

INTRODUCTION

TELLING A MEDIEVAL MAGICIAN

The thirteenth-century scholar and churchman Albert the Great relied on magic. His commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* (On the soul) includes a straightforward acknowledgment of this. The question at hand was whether incorporeal entities, like souls and angels, could move. After outlining several arguments against this position, Albert raised the alternative possibility—that incorporeal entities can move—and affirmed, “We ourselves have verified the truth of this with the magical arts.”¹ He elaborated little but promised to return to the matter in later writings. He offered further evidence of his familiarity with magic in other treatises and commentaries. Given a medieval presupposition linking the magical to the diabolical and the diabolical to the heretical, a twenty-first-century reader might expect Albert to have been censured or to have received an even harsher penalty for such a confession. He was not. To the contrary, he remained one of the most revered figures of his age, and his engagement with magic became the object of fascination, celebration, and even imitation.

This ostensible paradox warrants quick amplification. Albert's standing among the most highly regarded churchmen of his day remained unchallenged in his lifetime. He held many positions of trust within and outside his order before and after his authorship of the *De anima*,² which he wrote while he was provincial superior of the Dominican friars in Germany.³ Other accomplishments contributed to the high regard in which his contemporaries held him, most of all his astute, innovative, and wide-ranging scholarship. He produced seventy treatises on theology, philosophy, and the natural sciences. Most of these titles advanced his Herculean project of commenting on the entirety of Aristotle's corpus, which was newly attracting scholarly attention in the Latin West. Albert was remarkable in the energy he devoted to understanding through an Aristotelian lens not only metaphysics and logic but also the workings of the natural world, including physics, botany, mineralogy, and zoology. In consequence of

this breadth, one twentieth-century interpreter estimated Albert to have been “far more famous than Thomas [Aquinas]” during their overlapping lifetimes. Indeed, Albert was already called “great” in his own day, as well as being called by the professorial sobriquet *doctor universalis* (the teacher of everything). By the fifteenth century he was commonly referred to not only as Albertus Teutonicus (Albert the German) and Albertus Coloniensis (Albert of Cologne) but also Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great).⁴

This esteem did not develop because his writings about magic had been overlooked, ignored, or concealed. His own students celebrated this expertise, which was referred to in scholarship and legend with scarcely a hint of misgiving or word of correction for the next two centuries. In his own treatment of incorporeal beings, Albert’s onetime student Ulrich of Strasbourg (ca. 1225–1277) lauded his teacher as one “who was inspired in his grasp of all fields of knowledge and experienced in the magical arts.”⁵ A generation later the Dutch chronicler Johannes De Beke (d. 1346) used one of the most ambiguous words in the high medieval glossary of magical terms, “nigromancy,” in enthusing that Albert was “great in nigromancy, greater in philosophy, and greatest of all in theology.”⁶ In the late Middle Ages, anonymous authors began ascribing to Albert books that were not his, works of alchemy—some more learned than others—and so-called books of secrets that promised to reveal the innermost workings of the created world. New legends emerged as well, one telling, for example, of a voluptuous summertime feast he hosted in the dead of winter for the German king, and another of his conversion to a life of devotion after a youthful engagement with sorcery. If he had ever applied his knowledge of magic immorally, such legends piously intoned, Albert had repented early in life and this familiarity with magic aided subsequent critical analysis of magic in his serious scholarship.⁷ Albert would not have recognized himself in much of this spurious writing.

Sustained objections to Albert as an avid practitioner of magic began to emerge in the fifteenth century, nearly two hundred years after his death and only after the more dubious dimensions of his reputation had established themselves in the imagination of elite scholars and popular storytellers alike. Efforts to correct this misshapen notoriety recurred intermittently over the next four centuries. The objections are noteworthy in three respects: First, those who weighed in—reforming churchmen in the fifteenth century, erudite libertines and skeptics in the seventeenth, and philosophes in the eighteenth—brought to bear defining trends in European intellectual history in evaluating the significance of Albert’s thinking about magic. Second, their treatment of what Albert had actually written was not always more accurate than that of those they

opposed. Regardless of what conclusions were reached on the matter, everyone was taking liberties with what Albert actually wrote. And third, with few exceptions, their goal was not to condemn Albert for taking a wrong stance toward magic but rather to clear him of any hint of the irrationality and misbehavior that association with magic could imply.

Serious concern over Albert's engagement with magic ended by about 1800, and more with a whimper than a bang. It was not that the fundamental questions—Did he practice magic or not, and of what sort? And should he be praised or condemned for it?—had been definitively answered, but rather that the research question had lost its attraction: Ecclesiastics and scholars who had since the fifteenth century found claims of his engagement with magic defamatory continued to regard most of Albert's corpus worthy of investigation, but not his uncontested writing on magic. Nineteenth-century historians newly interested in earlier approaches to the natural world included him as a serious representative of a surpassed paradigm. The Catholic Church canonized him with scarcely a glance at the magic that had seemingly disqualified him from canonization in earlier centuries. Romantic-era authors began deploying him as a stock character for the magician, but without deliberation over what he may or may not have written. Albert, as a serious scholar and practitioner of magic, whose works occasioned controversy and obliged analysis, had conjured himself away.

The aim of this study is to understand Albert's engagement with magic, the reputation it engendered, and the challenge that reputation posed in the context of European intellectual and cultural history. Albert wrote extensively about magic and intimated his practice of it in certain forms. His own words, scholarly pseudepigrapha, and popular fables fueled the development of his reputation as a magician in his lifetime and for centuries beyond. His words and that reputation often fostered admiration in elite and popular milieus. When they raised concerns, commentators on Albert did not censure the man himself but reinterpreted or refuted his reputation. Analysis of Albert's writings on magic and the reputation they inculcated thus not only draws attention to an obscure and possibly disturbing dimension of Albert's own life—significant in itself given Albert's renown as a thirteenth-century scholar and churchman—but also demonstrates the ambiguous, ambivalent, and unstable meaning of magic in the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. In the rest of this introduction I provide several dimensions of context—lexical, historiographical, and historical—before sketching the origin of Albert's reputation as a magician and the history of its treatment, as analyzed in the following five chapters and epilogue.

Telling a Magician: A Lexical Challenge

Magic is never and nowhere easy to define. Even narrowing our scope to “Albert’s magic” does not point to an unambiguous subject of scholarly research. Furthermore, what Albert understood as magic and what others—whether they regarded him as a magician or not—understood as magic do not perfectly align. A preliminary consideration of terms and concepts associated with magic in Albert’s day, however, raises into relief the problems about magic that are the heart of this book. *Magia*—the Latin noun for magic—might seem the natural place to start. It was, however, an uncommon word in the philosophical and theological lexicon of Albert’s day, and in fact of the Middle Ages generally. Instead, references to specific kinds of magic and adjectives meaning “magical”—*magicus* or *magicalis*—predominated. Used substantively, *magic* could suggest books, people, practices, or, most commonly, knowledge. Latin Christianity’s foremost thinker in late antiquity, Augustine of Hippo, for example, referred not to *magia* but to *artes magicae* (magical arts) in *The City of God* and *On Christian Doctrine*, where he developed his influential explanation of magic as fundamentally demonic.⁸

In the authoritative medieval reference work *The Etymologies* (ca. 620s), the scholar and prelate Isidore of Seville did not use the word in the chapter “On the Magicians” either. Rather, he distinguished and condemned two kinds of practitioner (*magi*), whose activities required the invocation of evil spirits. One, whom he labelled *malificii* (translated commonly as witches or sorcerors, but meaning most literally evildoers), causes harm through the invocation of and with the assistance of malign spirits; *malificii* “agitate the elements, disturb the minds of people, and slay without any drinking of poison, using the violence of spells alone.” The other, whom he called diviners (*divini*), gives “certain knowledge of things to come and of things below,” through the invocation of “evil angels”; astrologers and horoscope-casters number among the diviners. Isidore never subsumed these bodies of knowledge and corresponding practices under the single title *magia*, but only alerted his readers to their shared dependence on demonic participation.⁹ Furthermore, Isidore drafted his chapter on magicians in the same section of *The Etymologies* in which he treated heretics, sibyls, pagans, and false gods. The problem that united the magicians to these others was flawed, or absent, Christian faith. What magicians knew and did shared, by Isidore’s lights, its most important conceptual frontier with religion.

Such an alignment sets the stage for answering the question why natural magic—the form of magic closest to the heart of *Disenchanting Albert the Great*—was not represented in Isidore’s taxonomy. Natural magic concerned itself with the workings of the natural world that eluded the conventions of scholastic natural philosophy but did not outright contradict Christian teaching.

Furthermore, natural magic's late emergence—only after Arabic scientific treatises started circulating in translation in the twelfth-century Latin West—serves as a reminder that changes within the millennium known as the Middle Ages can be at least as significant as the differences separating today's perspectives on magic from the medieval.

Credit for coining the term *natural magic* (*ars magica naturalis*) belongs to Albert's older contemporary William of Auvergne (1190–1249). As William used the term, natural magic encompasses natural phenomena of otherwise indeterminate cause. The proper field of natural philosophy relies on resemblances and contrarieties construed between the cause of a change and the observed change. The characteristic properties hot, cold, dry, and wet are, for example, central to ancient and medieval natural philosophy. Thus water's boiling in a pot can be explained with reference to the burning wood on which the pot sits. William was confident in the power of natural philosophy to explain nearly all natural phenomena and dismissed most of what was regarded as magical and wondrous in his day as ultimately explicable with natural philosophy. William's confidence has been taken to foreshadow the robust mechanism that defined modern science in the seventeenth century. Nonetheless, by William's reckoning, some natural phenomena have causes that are not based on similarity and contrariety. These are hidden causes. Examples of hidden causation include the generation of frogs and lice because these animals seemed to generate without parents. The power of rubies to dispel noxious fumes was similarly an occult one. While unexpected in the sense of not being explicable through conventional natural philosophy, such occult operations were taken to be fundamentally natural. William accordingly judged it permissible to take advantage of them, and he called the study and manipulation of occult forces the art of natural magic.¹⁰ Although Albert and William briefly lived in Paris simultaneously, Albert did not adopt the term *natural magic* and developed his own similar concept differently from William, especially in his treatment of celestial influences.¹¹

An alternative term Albert used for natural magic was *nigromancy*. Nigromancy is conventionally placed among the most disreputable words in the glossaries of medieval and early modern magic. In its vilest usage it referred to the conjuration of demons. In later centuries it connoted an exchange of the summoned demon's perverse aid for the conjurer's immortal soul. The word, however, has a frustrating history of shifting meaning. In its oldest iterations the word *necromancy*—from the Greek *nekros*, denoting dead, and *mantia*, denoting divination—indicated ceremonies for the conjuration of the dead. As a broad range of Arabic texts began being translated into Latin in the twelfth century, *necromancy* was used to translate an Arabic word for magic that did not necessarily insinuate conjuration.¹² Simultaneously, a fateful orthographical

confusion emerged in Latin texts as *nigromancy* (now drawing from the Latin word for “black”) began to be used interchangeably with *necromancy*. Now yet another, pernicious meaning was adjoined to the older one—namely, the conjuring of demons. In any given medieval manuscript from about 1100 onward, the word’s meaning, regardless of the spelling, must be discerned from other indications in the text.¹³

Further confusing matters, some thinkers attempted to distinguish between good and evil forms of nigromancy. In his *Dialogues Against the Jews* Petrus Alfonsi (d. after 1116), a Jewish Spanish physician, astronomer, and Christian convert much influenced by the Arabic learning circulating in the Iberian Peninsula, classified nigromancy as a liberal art and divided it into nine parts. Four of them had to do with the elements—earth, air, fire, and water—and the remaining five concerned the conjuring of “wicked spirits.”¹⁴ Not long after, Dominicus Gundissalinus (1115–1190), a prolific translator of Arabic texts into Latin and much inspired by the tenth-century commentator on Aristotle al-Farabi, sketched eight particular natural sciences in *On the Divisions of Philosophy*. He placed what he called “nigromancy according to physics” (*nigromancia secundum physicam*) in his taxonomy of natural sciences alongside medicine, agriculture, navigation, and optics as well as the “science of images,” astrology, and alchemy. In this sense nigromancy is the science of properties, which could be deemed natural, astrological, or magical. *On the Divisions of Philosophy* circulated widely, and its overview of natural sciences surfaced in other treatises on human knowledge across Europe. “Nigromancy according to physics” linked the natural sciences of medieval Dar al-Islam to the Latin West and informed early notions of natural magic. The challenge throughout the later medieval and early modern periods for theorists of natural magic would be to keep it clear of the scurrilous practices Isidore had condemned six centuries earlier.¹⁵

Gundissalinus’s list of natural sciences included three more fields that Albert wrote about and that later interpreters of Albert sometimes struggled to evaluate as magic. The first is astrology, the study of the influence of celestial bodies and their movements on human society. Throughout the Middle Ages, celestial movements were observed, measured, and recorded so that future movements could be predicted and their influence anticipated. The claims that mathematical calculation undergirded astrological divination (called judicial astrology or judgments), that there were such celestial influences on the human world, and that they could be apprehended were regarded as legitimate and rational. The claim that certain readings of the future undermine human free will, however, was regarded as condemnable by Christian theologians, such as Isidore. The

dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate astrology remained a lively and unresolved debate throughout the era.¹⁶

The second field is alchemy, which in contrast to astrology, became a subject of vigorous interest in the Latin West only with the reception of Arab learning in the twelfth century. The earliest treatises on alchemy describe the manipulations of material objects in ways that engendered skepticism when they seemed to contradict Aristotelian theories of the elements. As time went on, the metaphorical expressions its adepts used in describing procedures as well as the ritualistic appeals for spiritual aids in alchemical formulae and recipes made alchemy the object of ever greater critical scrutiny. Questions sharpened as to whose aid the alchemists sought to work their transmutations and to what ends they undertook their experiments.¹⁷

The third natural science, the so-called science of images, presupposed that the special emanations from celestial bodies could be harnessed to marvelous effect through signs drawn onto or engraved into objects such as gems. That the crafting entailed precise knowledge of the stars, objects like gems, and signs was in itself unproblematic. That the crafting sometimes entailed particular incantations and rituals smacked of wickedest nigromancy. Like the other two disciplines, the science of images was a disputed field. Albert and his student Thomas Aquinas disagreed on the question of the craft's morality. Albert, here and for topics like it, pushed the limit of the permissible further than his contemporaries. It is precisely his tenacity in seeking out natural explanations that attracted later experimenters in natural magic and caused confusion for later generations trying to make his thought flawlessly orthodox.¹⁸

Telling a Magician: A Historiographical Challenge

Modern scholarship ordinarily treats magic, in its many forms, in implicit or explicit conjunction with two other major fields of human endeavor, religion and science.¹⁹ There are two main reasons for this, one having to do with shared content, the other with the modern scholarship itself. What magic, religion, and science share is an interest in understanding the natural world. This interest is of course definitional to the natural sciences. While less self-evidently so to religion, the interest is central to ancient and medieval religion as well. Not only Christianity but also the other monotheistic religions and many of the polytheistic religions and philosophical systems in Europe and the Mediterranean world hold some notion of a creating divinity. In consequence, thinking about nature has invariably led to thinking about the divine and vice versa.

Indeed, Christianity's dogma of creation was generally taken in the Middle Ages and early modern period to dignify the study of the natural world on its own terms, and it bore itself further out in the medieval effort to separate natural philosophy as an academic discipline in its own right from theology.

Modern scholarship on magic has maintained attention to science and religion as vital, if also sometimes anguished, partners. Within early sociology and anthropology, the triad of religion, magic, and science as rivalrous human approaches to the workings of the natural world emerged, each approach placed along a measure of rationality according to how it explains causation in the natural world. Early twentieth-century functional structuralism described the relationship among the three in evolutionary terms, but without unanimity among its theorists as to the ordering of religion and magic prior to the emergence of natural science. Subsequent scholarship into magic has reacted with skepticism toward evolutionary approaches for arriving at conclusions unduly shaped by the prejudices of researchers and for sacrificing precision in the drive to generate a general theory. Nonetheless, the legacy of this older scholarship still looms in the background of historical studies of magic today.²⁰

The partnership between science and religion in the handling of magic is particularly germane to our purposes, as Albert observed in his own writings a distinction between theological and philosophical (scientific) assessments of what he identified as magic. By Albert's lights, how magic works is first and foremost a problem for the natural philosopher; whether it is good to practice is a problem for the theologian. Further, magic effected by celestial influences on the hidden properties of natural objects lends itself to testing against theories of the natural sciences; magic worked in concert with demons, however, warrants theological or ethical interpretation. He generally addressed the former issues in philosophical works like the *De mineralibus* (On minerals) and the *De vegetabilibus* (On botany), and the latter in theological works like his *Summa theologiae* (Systematic compendium of theology) and his *Super Sententiarum* (Commentary on the sentences of Peter Lombard). Albert shared such distinguishing efforts in principle with most fellow scholastics: Magic had a place on both sides of the frontier demarking what is proper to the philosopher versus the theologian. Moreover, even with very different notions of rationality, empiricism, and ethics, medieval and modern approaches to magic are roughly parallel: regardless of how different the overarching worldviews of medieval and modern scholarship can be, there is a shared tendency to evaluate magic against conceptions of what constitutes religion and science.

Measures of religions and scientific systems on scales of rationality have their own histories, and cautions against them in recent scholarship offer additional guardrails for our analysis of Albert's magic and his reputation as a magician.

Reacting to the hydra-like indomitability of calculated scholarly contrasts between the enchanted Christianity of the Middle Ages and the rational Christianity of modern Europe, the historian Alexandra Walsham offers her colleagues in the field of religious history a caution pertinent to historians of science and of magic. Each of us is, she opined, still “a product and a prisoner of [earlier] historiographical and epistemological trends” that instrumentalize the medieval for the sake of the modern; the temptation to craft new grand narratives for the sake of analogous agenda, she argued, remains.²¹ The history of science has been similarly afflicted, and the historian of science and medicine John Henry, motivated like Walsham, laments a tendency among his colleagues to extract from historical sources—in this case, works of alchemy and astronomy—whatever rings modern and to leave aside the rest as tare to modern science’s wheat. He proposes instead a comprehensive approach that evaluates even superstitious and irrational elements as potentially essential parts of the process of scientific development and thus necessary to integrate into overarching studies.²² The danger of analyzing magic in history arises from the penchant to classify medieval understandings of nature that are wrong or that fail to correspond to the modern ones as irrational, superstitious, and magical and therefore are not worth further consideration.

At the intersection of the lexical and historiographical problems outlined so far is a rivalry between analyzing as magic what is presented in the historical sources as such and analyzing what appears in the sources to be magic according to a modern definition of magic.²³ Aligning with one side versus the other solves some problems only to cause others, and most historians try working with both approaches in some balance. Echoing Walsham’s and Henry’s critiques of their respective fields, the medievalist Isabelle Draelants blames the problem of defining magic on “the evolution of intellectual categories between the Middle Ages and the present day” and rejects as “useless” both the historian’s view of “the progress of the sciences away from superstition” and the structuralist’s “distinctions between science and magic.”²⁴ In short, the aspiration to discern in the presumed diminishing history of magic an inevitable march toward greater human reason distorts the analysis of magic in history.

Investigation into Albert’s reputation as a magician, as such, requires alertness to the shifting and ambiguous meanings of magic that separate what Albert meant from how his interpreters understood him, indeed from the thirteenth century to the present. It is a problem of contextualized understandings of magic in history not resonating. If magic could not avoid being diabolical, as a fifteenth-century Dominican could hold, what possible sense could be made of Ulrich’s exuberant celebration of Albert’s magic except to reimagine what Ulrich meant. Or, more subtly, as alchemy developed from a laboratorial practice

in the twelfth century to an evocatively mystical one in the sixteenth, the alchemical lab manuals of the earlier era could not help but come under new, hostile scrutiny. The change in judgment reflected not only changing contexts but specifically what was expressed and understood as magic in various historical moments. Along these lines, the historical study of magic is fascinating to religious studies scholar Bernd-Christian Otto not only for its range of referents but also for the range of dispositions brought to bear upon it, from the polemical and ostracizing to the forensic and the valorizing.²⁵ Attentiveness to such distinctions—in an approach he identifies as historical discourse analysis—helps unpack the recurrent renegotiating of Albert's equivocal reputation as a magician in two key respects.

First, it situates and obviates a challenge against regarding Albert as a magician at all. For example, Alain de Libera, one leading modern interpreter of Albert's philosophy, has remarked, "It must be said in the strongest possible terms: Albert's work has nothing to do with magic," and, "This tireless reader probably did not, as far as we can imagine, handle vials of chickweed, spurge, or houseleek juice, virgin boy's urine, bean blossom water, and bleak scales."²⁶ Leaving aside for the moment that Albert's studies of the natural world likely did bring him into contact with each of those ingredients, that very list is hardly the sole indicator of magical practice between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Furthermore, the very argument lends itself to polemics, sometimes in a valorizing mode vis-à-vis Albert's reputation as a magician, but here in an ostracizing one.

Second, Otto's contextualizing distinctions offer terms with which to understand two key turning points in this book: The first turning point occurs between the first and second chapters. In chapter 1 Albert's writings about magic are the principal focus and thus he is an active participant in the discussion over magic: what it is, how it works, and whether it is good to practice. Afterward, Albert's reputation as a magician is the principal focus, and he metamorphoses from participant to subject. Complicating matters, while Albert's writings constituted a reference for the later discourses, there was no undisputed canon of those writings, pseudepigrapha gained and lost legitimacy, and the range of topics he wrote about as magic expanded and shrank accordingly. The second turning point appears between the second and the third chapters. In the second chapter, the analysis focuses on historical figures and writings that assume magic works and is good to practice; chapter 3 examines those who thought to the contrary. What accumulates across these chapters is evidence of Albert's emergence as an instrument for partisan engagement in larger disputes over magic and more generally knowledge of the natural world. Just as knowing that the applied definition of magic helps us understand claims about Albert's magic, so studying

Albert's ambiguous and elastic reputation gives evidence of how what counted as magic changed.

That the famed schoolman earned a reputation as a magician in the thirteenth century and lost it in the eighteenth raises the question whether his history is one of disenchantment. The answer is not as straightforward as one might expect, and not only because *disenchantment* itself is such a fraught term. On the one hand, this investigation into Albert's reputation as a magician, in its broadest scope, exposes a diminished capacity in diverse European circles of learning to take someone seriously as a magician. Such developments across six centuries imply "disenchantment" in the sense of an increasing faith in reason and empiricism to explain natural phenomena without recourse to mysterious or supernatural forces. On the other hand, generation by generation Albert's reputation as a magician, viewed positively or negatively, did not progressively disappear; neither its support nor its opposition followed consistent, momentum-gathering strategies. Any assessment of disenchantment must begin with the recognition that on certain topics—for example, talismans activated by celestial influences—Albert was more likely to emphasize natural chains of causation (over demonic or miraculous ones) than many contemporaries as well as later devotees who claimed him as the precedent and inspiration for their identifications of magic. In turn, those who reacted against Albert's reputation often drew from contemporaneous approaches to magic that assumed much more demonic and miraculous interference in nature's common course than Albert had.

My analysis of Albert's naturalism and that of those who reacted to his engagement with magical topics has implications for the continuing evaluation and critique of the grand narrative of disenchantment in Western modernity. I have found the work of three scholars especially stimulating for my own thinking about disenchantment outside the now-fraught terms within which it has been traditionally understood in European history: Michael Bailey, who proposes the oscillating nature of superstition in its relation to skepticism in European intellectual history;²⁷ Alan Charles Kors, who, in an influential, revisionist history of the Enlightenment, locates the origins of much eighteenth-century thinking about secularism, atheism, and naturalism in expressly theological debates of earlier periods;²⁸ and Jason A. Josephson-Storm, whose expressed aim is to demythologize what he regards as the myth of disenchantment and who rejects a march of ineluctable progress from "enchanted ontologies and spiritualized orientations to nature" to the apprehension of "an unmediated cosmos . . . with the sparkling clarity of universal rationality."²⁹ While these scholars do not cleanly align with one another on questions of rationality and skepticism, and disenchantment and Enlightenment, in European history, they do collectively support what we in fact find by studying Albert's stance on magic

and his evolving reputation as a magician: that both *magic* and *disenchantment* are ambiguous and elastic terms, and that when understood as such, they are all the more useful in making sense of debates over them.

Telling a Magician: The History—A Precedent?

The development of Albert's reputation as a magician is better described as labyrinthine than linear or even oscillating. Both those who approved of and those who rejected the practice of magic itself were consistent, though, in holding Albert immune from condemnation for his association with magic. This immunity begs the question whether Albert's treatment was unusual. He was certainly not the only learned figure of the Middle Ages associated with the practice of magic. The seventeenth-century librarian Gabriel Naudé composed an encyclopedic volume dedicated to exonerating many historical figures, from antiquity to his own day, falsely accused of sorcery.³⁰ The volume's table of contents reads like a roll call in honor of Mediterranean and European magicians. Albert is but one of forty-two cases Naudé addressed. The variety of figures on the list—from Numa Pompilius (715–673 BCE), the second king of Rome, who allegedly used demonic conjuring to subjugate the Roman people, to the reforming abbot and humanist Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516), whose *Steganographia*, a work on angelic cryptography, enemies denounced as itself diabolical—draws attention to the wide variety of ways magical powers were imputed to historical figures. In this group, Albert stands out as a practitioner of magic regarded as such in his own lifetime and based on his own acknowledgment. Examining the similar reputations of four other medieval figures—namely, those of the pope Gerbert of Aurillac, the philosopher Roger Bacon, the physician Peter of Abano, and the astronomer Cecco of Ascoli—draws Albert's distinctiveness into higher relief.

In the case of Gerbert of Aurillac (945–1003), like that of Albert, great learning drew him to study magic. But the accusations against Gerbert, unlike those against Albert, predominantly involved demonic magic, emerged only after his death, and were aggravated by the charge of ecclesiastical ambition. Indeed, Gerbert ranks as the medieval sorcerer simultaneously most prominent and most vilified: prominent, because he held the papacy for four years under the name Sylvester II and because he left a substantial body of correspondence and scholarly writing extant to the present day;³¹ vilified, because of the efforts taken to denounce him by factions in the Investiture Contest.³² The earliest explanations for Gerbert's successes in the worlds of learning and power that pointed to magical proficiency date to the late eleventh century, long after his death. A German prelate, a certain Benno, perhaps of Osnabrück (1020–1088),

drew a connection between the reforming pope Gregory VII (Benno's contemporary) backward to Gerbert as the later pope's teacher. He denounced them both as sorcerers. Sigebert of Gembloux (1035–1112) reiterated Benno's censure in his *Chronica*. He acknowledged Gerbert's learning but repeated the accusation of demonic conjuration, reported that the devil himself had beaten Gerbert to death, and urged his removal from the list of valid popes.³³

The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman history writer William of Malmesbury gave the stories legendary form in his *Deeds of the English Kings*: Gerbert's accomplishments, he explained, were attained in an exchange with the devil for his soul. Gerbert's pact with the devil came, by William's account, during his studies in Muslim al-Andalus (not Christian Catalonia, as was more likely the case). Gerbert's lust for knowledge led him first to purloin a book of secret knowledge, the one most valued in the collection of his Saracen tutor. Trapped by rising floodwaters on his flight back to France, he turned to the book, conjured a demon, and exchanged his soul for the powers he needed to evade capture. By the same means, once home he acquired new depths of knowledge, insinuated himself into circles of spiritual and temporal authority, and won ecclesiastical dignities all the way to the papacy. Once regarded by those who favored his nomination to the papacy, including the emperor Otto III, as a committed reformer and imperial loyalist, Gerbert numbered, by William's reckoning, among the most depraved figures in all Christian history.³⁴ Papal chroniclers defended both Gerbert and Gregory through the centuries, but William's version of Gerbert's sorcery was repeated in influential places, including in the thirteenth-century compendium *The Mirror of History* by Vincent of Beauvais.³⁵

The emergence of Roger Bacon's reputation as an Oxford magus likewise emerged only after his death even though he had written extensively and largely disapprovingly of magic. Bacon (1220–1292), Albert's younger contemporary, referred to magic in his *Opus maius* and *Opus tertium* and composed a work known under the title "On the Secret Works of Art and Nature and the Nullity of Magic." As he used the term, magic is mainly deceptive and illusory, even in the rare moments when he allowed for the possibility of spirits' cooperating with conjurers. The wonders of nature, he argued, surpass the illusions of any magician, even if the two kinds of phenomenon are easily confused. Bacon himself regarded magical arts as illicit and misused knowledge.³⁶ While his explanation of magic rendered anything like good or white magic nonsensical, his idea of experimental science corresponded in part to what contemporaries saw in natural magic.

Groundwork for his reputation as a sorcerer was laid in a late fourteenth-century Franciscan chronicle that recorded a vague allegation that Bacon's own Franciscan order had condemned him for writing about certain "novelties." Afterward another friar, Peter of Trau (fl. 1385), reported that Bacon had created

a mirror that allowed his students to see what people were doing anywhere in the world. While Bacon's authentic works were consulted, quoted, and sometimes plagiarized in the later Middle Ages, additional works on magic were being composed and falsely attributed to him. Listing several of these spurious titles in his *Famous Writers of Great Britain* (1548), the English churchman and religious controversialist John Bale (1495–1563) denounced Bacon as an “enchanter and conjurer.”³⁷ Although Bale later reversed his judgment and called the charge of conjuring a defamation, the sixteenth-century accusation left a consequential paper trail.³⁸

As in Albert's case, fictional literature spread Bacon's reputation as a magician. Indeed, Bacon's conjurations made their most influential appearance not in a learned treatise but in a play, Robert Greene's comedy *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1592). Greene drew most of his material from the less successful and anonymous *Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (ca. 1590). The plays put in circulation a set of stories about Bacon as a magician: that he used a mirror to reveal a secret romance to a jealous lover, transported people inexplicably from one place to another, summoned the ghost of Julius Caesar to contend with that of Pompey at a royal banquet, and strove unsuccessfully to construct a talking head with the aid of celestial and demonic powers. In the play, Bacon ends his magical investigations when two students fight each other to the death after witnessing a duel between their fathers in his magical mirror. Bacon, appalled, renounces magic and leads ever after a life of penance.³⁹

Again, as in Albert's case, a defense of Bacon finally emerged: in 1557 John Dee composed an essay, no longer extant, that defended Bacon as the consummate Christian and his accomplishments as free of any diabolism. Naudé numbered Bacon among history's misunderstood geniuses. Late seventeenth-century attempts within the Royal Society to collect and publish Bacon's scientific works, though unsuccessful, still drew serious attention to Bacon as an experimenter and inventor.⁴⁰ Bacon receives multiple mentions in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. These references are fewer and generally less exuberant than those to Albert, but sometimes, as in the article on chemistry, comparison turns in Bacon's favor. A brief biography of Bacon is included in the article on scholasticism. Bacon, the author reported, “took the habit of a Franciscan, but wasted his time neither arguing nor languishing. He studied nature, sought its secrets, and devoted himself entirely to astronomy, chemistry, optics, and mechanics. He made great progress in experimental physics such that one can see in him the hints of several discoveries that were made only in centuries much later than his own.” The article concludes with an account of the accusations of magic against Bacon and his sufferings at the hand of his order: “The favor of the pope did not reduce his enemies to inaction: they

turned to his order's superior, who condemned his doctrine, suppressed his works, and threw him into a dungeon.³⁴¹

Born fifty years after Albert but already in his twenties and advanced in his studies at Constantinople when Albert died, Peter of Abano (ca. 1250/57–1315/16) was a Paduan physician and philosopher. His major work was the *Reconciler of the Differences Between Philosophers and Physicians*, in which he addressed issues pertaining to astral influences and astrology.⁴² Several additional treatises on astral influences and astrology—the *Illuminator of the Doubtful Things of Astronomy*, *On the Movement of the Eighth Sphere*, and *On Images*—enjoyed more limited circulation.⁴³ He wrote well-received treatises on poisons and physiognomy as well. His medical insights were founded on Ptolemy, Galen, and Avicenna and earned favorable citation up to the seventeenth century.

His perspective on several points of cosmology coincided with Albert's, and he likewise gained a reputation as a magician. Peter regarded the influences of celestial movements on humans as a significant part of the study of nature. Peter saw in astrological influences the effects of the celestial realm's perfection on the terrestrial realm's imperfection. Like Albert, he was reluctant to explain remarkable phenomena in the world with reference to the intervention of angels and demons. Both Peter and Albert distinguished the science of the stars from anything diabolical, which they repeatedly condemned. Along these lines, both men accepted the crafting and use of talismans as benign in principle. Both were inclined to natural understandings of hidden properties and in this regard drew from interpretations of Aristotle developed in the Muslim world and newly arriving in the Latin West in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴⁴

More like Bacon's reputation than Albert's, however, Peter's reputation was related to an ambiguous set of interactions that he had had with ecclesiastical authorities and that became disparaging only after his death. The nature of Peter's conflict with ecclesiastical authorities remains unclear. He alluded to it in his own writing, and terms in his will have been interpreted as stratagems to protect his property for his family should he be condemned. On the one hand, his astrological determinism, rejection of the conventional association of demons with mental illness, explanation of saintly miracles as wondrous, and extensive treatment of the effectiveness of medically therapeutic incantations could all have attracted official inquisitorial attention. On the other, he affirmed in the *Reconciler* an important distinction between his philosophical speculation and his unreserved adherence to Christian doctrine. He likely appeared before ecclesiastical tribunals on two occasions. The first court acquitted him, but he died during the second trial and that court posthumously condemned him. The court then ordered his body be exhumed and burned. When his body was not found, he was burned in effigy. Michele Savonarola

(1385–1466), a physician, humanist, and history writer, as well as a grandfather of the ill-fated Dominican reformer Girolamo, provided an unreliable link between Peter and the pseudepigrapha in a story that focused on the hostility of Parisian Dominicans toward Peter for dabblings in illicit magic.⁴⁵ The foremost modern scholar of Peter's life and thought, however, has declared the circumstances surrounding his death and attempted *damnatio* a mystery.⁴⁶

Much like Albert's reputation, Peter's hung on the reception of both authentic and inauthentic writings that circulated in subsequent centuries. In the fifteenth century Peter's authentic medical works enjoyed multiple printings, and multiple treatises on conjuring and divination, misascribed to him, began appearing, too. *Experiments with Rings*, for example, was an illusionist's handbook based on an Arab notion of the moon's twenty-eight mansions (segments in its rotational path in the sky around the Earth),⁴⁷ and the *Commentary on Magic* was a compendium of astral magic and conjuration published under the title "Heptameron" in Heinrich Agrippa's *On Occult Philosophy* in 1565.⁴⁸ Moreover, Marcilio Ficino was convinced of Peter's sorcery, and Giovanni Pico attacked Peter's medical astrology in his *Disputations Against Divinatory Astrology*.⁴⁹ Trithemius was more cautious: in a paragraph that followed one in which he defended Albert against any necromantic insinuations, he allowed that Peter may not have written such works as the *Commentary* but affirmed that the author, also of other books under Peter's name, was "vain and superstitious in all things."⁵⁰

Naudé defended Peter in the *Apologie*, enthusing that Peter ought to be numbered among the brightest figures in an otherwise ignorant age and that his *Reconciler* should be considered among the most insightful works on medicine and astronomy.⁵¹ Naudé's exoneration of Peter is as exuberant as the *Encyclopédie's* is stingy. In the latter's entry on scholasticism, Peter ranks among the movement's minor figures. The contributor drew attention to the accusations of magic against him, as he also had for Bacon but not for Albert, and sarcastically opined, "It is not clear why he was given this honor. Today he would only be thought a miserable astrologer and a ridiculous charlatan."⁵²

The sharpest contrast of the four figures under consideration to Albert is found in the case of Cecco of Ascoli (1257–1327), who, as a self-professed conjurer, was executed for nigromancy in 1327. Cecco taught astronomy at Bologna and earned renown in his day for a commentary on the thirteenth-century astronomical work *The Sphere of the World* by Johannes de Sacrobosco as well as for handbooks on cosmology and astrology. Despite his attracting hostile attention from church authorities, the duke of Calabria hired him to make astrological forecasts for him in 1326.⁵³ Less than a year later, his fortune turned: inquisitors charged, tried, and condemned Cecco, and he was burned at the stake on 26 September 1327. Once again, incomplete records make the exact charges a matter

of some speculation today. His commentary on *The Sphere* contained passages on astrological nigromancy, a form of demonology that places demons within the cosmic sphere and accessible through ceremonies to humans. Such writings, let alone activity, would easily have attracted the censure of ecclesiastical authorities. His nigromancy drew on the learning newly reaching the Latin West from the Muslim world, and he tapped magical traditions allegedly originating with the biblical Solomon. Parts of his writing also indicate tendencies to astrological fatalism regarding human judgment and astrological determinism regarding sacred events. His condemnation followed so closely upon Pope John XXII's condemnation of ritual magic in *Super illius specula* that it is hard not to conclude that Cecco was executed to make of him an example during the bull's early implementation.⁵⁴ Cecco received scant attention in later centuries. Naudé listed him with Socrates, Iamblichus, and Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484–1558)—that is, among those whose greatest inspirations came from their own particular genii—but offered scarcely a word specific to his life or writings.⁵⁵ The editors of the *Encyclopédie* passed over Cecco in silence. Girolamo Tiraboschi (1731–1794), the librarian to the duke of Modena and Reggio, linked Peter and Cecco as astrologers in his famous review of Italian literature, *The History of Italian Literature*. He retold the story of Cecco's condemnation for conjuring and evaluated favorably Cecco's "Acerba," a poetic work of some five thousand verses on nature, morals, and philosophy that touches on astrology and the occult.⁵⁶

These four cases offer a sketch of the diverse and unpredictable routes by which learned medieval figures earned reputations as practitioners of magic, sometimes during, sometimes after their lifetimes. In all four cases the scrutiny they attracted as reputed practitioners of magic was predominantly hostile, and in two cases it led to judicial condemnations (Peter and Cecco). Concern for demonic associations, however contrived, has a part in each of these stories. Albert's own reputation for thinking about and practicing magic developed in the same intellectual and cultural landscape that these four figures inhabited. Yet, unlike them, Albert traversed it unscathed. Adding Albert to the group underscores how ambiguous, capricious, and elastic the links were between what particular thinkers wrote and their reputations as magicians in a given moment and what the implications of that judgment could be.

Telling a Magician: The History

With this context now set, we turn to the outlines of the analysis that follows, chapter by chapter. Each chapter takes aim at a phase in the development of Albert's reputation as a magician from his own day to, by the epilogue, our own.

Chapter 1, “Albert’s Magic,” lays the groundwork by outlining Albert’s own understanding of magic, beginning with an analysis of his affirmation of magic in *De anima* and expanding to include his treatment of magic, natural and demonic, in his philosophical and theological works. Chapter 2, “The Magical Albert,” traces the emergence of Albert’s reputation as an expert in magic, beginning during his lifetime and following its positive expression in the fifteenth century. This chapter draws into consideration early life-writing about Albert as well as the composition of legends concerning his magical activities, the emergence of pseudepigrapha and early debates over his genuine bibliography, the effects of new understandings of magic on understandings of what Albert had written, and, most important, how little concern his evolving reputation as a magician attracted from ecclesiastical and academic authorities.

The next three chapters follow the critical approaches to Albert’s reputation for magic in stages. Their subjects share the aim of making Albert’s thought less “magical,” but they achieve this through different means, first moralizing, then historicizing, and finally, scientific. They tap, each in their own way, into discourses of magic’s ostracism. Chapter 3, “Albertus Sanctus,” analyzes the beginnings of an unease with his reputation as a magician. That unease can sometimes be detected in an oblique defensiveness, as when the Dominican theologian Luis de Valladolid prepared a list of Albert’s authentic writings around 1414 that accented Albert’s opposition to diabolical magic. Sometimes it took a disapproving stance, as when the distinguished theologian and university chancellor at Paris Jean Gerson, in a rare word of direct criticism, judged Albert’s supposed treatment of astrology “unworthy of a Christian thinker” in 1419.⁵⁷ A full-scale effort was finally mounted late in the century to scrub Albert’s reputation of any blemish of magical proclivity. The participants in this campaign hoped to settle the matter once and for all with his canonization, and in consequence more biographical writing about Albert was composed in the two-decade period beginning in 1470 than in the preceding two centuries. Study of the canonization efforts uncovers new, high stakes to settling the question of what Albert had been doing in the thirteenth century now in the era of burgeoning witch trials. By the lights of his Dominican advocates, what Albert really wrote and all the more what others wrote about him and put under his name put his sterling reputation in jeopardy and had to be, as necessary, rewritten and refuted. What their efforts demonstrate, in comparison with the history of the preceding chapters, is that as much purposefulness could be applied to excising certain ideas and activities from Albert’s résumé as imputing them to it.

The concerted fifteenth-century attempt to rescue Albert’s reputation not only failed to achieve his canonization; it also failed to snuff out curiosity about his alleged sorcerous propensities. The circulation of legends and pseudepigrapha



ALBERT LÉ GRAND,

Fig. 1. “Albert Studies Nature.” In (Pseudo-)Albertus Magnus, *Le Grand Albert et ses secrets merveilleux* (Paris: Le Bailly, 1865), iv. The image places Albert the Great in both the foreground—in a makeshift laboratory that includes alchemical equipment—and the background, in the field studying animals. A biographical chapter in the volume is devoted to “Albert the Sorcerer.”

continued in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, much buoyed by the printing press. *The Grand Albert*, a book of secrets with medieval roots ascribed to him, for example, remained a publishing favorite into the nineteenth century (fig. 1).⁵⁸ The title was sufficiently representative of magic and superstition in the early modern period that the French priest and satirist Laurent Bordelon placed it next to *The Lesser Albert*,⁵⁹ a similarly famous book of conjurations, on the bookshelf of the hapless protagonist of his *History of the Ridiculous Extravagancies of Monsieur Oufle* in 1710, noting such books were “in credit among fools.”⁶⁰

Arguments continued across all epochs of European intellectual history over what the magic of earlier generations had meant, and Albert's connections to magic surfaced again and again as a case worth examining. In contrast to the late fifteenth-century objections to Albert's reputation for magic, the later authors who turned to address Albert's magic expressed little interest in the ecclesiastical or moral implications of what Albert might have thought and done. Whereas fifteenth-century arguments emphasized Albert's piety hand in hand with his rationality as characteristics mitigating against the possibility of his practicing magic, the later inquirers were more concerned with what Albert had written about the natural world in comparison to the natural sciences of his own day and theirs. Rather than drawing Albert's scholarly integrity from his moral character, as the generation who had sought his canonization had done, these investigators were interested in assessing how Albert explained the natural world in the first place.

Chapter 4, "The Historical Albert," evaluates the first of the two secular attempts to resolve the problem of Albert's reputation for magic. It takes Gabriel Naudé's seminal text in this regard, *Apologie pour tous les grands personages faussement soupçonnez de magie* (A defense of all great persons falsely suspected of magic) (1625).⁶¹ Naudé's volume comprises sections on the nature of magic and on history writing. Naudé applied these theoretical points to a set of cases to exculpate the "falsely suspected." Naudé acquitted Albert with a two-pronged argument deployed throughout the volume: first, that envious contemporaries had maliciously confused brilliance with superstition, and second, that allegations of magic too easily allowed lazy history writers to titillate foolish readers. While making cursory allowance for Albert's moral integrity, Naudé established a framework for understanding advances in the natural sciences and emphasized Albert's commitment to natural-scientific knowledge and the principles of rational, empirical discovery, which gave cause for admiration but also excused Albert even when, from the perspective of later science, he might have been wrong. Naudé's *Apologie* became the locus classicus in treatments of magic and its practitioners for the next two centuries. Scarcely a scholarly work on magic can be found in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that does not rely on Naudé's *Apologie*.

Among the writings that were most dependent on Naudé's work and approach was the quintessential repository of learning in the eighteenth century, the encyclopedia. In that era of great philosophical accomplishment and contest, the encyclopedic genre was as much a tool of propaganda as of reference and education. The genre found fertile soil across Europe and proved itself a reliable, supple, and effective instrument for every side in an era of heightened religious, philosophical, and national rivalries. In this respect, the most famous of

encyclopedias, Diderot and d'Alembert's, is but one of many such works.⁶² The fifth chapter, "The Encyclopedic Albert," turns to these encyclopedias precisely because they demonstrate the era's intellectual and cultural complexity. What its investigation finds is that despite the captiousness of the times and even as Albert's thought was judged to be surpassed, encyclopedia authors of every stripe handled him with consistent respect: Albert was a man learned in matters of the natural world, perhaps even worthy of association with the naturalists of the most recent periods. Scholarly contributors to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* treated Albert's accomplishments no less graciously than did the Jesuits in their *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, even as they acknowledged inadequacies in his work when judged against the natural sciences of the eighteenth century. While Albert's own students lauded him for his expertise in magic and two centuries later Dominican confreres denounced the calumny, two centuries still later philosophes and Jesuits passed over Albert's magic and analyzed instead the knowledge of the natural world he attained. Albert's learning was still, by many measures, great, but his magic had become immaterial.

Across the approximately six centuries under review in *Disenchanting Albert the Great* and in each of the next five chapters and epilogue, different dimensions of Albert's rich and multifaceted scholarship rise into and sink out of view. The almost effervescent quality of this variation reflects not only what Albert thought about the complex topic of magic but also the ideas, ever-changing among his readers, about what magic could be, how it worked, and whether it was good to practice. Judgments changed across time, as did the content of what was being evaluated as magic. *Disenchanting Albert the Great* can be taken therefore as a case study in the history of both magic and disenchantment across the six centuries under review. The study is about one leading medieval thinker's relationship to magic and the history of reactions to it. Extracted from Max Weber's well-known thesis that links processes of rationalization, disenchanted approaches to the natural world, and Western modernity, the search for disenchantment in Albert's reputation as a magician has implications for understanding what disenchantment could mean in intellectual history, but in a twofold, upended sense. First, *Disenchanting Albert the Great* is an analysis of one scholastic philosopher's naturalizing tendencies in treating forces shaping the natural world, of which many were deemed inexplicable according to the conventional approaches of his own day. For Albert identifying certain phenomena as magic was not about expanding the realm of the mysterious and unknowable, but quite the reverse—namely, keeping these phenomena and their causes within the sphere of the natural. They were, as it were, knowable unknowns.

Second, it is a history of how that disenchanting approach to natural phenomena inspired responses that in turn enchanted and reenchanted Albert and

his thought. We see this in the tendentious appeals to Albert's legacy as an endorsement for kinds of magical arts that the *doctor universalis* would have neither recognized as magic nor approved of. Critical interpretations followed as well, sometimes analyzing what Albert himself had written, sometimes critiquing what others had written about or ascribed to Albert, and then turning to other matters altogether. Responses of this latter sort constituted a kind of disenchantment, however unevenly, until discussion of Albert's magic passed across the threshold of 1800. Then, a scholarly interest in ascertaining his contribution to and place in a history of natural sciences managed to displace interest in his magic qua magic. What lingered as a reputation for magic thereafter no longer had to do with what he had actually written or done, or even what his contemporaries thought he had done. At long last, the Albert who had worked as a natural philosopher to disenchant the cosmos but who ended up himself enchanted, was disenchanting and recognized as a master of natural knowledge, which is what he had, in fact, aspired to all along.