
All early-20th century

The 'magical–medical' properties of these figures were variously held to be inherent in their eyes, their headdresses and collars, the material inserted into carved cavities and in the pigments with which they were coloured. The Songe figure with its head turned to one side has an empty cavity in its head from which the 'medicine' has clearly been removed. A label dating from its original purchase explains how it was "bought from a Medicine Man to obtain good luck and to bring misfortune to the buyer's enemies". The power of the figures was sometimes enhanced through offerings made to them, or by transferring 'medicine' from another figure. All these examples were originally collected for the Wellcome Museum, and were probably displayed in its 'Primitive Medicine Gallery'. Trustees of the British Museum – 1954 Af 23.1662 and 1954 +23.1168, 260 and 1225

5.6 **Woollen bag for medicine (*alforja*).**
Aymara People, Oruro, Bolivia, late-20th century

The Aymara people of the Bolivian Andes store herbs and ritual artefacts, such as amulets, llama fat, figurines, plants, powders and ceremonial sweets in bags such as this. The contents are often compiled by ritual specialists *Yatiri* (literally the 'one who knows'), and offered as ritual food to principal deities such as *Pachamama* ('mother earth'). The central belief in Aymara ritual medicine is that the earth is an animate force which must be acknowledged through regular appeasement to avoid illness, misfortune and crop failure. Trustees of the British Museum – 1981 Am.28.139a

5.7 **Curing ceremony doll made of balsa wood.**
Cuna people, San Blas Islands, Panama, late-20th century

Cuna families collect therapeutic medicine dolls, often storing them in wooden boxes. When needed, they are placed beside the bed of a sick person. Medicine men are then summoned to sing, give medicinal treatments and place incense pots near the patient. As in many traditional societies, exposure to western medicine has led to many Cuna people using a mixture of both western and traditional remedies in the hope of maximizing the chance of a cure. Trustees of the British Museum – 1979 Am.1.2

5.8 **Coloured paper fertility doll. Mexico, 20th century**

Like much else in modern Mexico, beliefs in magical medicine are supported by an intricately woven pattern of at least three different cultural strands: the survival of ancient indigenous practices and beliefs, colonial (i.e. Spanish Catholic) influences, and modern innovations and reworkings. Loaned by the Horniman Museum – 21.7.60/13(a-k)

5.9 **Rock crystal skull. Aztec(?), Mexico, 16th century?**

Though the carved skull may be Aztec in style, it could also have been made in the early Colonial period or even later. Recent 'new-age' interest in crystal healing has led some to speculate about possible magico-medical properties of rock crystal skulls from Mesoamerica. Though the precise use of such objects is not known, anthropologists have uncovered no evidence to support such theories. It has also been argued that at least some examples of such rock crystal skulls may be fakes produced for Western collectors since the 19th century. In any case, labelling such items as 'magical' probably reflects more about Western expectations than indigenous beliefs.

Trustees of the British Museum – St 420

5.10 **(a) Medicine man's mask made of wood and goat skin.**
Kayan People, Baram River district, Sarawak, East Malaysia, 19th century
(b) Ivory soul catcher.
Tsimshian people, Kitwankul, British Columbia, early-19th century

Masks such as this Kayan one were used by medicine men to catch souls. The carved 'soul catchers' were the most important ceremonial objects used by shamans in the North West Coast area of America. Some diseases were thought to be caused by souls leaving the body. A shaman would use this implement to catch and restore the soul to the patient. The design on the 'soul-catcher' represents a double-headed water monster. Trustees of the British Museum – As1900.1039; Am 1939 11-1

5.11 **(a) Amuletic necklace of wood and glass beads and amuletic horn decorated with beads and textile. Madagascar, 20th century**
(b) Bamboo amuletic boxes on a string. Sudan, 20th century
(c) Jade amulet. Maori people, New Zealand, late-19th/early-20th century
(d) Amuletic necklace of glass beads. Hebron, Palestine, late-19th/early-20th century

An extraordinary variety of amulets in different forms and materials is part of virtually every material culture throughout the world. Many are used to protect the bearers from illness. In Madagascar personal talismans can serve a direct therapeutic end, as well as functioning as a charm. Often an amulet's power resides in the symbols with which it is decorated. A common example of such a symbol is illustrated in the Palestinian glass disc necklace shown here – the pattern of onlaid circles resembling eyes, which act as protection against the evil eye. Loaned by (a) Horniman Museum – 5.3.62/19 and 5.3.62/27; (b, c and d) Science Museum – A166698, A60924, A 665302

5.12 Photographs of medicine men: in Liberia, Africa by Richard Buchta; in Malaya by Wiele & Klein; and in Australia. All mid-20th century

These photographs of traditional healing men were all published in magazines for Western readers. The terms used to describe them are indicative of attitudes to such practices then prevalent. The Niam-Niam shaman is identified as a "witch-doctor in his wizard panoply"; the "Malayan exorcists" are said to be "clad in the appropriate disguises for carrying out their professional avocation", while the Australian picture is titled 'Relic of Aboriginal Demon worship'. Consumption and use of such images has done much to turn the practice of traditional medicine into a popular culture cliché.

Iconographic collections – catalogue nos 21322, 21487 and 21410

5.13 Horseshoe made of plastic. Purchased in London, 1980s.
Charm made of stone and string. Hampshire, England, 20th century

Talismans have been found among all peoples in all historical periods. Modern England is no exception, with a range of types from the timeless use of natural objects like this stone charm carried to protect its owner from injury, to the introduction of modern materials into traditional forms like this plastic horseshoe used as a good-luck amulet.

Loaned by the Horniman Museum – 7.196

Section 6

The magic of medicine: survivals and revivals

From the 18th century on, the fortunes of magical medicine have perpetually been both rising and falling. Thus though the 18th century saw the triumph of a rationally sceptical attitude to magic, it also witnessed numerous spiritualist cults and popular mystical phenomena creeping back into this rational world. Since 1800 the western world has carried on simultaneously championing a notion of progress towards ever greater rationality, while also warmly welcoming a whole series of revived magical ideas: for example, Robert Smith's inauguration of modern astrological journalism, the unification of the Cabala, tarot, alchemy, astrology, numerology, etc. by members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the fashionable popularity of Aleister Crowley's magical 'wickedness'.

Even within modern scientific medicine there have been frequent hints that the influence of an occult past has never quite been completely shaken off. Thus when penicillin was first discovered, it represented for many nothing short of a 'miracle cure'; the single-substance remedies sought for various diseases have commonly been termed 'magic bullets'; and the pharmaceutical industry has repeatedly sought to advertise its wares through allusions to the occult.

Many people have been disillusioned with what they see as a dehumanized and despiritualized modern medical science, consequently fighting against a feeling of isolation by seeking to recapture what others, if not they themselves, have termed mystical and magical. This "revolt of the soul against the intellect", as W B Yeats termed it, has been most pronounced among the middlebrow middle classes. Rather than actively seeking out the occult, however, they have mostly been looking for an alternative, or at least a complement, to an overly materialistic medical science.

One of the intellectual planks on which a revitalized interest in magic has rested is the psychological reinterpretation of occult philosophies and symbolism. In the hands of C G Jung (1875–1961), for example, the arcane science of alchemy was rescued from the domain of satire by investing it with new meaning as a system of character analysis: a sophisticated method of understanding how the 'self' subsumes a harmonious synthesis of opposites.

Against a background of the perpetual cultural tendency for a few 'superstitions' to survive, one area in which magical ideas have particularly thrived is modern witchcraft. A romantic interest in folk sorcery as a form of natural pantheistic religion has from the mid-19th century given it a certain respectability – one further popularized by such well-known adherents as Sir Walter Scott. The ancient pagan cult practices that these new witches were intent on reviving included astrology and other forms of divination, herbology and incantations. The secretive nature of witchcraft makes numbers hard to determine, but the United States has an estimated 25 000 active witches, with maybe half as many in the United Kingdom.

This revived interest in magic is not only a western phenomenon, other versions being fuelled, for example, by a reinvigorated Islamic faith. Often, in fact, new magic appears precisely where one culture borrows ideas or practices from another. This is particularly true in the West, where something of a shoppers' mentality has developed in which elements of other belief systems are employed when and where they appeal. As a result, particularly where health is concerned, many people have adopted a belt and braces strategy, mixing treatments which, philosophically speaking, are often not compatible. Those with occult associations often have additional appeal because of their entertainment value – fortune telling being the most obvious example. Some critics of this eclecticism see it as a sign of a severe identity crisis, in which the chimera of magic offers the possibility of relocating the human soul long since lost in the confusion of modern life.

6.1 **David Brewster, *Letters on natural magic, addressed to Sir Walter Scott ...* (London, 1832)**

Written at Scott's suggestion, Brewster's series of letters were compiled in order to bring to public attention a popular account of "nature's prodigies". Among other subjects, Brewster covered spectral and optical illusions, effects of sound, mechanical automata and the wonders of chemistry. The illustration displayed relates to the illusion of the same drawn eyes appearing to look in different directions depending on the surrounding face. Romanticism spurred Scott into an interest in witchcraft, which, because of his fame, in turn led many others to the subject. **EPB 15340/A**

6.2 **Hiram E Butler, *Solar biology: a scientific method of delineating character; diagnosing disease; determining mental, physical, and business qualifications, conjugal adaptability, etc., etc., from date of birth,* 2nd edn (Boston, 1887)**

This popular astrological work was republished in at least 14 editions. Butler's use of the term biology clearly signals his intention to align astrology, which many critics from the 15th century on had attacked as either fraudulent or useless, with more conventional branches of scientific enquiry. The breadth of the audiences for this material has always drawn both on those who believe in astral influences and those who simply enjoy it as an amusing pastime. **Historical collection – occult**

6.3 *Magnetic healing* (Chicago & London, 1901)
This work is one of a series published by The Psychic Research Company under the general title 'A course of practical psychic instruction'. Other titles in the series include *Mind reading, Hypnotism* and *Personal magnetism.* The illustration on the pages displayed shows the actions that should be taken by a healer to effect "the long pass in magnetic treatment". While taking this stance, practitioners should simultaneously concentrate their minds on the intended effect. Historical collection – occult

6.4 **Crutches hung on a wall at Lourdes. Photograph. France, 1937**
Of those who visit Lourdes, some come as tourists, some make the pilgrimage simply to honour the place and its associations, and some seek cures either for themselves or for loved ones. Throughout its history, the healings affected at Lourdes have been met with both awed acceptance and incredulity. Debates between the two positions have ensured that a significant number of other visitors therefore come with the explicit aim of investigating the authenticity of claims made for the miraculous cures.
Iconographic collections – icv 49516

6.5 **'Nigog's magic pillules'. Pen and wash drawing. British, early-20th century**
The large object resembling a crystal ball conjures up the mystical associations of the picture. In the accompanying text the patient complains of having to empty the box of pills before he eats. The box carries the label 'Worth a guinea a box', the famous advertising catch phrase for Holloway's pills. 'Professor' Thomas Holloway was the best known of a host of successful 'medicine men' who emerged in Victorian England selling cures with powers so remarkable as to suggest mysterious and magical properties, even where none were explicitly claimed. Iconographic collections – catalogue no 11862

6.6 *The magic bullet: social implications and limitations of modern medicine …*
Edited by Mark Diesendorf (Canberra, 1976)
Published by the Society for Social Responsibility in Science, this collection of essays aims to explode what is described as "the simplistic conception of ill health and the role of medicines" in which the causes of diseases are seen as hostile agents able to be destroyed by a single 'magic bullet'. While much of modern medicine has sought to eradicate any suggestion of the 'non-rational', even such metaphorical uses of occult terms indicate a continuing interaction of medical and magical ideas. Modern medicine collection – XW

6.7 **'Faith healing: cases you dare not ignore'.**
Article from *Daily Sketch*, 14 March 1961
The article displayed describes "independent and irrefutable evidence" for the existence of spiritual healing. One account relates to a Margery Steven (the 'miracle woman'), who, having been "completely crippled" managed to regain her health without the intervention of orthodox medicine. The article suggests that the prayers of various healing circles were responsible for her remarkable recovery. CMAC PP/HCT/D.1

6.8 George Pasteur, *Horizon of spiritual healing* (Ferndown, Dorset, 1966)

This book's cover illustration shows the author in action, making a goitre vanish at a public demonstration in 1965. In it, Pasteur relates the laws governing the 'healing intelligence', and urges orthodox medical circles to recognize the healing ministry's contribution to the common fight against disease and sickness. The book ends with a version of the Hippocratic oath. Modern medicine collection – XWB

6.9 *The Doctor and his patients: the parish priest and his people.* (London, nd)

This pamphlet was published by The Guild of St Raphael, a group promoting the restoration of "the healing ministry of Christ". It was written as a cooperative venture between doctors and clergy. As is suggested by the double symbol of a cross and entwined serpents, its aim was to encourage closer relations between religion and medicine. Links between faith and healing have in the late-20th century been promoted by a wide range of groups both in and outside established churches and religions.

CMAC PP/HCT/D.23

6.10 Muhammad 'Isam Tarabiya, *Quranic curing and treatment with incantations* (Amman, 1994); Sa'id Jar 'Alt Badawi, *How to rid the human body of genies* (Cairo, 1992)

Both these works are based on the idea that both illnesses and cures are issued by God. One describes amulets and talismans derived from sections of the *Quran*, which are to be recited to protect people against ailments. The other, also based on the *Quran* and 'The sayings of the prophet' is about the nature of genies and how to get rid of them. Works like these have in part been inspired by a reaction against secularism, and represent something of an Islamic legitimization of folk medical practices. In the past they might well have been opposed by the religious establishment for their glossy, somewhat sensational style of presentation. Loaned by Lawrence I Conrad

6.11 '"Magic box" puts horse in Derby', *Sunday Graphic*, 5 September 1954 and 'Prove your black box can work', *Daily Sketch*, 19 July 1960

These newspaper articles relate to George De La Warr's black box and his claims for using it to diagnose and cure illnesses by remote control. A High Court action was brought against De La Warr alleging misrepresentation; but the case was dismissed. It is not clear exactly how the box was meant to work, but it seems to have involved processing photographs of samples taken from patients. CMAC PP/RRM/A.1/5

6.12 Stethoscope. Made in Japan, used in England, 1960s

This instrument was used in a London hospital in the early 1960s. For many, the stethoscope is the most powerful symbol of the medical professions, acting as a badge of identity, and even as a talisman. Anthropologists have recently analysed the practice of modern medicine in terms of the way knowledge is concentrated in an exclusive shaman-like group who wear costumes that distinguish their role. As they point out,

seen from the outside, some aspects of modern medical practice conform to ritualistic behaviour that might well in other cultures be identified as magical.

Loaned by Laurence Smaje

6.13 Selection of 12 tarot cards from 'The rider tarot deck'. Purchased in San Diego, USA, 1996

These cards come from a deck designed by Pamela Colman Smith under the direction of Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942), a scholar of occultism. It has been speculated that Tarot cards may have an ancient Egyptian origin, but they did not emerge in Europe until the 14th century. Each card in a Tarot pack is deemed to have a divinatory meaning: the magician, for example, relates to skill, diplomacy, sickness, pain, self-confidence and will. Not relying on psychic gifts, the Tarot is one of the most popular methods of divination.

6.14 Bottle of 'Healing water', 'Orris root' amulet, 'Shaman's aroma-therapy', 'Sage spirit sticks', 'Attract good spirits' herbs, 'Self-love and healing' and 'Perfect health' charms; psychic consultant's card and page from San Diego Telephone Directory. Purchased in a San Diego 'metaphysical' shop, USA, 1996

The range and quantity of 'metaphysical' products now commonly available reflects the recent upsurge of popularity in mystical and occult matters. Interest is particularly great in southern California. Many of the claims made for such materials have a medical relevance – though often in broad, nonspecific terms. The 'Orris amulet', for example, is to be used to drive away 'negative influences'. This is also the effect induced by patients who brush themselves with the feather contained in the 'Self love' charm.

6.15 (a) Katrina Raphael, *Crystal healing: the therapeutic application of crystals and stones* (Santa Fe, 1987)
(b) Specimen of rock crystal

Raphael has worked in the area of New Age healing for over 16 years. Her book deals with the practical applications of crystal therapeutic techniques. Much of the power of the crystal is believed to be channelled through the tip. The fact that the tip of the specimen shown is chipped significantly reduced its price.

6.16 Leaflets for 'Violet Hill Studios', 'Foundation for international spiritual unfoldment', 'The life centre for natural health and fitness', 'Eastern horizon studio' and 'The national institute of medical herbalists'. London, 1996

These are a small sample of the printed materials produced by organizations listed in a current London telephone directory under "Alternative & complementary medicines and therapies". The differences between them are almost as striking as the similarities. Most, however, draw on non-western healing and spiritual traditions and without fail they all advocate a more holistic approach to illness than is common in conventional medicine.

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'Abracadabra' is a mysterious word of unknown origin, long believed to have magical power. If uttered properly, it was thought to cause illnesses (i.e. their demonic causes) to disappear.


The MAGIC of MEDICINE


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May 1996

Ken ARNOLD • Martha BALDWIN • John M