The Magic of Things

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11-12 April 2003

This conference will consider the role of physical objects in ancient, medieval and early-modern magic. Our intention is to examine how things - for instance, stones, plants, parts of animals or ordinary domestic objects - can be appropriated by the magician and charged with magical properties. This is a subject which has been comparatively neglected in the modern historiography of magic, which (when it notices objects at all) has tended to focus on those made specifically for magical purposes: amulets, phylacteries and so forth. The process by which an ordinary thing becomes magical requires further exploration, in part to illuminate the magical world-view into which these objects become located. Equally, however, the subject demands attention because of the relationship - sometimes fruitful, sometimes antagonistic - between this "natural magic" and the emerging sciences of nature; and, beginning in the medieval period, the transformation of the magical discourse of objects into the technological discourse of machines.

The six scholars whom we will invite as speakers will bring a diversity of perspectives to these problems. In their research, all have addressed "magical objects," but in different periods and cultures: from antiquity to early modernity, and in the European, Arabic, and Indian worlds. Each paper will be followed by a response from a member of the Princeton faculty.

Friday, 11 April

1:00-2:00: Conjuring Tricks and Sorcery in Classical and Late Antiquity. Matthew Dickie (University of Illinois at Chicago).

2:00-2:45: Commentary by Robert Goulding (Princeton). General discussion.

2:45-3:15: Coffee.


4:15-5:00: Commentary by Don Skemer (Princeton). General Discussion.

7:30: Conference dinner at the Alchemist and Barrister, Witherspoon Street.
Saturday, April 12

9:00-10:00: The Creation of Rational and Irrational Animals
David Pingree (Brown University)

10:00-10:45: Commentary by Anthony Grafton (Princeton).
General Discussion.

10:45-11:45: The Economy of Magic in Early Modern England
Lauren Kassell (Cambridge University).

12:30-1:30: Lunch (in conference room).

1:30-2:30: The Rise and Fall of a Magical Object in the Scientific Revolution:
The Sympathetic Cure of Wounds
Daniel Stolzenberg (Stanford University).

2:30-3:15: Commentary by Eileen Reeves (Princeton).
General Discussion

3:15-3:45: Coffee.

3:45-4:45: Newton's Alchemy, The Tabula Smaragdina, and the Aerial Niter.
William Newman (Indiana University).

4:45-5:30: Commentary by Michael Mahoney (Princeton).
General Discussion.