Introduction

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The history of magic is intimately entwined with political history. The connection is embedded in the very language we use to talk about politics. Politicians are practitioners of the 'dark arts' and form 'cabals', while an individual politician might be a 'Svengali', a 'prince of darkness' or a 'witch'. Probing deeper into the language of politics, the Latin word *coniuratio* has the double meaning of a political conspiracy and a magical conjuration, while the Bible itself warns that 'rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft' (1 Samuel 15:23). But magic is far more than just a source of political metaphors; in past centuries – and even in more recent years – concerns about magic routinely impinged on political decision-making. As one historian has observed, 'Precisely because there was a mystical dimension to politics … there was a political dimension to magic; both were modifications of the same world of thought'.[1] That world of thought had both negative and positive expressions, based on both fear and hope, and throughout British history the idea of a wise royal magical adviser based on the legendary figure of Merlin has been a persistent theme, while more than one ruler has aspired to the occult wisdom of King Solomon. Yet the political histories of England, Scotland and Great Britain have

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[1] Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 552.

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not hitherto been comprehensively examined in association with the occult beliefs and behaviours of the actors in that history. Just as it is crucial to understand the religious beliefs and ideological commitments of people in history, so it is important to understand the influence of belief in (and fear of) magic and other occult arts. In an effort to restore that missing piece of the puzzle of British history, this book examines the relationship between the occult arts and politics in Merlin's realm – the island of Great Britain – from the dawn of recorded history to the present day.

Merlin's Magic

In the twelfth century new and dangerous forms of knowledge were beginning to trickle into medieval Britain. At first, they were confined to a small, learned elite. The new knowledge included secrets about the formulation of life-prolonging elixirs and the transmutation of base metals into gold; precise understanding of the movements and occult influences of the heavens, giving a lucky few advance notice of future events; and even methods that claimed to enable someone to summon and control immensely powerful and intelligent spiritual beings. All of these new forms of knowledge had in common a 'hidden' or occult character, requiring initiation into difficult specialist skill sets. Originating in the Islamic world (often mediated through French and Iberian cultural translations before reaching Britain), these occult traditions deeply unsettled the cultural status quo of a world based on reverence for the Christian faith and the memory of ancient Greece and Rome. An enterprising

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Welsh writer, Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1095 to c. 1155), created a pseudo-historical character who embodied this dangerous revolution of learning: Merlin the prophet and artificer, 'the magus of the twelfth-century renaissance'.[2] Crucially, Merlin was a figure who belonged to an imagined British past, giving Geoffrey the opportunity to plant occult knowledge not only in the present, but also in a fabricated British past.

Yet magic and occult knowledge were hardly new to medieval Britain. As early as the first century BCE, the Roman author Pliny the Elder reported that the British rivalled the Persians in their addiction to magic. In the early Middle Ages, Britons, Gaels and the early English alike practised traditional forms of natural magic and divination, drawing on the supposed occult powers of plants and stones and the signs of the natural world. In the twelfth century, however, something changed; magic became more than just a technique for healing cattle or protecting crops with charms. In the character of Merlin, occult knowledge became a tool of high politics and began to promise almost limitless power. And, as might have been expected, this promise attracted the attention of the powerful – both with the desire to profit from magic and to suppress occult knowledge as a danger to the realm.

There is ample evidence that Britain's monarchs, from the Plantagenets to the Stuarts, 'sought wondrous help in moments of social and cosmic drama', including the assistance of magicians and diviners.[3] There is also over-whelming evidence that monarchs and their counsellors

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[2] Lawrence-Mathers, *True History of Merlin*, p. 5.
[3] Lawrence-Mathers, *True History of Merlin*, p. 125.

also feared harmful magic as a major threat to their reigns.[4] This book reappraises the political significance of magic and the occult tradition to the kingdoms of England and Scotland, arguing that the entanglement of occult traditions with politics from the twelfth century onwards was a key factor in enabling rulers to manage political change. Both the portrayal of political opponents as engaged in harmful magic (or even vain 'magical thinking'), and the use of occult symbolism to project political power were ways in which historical actors drew on the power of magic. From the civil war of Stephen and Matilda to the twenty-first-century crises of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of magic (quite apart from any questions about whether magic is really effective) exercises a cultural power every bit as impressive as the supernatural powers claimed by magicians themselves.

While the phrase 'magical thinking' is usually deployed as a pejorative today, it is not without its advantages for politicians. The vaguest and most unrealisable promises and proposals often seem to have the greatest popular appeal. Magical thinking, far from preventing any change from occurring, can be the way in which change is effected – not through actual magic, but by promoting enough faith in the inexplicable power of rulers to accomplish the preposterous that they encounter little difficulty in pushing through more modest changes. In cultures where the efficacy of occult practices is widely accepted – such as medieval and early modern Britain or

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[4] On the theme of harmful political magic see Jones, 'Political Uses of Sorcery', 670–87; Kelly, 'English Kings and the Fear of Sorcery', 206–38; Young, *Magic as a Political Crime*.

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contemporary Africa – it can serve rulers not only to propose vague and unrealisable policies but also to articulate them in explicitly magical terms.

It is often impossible to have any certainty that magical acts were ever actually attempted in the past, but rumour invariably clusters thickly around the idea of magic and the possibility that politics and the occult are entangled. Magic occupies a cultural space where real practices shade almost imperceptibly into smears and slurs; the invocation of magic or the occult in propaganda was often enough to achieve a desired political effect. This book is therefore focussed as much on political representations of magic as on magical acts (whose historical reality is often difficult to demonstrate). It is the argument of the book that occult beliefs need to be considered alongside more conventional religious beliefs, ideological commitments and personal ambitions as important factors in political decision-making and events. Traditions of occult knowledge guided the decisions and actions of both monarchs and of rebels. Fear of harmful magic and witchcraft produced paranoia and unease, while magic also lent monarchs a powerful set of symbols for projecting majesty. Some English monarchs even saw themselves as participants in the occult tradition, whether as magi, alchemists, demonologists or fulfillers of prophecy.

According to one definition, occult traditions represent 'a coherent intellectual stream' that attempts to make sense of the world via 'a complex structure of connections, sympathies and affinities', where some or all of the knowledge required to apprehend the truth is hidden from the senses. The occult tradition is accompanied by a conviction that knowledge of occult truths somehow enables the

supernatural manipulation of reality – the set of practices we might call magic.[5] Until the eighteenth century, the word 'occult' simply meant 'hidden', and did not always carry supernatural connotations – although the Enlightenment natural philosopher's pursuit of 'occult qualities' was in many respects a direct continuation of medieval and early modern natural magicians' search for the occult virtues (or 'powers') of nature. The occult tradition was 'a type of thinking, expressed either in writing or in action, that allowed the boundary between the natural and the supernatural to be crossed by the actions of human beings'.[6] It is important to bear in mind that the occult is a modern category applied to the past, just as the term 'supernatural' has changed its meaning over time to refer to unexplained phenomena in general rather than just the workings of God.

History and Occult Traditions

There is a long tradition in England of arguing that occult and magical beliefs are essentially irrelevant to history. In 1584, Reginald Scot noted that magicians seemed unable to influence politics or war, in spite of the great power ascribed to them by demonologists:

[I]f that … should be true in those things that witches are said to confess, what creature could live in security? Or what needed such preparation of wars, or such trouble, or charge in that behalf? No prince should be able to reign or live in the land. For (as Danaeus saith) that one Martin a witch killed the

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[5] Katz, *Occult Tradition*, pp. 1–2.
[6] Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts*, p. 5.

Emperor of Germany with witchcraft: so would our witches (if they could) destroy all our magistrates. One old witch might overthrow an army royal: and then what needed we any guns, or wildfire, or any other instruments of war? A witch might supply all wants, and accomplish a prince's will in this behalf, even without charge or bloodshed of his people.[7]

Scot went on to argue that, if magic were really effective, princes would not scruple to make use of it in warfare – since they displayed no reluctance to violate other precepts of the Christian religion in time of war.[8] Scot was saying, in effect, that all the theological handwringing about magic in his own time was a fuss about nothing, because deep down no one really believed that magic could influence the course of events. If they did, then they would be even more frightened of witches and magicians than they really were. One possible conclusion to draw from Scot's argument was that rulers who did not really believe in magical power promoted the persecution of witches and magicians for cynical political reasons rather than out of genuine concern for national security.

In 1978, the historian Edward Peters complained that 'political sorcery' was 'badly understood by most political historians'.[9] Little has changed since then. Although supernatural beliefs have been a major area of enquiry in social, intellectual and medical history since the 1970s, no corresponding shift has yet taken place in political history, with few political historians being willing to consider the impact of occult beliefs, real or ascribed. The relegation

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[7] Scot, *Discovery of Witchcraft*, p. 34.
[8] Scot, *Discovery of Witchcraft*, p. 35.
[9] Peters, *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law*, p. xvii.

of occult traditions to the margins of political history is all the more surprising in light of the central place now occupied by religious belief in political histories of medieval and early modern England. The insights of church historians routinely inform and permeate broader historical discussions about medieval and early modern Britain, and no one would now seriously maintain that religious disputes were a façade that merely provided convenient cover for social and political agendas. Yet supernatural beliefs not easily placed under the umbrella of conventional religion have been treated as 'curious exotica scattered through the more humdrum narrative of kings, battles and ecclesiastical affairs'.[10] Where the occult tradition impinges on politics, it often serves merely as a reminder of the distance between the worlds of the past and the present, meriting little discussion or explanation.

In the 1920s the pioneering anthropologist, Sir James Frazer, described the persistence of belief in magic in modern societies as 'a solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society',[11] an assessment based on his belief that magic was religion at a 'savage' stage of evolution. Although Frazer's approach has been thoroughly discredited by anthropologists, the notion that magical and occult beliefs are 'barbaric' and therefore in some way unworthy of historical study may be one reason why historians consciously or unconsciously avoid discussing them. Furthermore, supernatural beliefs beyond (or even within) the sphere of conventional religion are difficult to make sense of from inside a contemporary materialist

[10] Watkins, *History and the Supernatural*, p. 3.
[11] Quoted in Stone, 'Nazism as Modern Magic', 205.

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worldview, and when we look back to eras when magical thinking suffused all aspects of thought, it can become very hard to distinguish occult from non-occult beliefs. In response to the difficulty of comprehending occult supernatural beliefs, it is easy to succumb to temptation and assume that everyone in the past was hopelessly credulous; the study of esoteric belief is, on this view, a futile attempt to comprehend nonsense. Another temptation is to follow in the footsteps of Carl Jung by treating belief in magic and the occult as 'a universal category', a kind of anthropological constant that cannot and should not be studied historically because it is present in every human society. Universalising the occult in this way allows us to abdicate responsibility for considering seriously the specific historical significance of occult traditions in a particular time and place.[12]

Yet another temptation is to adopt a 'functionalist' approach to magic and the occult. This usually involves assuming that belief in magic and the occult somehow served a symbolic or theatrical social or political function, sometimes accompanied by the assumption that members of elites did not actually think magic 'worked' – they simply used the idea of magic as a tool to achieve their purposes. Likewise, those who favour a Marxist interpretation of history as class struggle may choose to see political magic as a last resort of the powerless against the powerful – or, in a feminist reading of history, as an act of resistance by women against patriarchal power. Much of the entanglement of politics and the occult was indeed about propaganda and misrepresentation. Yet there is also

[12] Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts*, p. 2.

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convincing evidence that governments sometimes made use of magical rites and imagery, or showed excessive fear of magic, when they felt vulnerable or under threat. Belief in magic might be written off as part and parcel of the paranoid outlook of medieval and early modern rulers, but it is also clear that rulers sometimes regarded occult claims in a more positive light. The idea that occult beliefs and practices were little more than a form of performance is just not credible, given the volume of evidence that survives for well-developed and coherent popular supernatural belief, as well as the effort that went into acting on those beliefs.

There is an element of truth in functional interpretations of occult beliefs; this is why such explanations are so enduring. People did deploy the idea of magic for other purposes. However, anthropological explanations in terms of function tend to make most sense in studies of small communities, and falter when the use of accusations of magic 'as a lever for statecraft and social control' is taken into account.[13] Furthermore, as one historian of magic has observed, arguing that rulers used accusations of harmful magic as an excuse to persecute marginalised groups is like arguing that health inspectors use the presence of rats as a pretext for closing down restaurants. Just as health inspectors close down restaurants because they consider rats bad, so medieval rulers considered harmful magic bad because they genuinely believed that its practitioners were in league with demons.[14] If accusations of magic were just an instrument of political control, and

[13] Zhao, 'Political Uses of Wugu Sorcery', 135.
[14] Kieckhefer, 'Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic', 829–30.

one tool among many to assert dominance, then magic is little more than a political construct. Yet, as one historian observes, 'even when prosecution for magic served as a means of asserting or establishing social or political control, it was effective largely because its legitimating conceptions were widely shared'.[15] People took magic seriously long before they decided to deploy accusations against people using harmful magic for political purposes.

The temptation to 'functionalise' is just one example of a broader desire to reductively 'explain away' occult beliefs in the past, perhaps because beliefs so alien to the expected norms of our own society cause us intellectual discomfort. Assessments of the political significance of occult beliefs and practices in British history have hitherto been based on studies of a particular period, incident, idea or practice.[16] This book, by contrast, offers an overview

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[15] Kieckhefer, 'Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic', 835.

[16] For examples of such studies see Bellany & Cogswell, *Murder of King James I*; Bloch, *Royal Touch*; Brogan, *Royal Touch*; Carey, *Courting Disaster*; Devine, 'Treasonous Catholic Magic', pp. 67–94; Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting and the State*; Gaskill, 'Witchcraft, Politics, and Memory', 289–308; Goodare, 'Witch-Hunting and the Scottish State', pp. 122–45; Griffiths, 'Trial of Eleanor Cobham', pp. 233–52; Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*; Hughes, *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy*; Hughes, 'Politics and the Occult at the Court of Edward IV', pp. 97–128; Hughes, *Rise of Alchemy in Fourteenth-Century England*; Jones, 'Defining Superstitions', pp. 187–204; Jones, 'Political Uses of Sorcery in Medieval Europe', 670–87; Kelly, 'English Kings and the Fear of Sorcery', 206–38; Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*; Leland, 'Witchcraft and the Woodvilles', pp. 267–88; Mendelsohn, 'Alchemy and Politics in England', 30–78; Peters 'Political Sorcery at the Turn of the Fourteenth Century', pp. 218–22; Steible, 'Jane Shore and the Politics of Cursing', 1–17; Van Patten, 'Magic, Prophecy, and the Law of Treason in Reformation England', 1–32; Young, *Magic as a Political Crime*.

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of the entanglement of occult traditions with politics throughout British history, seeking thereby to avoid the danger of generalising principles from particular cases or eras. Specific cases may reveal that magical beliefs served a particular function in a situation, but this does not mean that occult belief in general can or should be 'explained away' in other terms. The historian must grapple with occult traditions just like any other troubling characteristic of the past.

Once we are prepared to take the impact of occult beliefs seriously, there remains the challenge of how to make sense of occult claims made by people in past societies. How, for example, should we evaluate the actions of a magician chiefly renowned in his own time for doing things that most people would no longer consider possible? Should we try to 'demythologise' magic, explaining the operation of magical belief in naturalistic terms? Or should we accept reports of magical acts as factual because they are an integral part of the narrative of the past? Both approaches are problematic. The first approach is patronising and unreliable, because it usually requires us to dabble in psychological speculation unsupported by any historical evidence. For instance, if we speculate that witnesses who reported seeing a magician raise a demon were experiencing a collective hallucination induced by intense expectation, this involves imposing modern psychology on the past. We simply have no way of knowing whether the interpretation is true. Meanwhile, the second approach – accepting magic as part of the narrative – potentially allows us to abdicate any responsibility to interpret anything. Whatever anyone reported is to be treated as factual, and it cannot be analysed any further; but surrendering the right to analyse surely makes for poor history.

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Occult traditions, by their very nature, are frequently nebulous and ill-defined. A satisfactory definition of magic, in particular, is notoriously elusive.[17] One recent writer on magic has argued that magic is about a two-way relationship between humans and the world around them: magic is when 'people are open to the workings of the universe and the universe is responsive to us'.[18] While it is always possible to argue, in any individual case, that no meaningful distinction exists between magic and religion (and even between magic and science), these contested categories have remained durable in their usage. We continue to make use of the categories, not least in order to challenge them critically; and it is noticeable that, in spite of criticism of the term 'magic' as lacking in meaning, few people stop using it. There are no good reasons to suppose that all people who held occult beliefs in the past were any less 'rational' than ourselves. Time and again, magical beliefs express their own internal 'magical logic' based on suppositions about reality different from those held by most educated people in the contemporary Western world.[19] Throughout the Middle Ages, and for much of the early modern period, magic was a 'rationally explicable practice with objective rationality',[20] and the same is true of other occult traditions adjacent to magic, such as alchemy and astrology. Occult beliefs usually have their own internal consistency, often to an extremely complex and detailed degree.

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[17] For an overview of the discussion see Otto and Stausberg, 'General Introduction', pp. 1–15.
[18] Gosden, *History of Magic*, p. 2.
[19] Maxwell-Stuart, *British Witch*, p. 376.
[20] Kieckhefer, 'Specific Rationality of Magic', 822.

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Religion, in spite of its complex character and the subtle shades of adherence, is something that matters to history because religious commitments profoundly influenced events. The same goes for magic, which cannot simply be left to specialists to puzzle over; magic is part of the story, because perceptions of magic genuinely influenced the decisions of the powerful. It would seem absurd to suggest that people in the past can or should be studied apart from their religious beliefs. However, whereas church history is a well-established field of study which enriches our understanding of the religious context of a period and its political significance, detailed studies of the history of magic that tie magical beliefs into historical events have hitherto been virtually non-existent. It is also important to note that perceptions of magic could affect political action without the presence of actual belief in magic. Medieval and early modern monarchs were expected to show their strength against all threats, whether visible or invisible, real or fictitious; whether monarchs believed in them or not, magic, prophecies and portents were threats to the government because such things were widely believed in by the population at large.[21] As long as a significant proportion of the population believed in magic, magic remained politically important.

Politics and the Occult

The contention of this book is that no straightforward functionalist or reductive explanation of the relationship

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[21] Watkins, *History and the Supernatural*, p. 149.

between occult beliefs and politics is either possible or desirable. Nevertheless, the prevalence of occult beliefs in any society has political ramifications; if people believe in occult power, then occult power becomes a perceived instrument of political action both for rulers and ruled. Quite apart from whether people believe in the reality of occult power, cultural factors determine the extent to which occult power is considered a significant means of acting politically. A good example of such cultural differences is the contrast between the direct politicisation of witchcraft in early modern Scotland, where witches were accused of treason, and England, where accusations of political crime against witches were vanishingly rare. This difference does not, of course, mean that English people believed any less in witchcraft than their Scottish counterparts. In England, an elite tradition of 'political sorcery', usually involving members of the court consulting astrologers or professional service magicians, was considered far more significant than any threats of witchcraft from below.

The centrality of the court to medieval and early modern government is one reason why politics and occult beliefs became intertwined in Britain from at least the thirteenth century onwards. The conditions of a royal court were the perfect breeding ground for a growth of interest in influencing events by occult means. While the 'affair of the poisons' at the court of Louis XIV between 1677 and 1682 is the best known court magical scandal, it was the last major scandal of its kind in Europe and stands at the end of a long line of similar incidents and panics, some of which occurred in Britain. To some people, at a court where patronage was governed by the favour of a

fickle monarch to whom favourites controlled access by others, magical stratagems to influence the monarch may have seemed the only resort. Just as elaborate rituals of courtesy often concealed simmering and deadly court rivalries, so some turned to secret ritual acts in order to influence events. Royal mistresses (and would-be royal mistresses) turned to love magic to retain or gain the monarch's affections, or in the hope of conceiving a child fathered by the king that would secure their status. Favourites of both sexes tried to influence royal judgement by occult means – or thought they could discover and expose the magical influence already exercised by favourites who seemed to have bewitched the royal favour.

We should be alert to the occasions when we encounter allegations of magic or other occult misdemeanours in the course of political history, because an individual's decision to use magic (or the government's decision to deploy accusations of magic against that individual) is an indication of the extent to which he or she was prepared to achieve political aims by transgressing moral and theological norms. While magic was in theory 'action at a distance', in practice any attempt to deploy magic in the political sphere would require an individual to involve others, and therefore exposed someone who used magic to the same dangers as those who planned or committed political crimes such as sedition and armed rebellion. A person's decision to use magic against the government should not always be seen as a sign of desperation, however; such an interpretation presumes a modern worldview in which practical measures would always take precedence over occult action for most people. This was

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simply not the case in medieval and early modern Britain, where occult power was frighteningly real to many people, and consulting with magicians and other practitioners of the occult arts was sometimes a first rather than a last resort.

Consultations with courtiers and opponents of the government had the effect of bringing magicians and astrologers within the ambit of political influence. To provide such services was a dangerous act, rendering an individual a partaker in state secrets and a potential security threat. Providers of occult services became unwitting and unwilling political actors through the ways in which their clients made use of their services. Yet this entanglement of occultists with politics was also an opportunity for those daring enough to seize it. The legend of Merlin provided a template for an ideal royal adviser whose skills would include mastery of the occult secrets of nature, allowing individuals such as George Ripley, John Dee and Elias Ashmole to portray themselves as latter-day Merlins to their respective monarchs. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Merlin myth, along with the Biblical narrative of King Solomon as a possessor of occult wisdom, created a semi-legitimate space for occult traditions at court. However severe the monarch's personal or legislative stance towards magic, the symbolic association between the king and the Magi of Matthew's Gospel reinforced every year in Epiphany celebrations; the ceremony of touching for the 'king's evil', steeped in natural magic; and the importance of the chivalric myth of King Arthur's court, meant that the institution of monarchy in England was inevitably infused with perceptions of occult power.

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For some monarchs, such as Richard II and Elizabeth I, the projection of a personal image as a quasi-magical figure was central to their reigns; for others, such as Henry IV, magic was purely a source of fear. The personal relationship between monarchs and occult traditions has much to reveal about monarchs' attitudes to self-representation, their anxieties about their own legitimacy, and their future aspirations for their reigns. However, the magic of monarchy did not just lie in the overt adoption of ideas, rhetoric or imagery taken from or influenced by occult traditions. The notion that a single man or woman was capable of governing wisely and justly, with due regard for the needs of his or her humblest subjects, was arguably magical thinking in and of itself. The myth of monarchy concealed the bureaucratic, factional reality of medieval and early modern government, but it also made it possible for rulers to enact radical change without seeming to compromise the established order. When rulers *consciously* appealed to occult narratives and imagery, the possibility of using occult ideas to facilitate political change was only magnified. The inherently unstable concepts of magic and the occult, capable of subverting and inverting established views of the world, were frequently the mercurial element that enabled the alchemy of political change to occur in highly stratified medieval and early modern societies bound by tradition and religious dogma.

Geoffrey of Monmouth created the figure of Merlin at a time of deep political uncertainty, generated by the drowning of Henry I's son and heir in the White Ship in 1120. Geoffrey held out the possibility that rulers might tap into occult forces in order to predict the future

and stabilise the present. Would-be rebels and monarchs seeking to secure the throne sought to access the same sources of power, and when coups and rebellions succeeded – as they did in 1399 when Henry Bolingbroke overthrew Richard II, and in 1483 when Richard III seized the throne from his nephew Edward V – accusations of magic made it possible both to excuse the usurped and legitimise the usurper as a purifier of corrupt practices. Accusations of magic were especially associated with low-born royal servants who enjoyed an uncertain status at court, and such individuals seem to have made accusations in an effort to secure their positions as well as being frequent targets of such allegations.[22]

It can be tempting to view occult beliefs, especially in the modern world, as a relic of the past and an indication of political and social conservatism. The vodun religion's cultural dominance in Haiti, for example, has been blamed for encouraging dysfunctional behaviour that contributes to Haiti's poverty.[23] Similarly, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and others viewed the rise of fascism in mid-twentieth-century Europe as a recrudescence of magical thinking, since Nazis and fascists were responsible for a 'concerted working of magical forces through their highly developed system of physical control in propaganda … which allow[s] the mental uniformity essential to magical action to be achieved on the mystical level of discourse'.[24] However, the anthropological analysis of Nazism as 'magic' really amounted to

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[22] Peters, *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law*, p. 121.
[23] Kieckhefer, 'Specific Rationality of Magic', 830.
[24] Quoted in Stone, 'Nazism as Modern Magic', 207.

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the argument that Hitler appealed to emotion and mysticism rather than fact and rationality.[25] The broad characterisation of far-right populism as 'magical', whether in the 1930s or the contemporary world, says more about its perceived conflict with modernity and predilection for fancifully simple solutions to political problems than its actual use of coherent occult traditions.

While there are examples from British history of political conservatives apparently giving credence to occult ideas, there is also ample evidence of historic links between magic and political radicalism. It would be wrong to see interest in magic and the occult as confined to a reactionary rejection of 'modernity'.[26] For medieval Icelanders, stories of magical attacks on monarchs became a site of national popular resistance to distant kings in Norway and Denmark.[27] In seventeenth-century Russia, 'magical processes could be interpreted as interventions in domestic and international policy',[28] and magic was extensively exploited by the supporters of Stepan Razin in his 1670 rebellion against Tsar Alexis. Their use of magic empowered the rebels, making possible a 'unitary notion of a people made of free individuals conceiving of themselves as the source of legitimacy for political power'. In this particular case, magic facilitated the development of political modernity. Magic, uniquely, allowed the rebels 'to think their action into efficacy' and freed them from dependency on the ideas of religious and dynastic

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[25] Stone, 'Nazism as Modern Magic', 214.
[26] Lachman, *Politics and the Occult*, p. xv.
[27] Meylan, *Magic and Kingship*, pp. 1–26.
[28] Nun-Ingerflom, 'How Old Magic Does the Trick for Modern Politics', 434.

legitimacy that traditionally underpinned rebellions.[29] The willingness of Razin and his rebels to deploy the idea of magic echoes the deployment of astrology by William Lilly and alchemy by John Pordage and Gerard Winstanley in support of the English revolution of the 1640s.

In modern Africa, the resurgence of witch-hunting and the use of magic and rumours of magic to frighten and intimidate the population has often followed a breakdown of civil society. One feature of South Africa's transition to democracy in the 1990s was the appearance of calls to legalise and re-instigate witch-hunting, thereby distancing the new South Africa from a colonial past in which European Enlightenment ideas about witchcraft were imposed on the population. In the eyes of some Africans, state institutions in Africa based on Western models have failed because they could not take account of the threat of witchcraft.[30] This situation might be compared with the willingness of English Puritans to witch-hunt in the 1640s once they were freed from the restrictive influence of royal power and Laudian bishops. In seventeenth-century Britain, as in contemporary Africa, the decline of the state was 'experienced as a collective trauma for which people have no explanation', and the result was that people turned to witchcraft as an explanatory mechanism.[31] Furthermore, when modern

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[29] Nun-Ingerflom, 'How Old Magic Does the Trick for Modern Politics', 449–50.

[30] Harnischfeger, 'State Decline and the Return of Occult Powers', 57–8. On legal debates concerning witchcraft and the state in Africa see also Tebbe, 'Witchcraft and Statecraft', 183–236.

[31] Harnischfeger, 'State Decline and the Return of Occult Powers', 59.

African states are too weak to regulate power, that power becomes unpredictable, and therefore liable to be linked with hidden, occult forces – again, a trend that is detectable during the Civil War period in Britain.[32]

In pre-colonial South Africa, 'Magic … resided at the centre of competitive politics' between chiefs,[33] while in ancient China politically motivated accusations of magic were 'prevalent during periods of state-building, territorial expansion, hegemony, and imperial absolutism'.[34] Such examples can provide useful comparisons with medieval and early modern Britain, where both magic itself and accusations of magic were deployed as political weapons. In the 1530s, Thomas Cromwell achieved an apparently impossible inversion of established belief – re-designating traditional Catholicism as unacceptable belief while installing formerly heretical ideas as a national religion – by invoking the accusation of magic against the Catholic church itself, thereby discrediting a traditional framework of religious belief established in England for almost a millennium. The general lines of anti-magical polemic laid down in Henry VIII's reign would be followed in subsequent eras, most notably in the thirties and forties of the seventeenth century, when Puritans deployed the same rhetoric against supporters of episcopacy in the Church of England. Yet it would be a mistake to see the political role of magic and occult beliefs in British history as a purely negative one, serving only as fuel for accusations, denunciations and damaging rhetoric. The stronger the anti-magical

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[32] Harnischfeger, 'State Decline and the Return of Occult Powers', 74.
[33] Crais, *Politics of Evil*, p. 50.
[34] Zhao, 'Political Uses of Wugu Sorcery in Imperial China', 143.

polemic a government adopted – whether in sixteenth-century England and Scotland or twentieth-century China – the greater the extent to which that polemic confirmed, in the eyes of some, that magicians and other occult practitioners possessed genuine power, and that power might be harnessed as well as protected against.

Official anti-magical campaigns were sometimes a matter of affirming licit forms of magic over illicit ones, rather than attempts to stamp out magic altogether. For example, the concerns of Elizabeth I's government about people magically abusing images of the queen in the 1580s and 1590s occurred at a time when Elizabeth was making every effort to project her image, including the use of positive occult symbolism. Occult imagery replaced the outlawed religious imagery of Catholic England, enabling monarchs to continue the same kind of visual propaganda as their medieval predecessors, albeit imbued with a different symbolism. The exposure of illicit love magic at the court of James I as part of the Overbury poisoning case occurred at a time when the Stuart court was engaged in legitimating itself through ritualised court masques full of Hermetic imagery. Perceptions of magic in the Old World were a lense through which English settlers in the New World experienced the strangeness of the religious practices of indigenous peoples, while occult philosophy allowed individuals rigorously indoctrinated in a hierarchical worldview to make sense of the new 'topsy-turvy' political world of the Interregnum. Occult interpretations also made it possible for committed radicals to accept the Restoration in 1660. The ambiguity of magic and the difficulty of defining it – as well as the option of denying that one was engaging in magic at

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all – made it the perfect instrument for orchestrating, managing and facilitating acceptance of political change. Occult thinking was a crucial ingredient in the worldviews of many medieval and early modern people that enabled them to come to terms with otherwise unthinkable turns of events.

British Magic

This book is about the entanglement of magic and politics in Britain from the earliest times to the present day. The political entity known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain has only existed since 1707, when Scotland and England were formally united, yet the two kingdoms existed in personal union under a single monarch from 1603. The use of the word 'Britain' in the book's subtitle is not an attempt to elide the important differences that existed between the kingdoms of England and Scotland when it came to the relationship between politics and magic, or to claim anachronistically that England and Scotland constituted a single cultural unit. If anything, from the sixteenth century onwards English and Scottish rulers and legislators adopted sharply contrasting approaches to magic. Rather, the reference to Britain is a recognition that the history of occult traditions in the island of Great Britain goes back to a time before England and Scotland existed, as well as extending into the period after the Act of Union. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the history of British occult traditions goes back to an *imagined* time before England and Scotland existed. Merlin, the archetypal magician whom medieval and early modern magicians strove to emulate, was a British figure who supposedly lived in the sixth century,

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but was tied to a variety of locations in England, Wales and Scotland. Merlin's prophecies concerned the destiny of Britain, not the individual kingdoms of England and Scotland.[35] The 'Merlin tradition' that underlay much of the entanglement of occult traditions with politics in medieval and early modern Britain thereby acted as a unifying factor in an otherwise fractured island.

The inclusion of English-controlled Ireland in a book about British history is not meant to imply that Ireland is geographically or politically a part of Britain. Instead, it is a recognition that individuals who identified themselves as English and belonged to a broader English culture lived in Ireland in the Middle Ages. In this sense, the Irish Pale was 'English', in contrast to Gaelic Ireland. The history of English Ireland is both British and Irish history. For the same reason, this book does not ignore British colonial attitudes to magic, although its coverage of the colonial context of the British Empire is by no means comprehensive. The interactions between indigenous and colonial attitudes to and beliefs about magic are so complex as to require a separate study.[36] Yet it is impossible to tell the story of the interrelationship between politics and magic while ignoring the political significance of England's (and later Britain's) expansionist and colonial ambitions.

Scope of the Book

The first chapter deals with the ways learned occult traditions reached Britain in the High Middle Ages (from the

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[35] Lawrence-Mathers, *True History of Merlin*, p. 72.
[36] See Loar, *Political Magic*.

twelfth century onwards), thereby setting the scene for the political significance that these new forms of knowledge would go on to have. The chapter considers the earliest sources for the political use of magic in ancient Britain, first recorded by the Romans, and highlights the centrality of the legendary figure of Merlin to the imagined self-understanding and self-fashioned traditions of British practitioners of the occult arts. Chapter 1 addresses the relationship between occult traditions and Christianity in early medieval Britain, the nature of occult practices in early England, and the varieties of new hidden knowledge that arrived in the twelfth century, including natural magic, alchemy, astrology and ritual magic. Finally, the chapter considers the arrival of Renaissance magic and knowledge of the Hebrew Kabbalah in late medieval England, and elucidates the distinction between learned occult traditions and witchcraft. The chapter concludes that elite and secret forms of knowledge were inevitably both attractive and repulsive to rulers – a paradox that characterises the history of political engagement with occult traditions.

The focus of Chapter 2 is the evidence for the political application and representation of occult knowledge in medieval Britain between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. Medieval monarchs feared political sorcery as a form of treason, with political anxiety about sorcerers reaching fever pitch in England and English-controlled Ireland in the fourteenth century. However, monarchs themselves were also accused of using magic against their own subjects, and several kings became intensely interested in the financial potential of alchemy and the predictive possibilities of astrology in statecraft and warfare.

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A succession of royal 'magical advisers', including Roger Bacon and George Ripley, took on the legendary mantle of Merlin, but one king, Richard II, was determined to define himself as a magus. Richard's reign brought to a head many of the anxieties surrounding the paradox of the monarchy's fascination with occult knowledge. Yet in spite of the apparent contribution of Richard II's occult interests to his downfall, Lancastrian and Yorkist monarchs continued to be simultaneously terrified of and intrigued by political sorcery. The chapter argues that royal suppression and control of magic and other occult arts was essential to the projection of royal power and legitimacy in medieval Britain.

Chapter 3 addresses the role played by occult traditions in the seismic changes of the sixteenth century, as government took a turn towards centralisation and monarchical absolutism and religious reform transformed the societies of England and Scotland. The House of Tudor's Welsh ancestry made Tudor monarchs conscious successors of King Arthur. Accusations and rumours of magic were rife at the court of Henry VIII and played a role in the downfall of Anne Boleyn as queen, but allegations of magic also swirled around Cardinal Wolsey in Henry's early reign. As the Henrician Reformation began in the 1530s, propagandists such as John Bale made strenuous efforts to redefine the boundaries of occult practices, recasting traditional Catholic ceremonies such as the mass as magic (or at least as no better than magic). Similar developments occurred in Scotland, and in both countries the reorientation of the relationship of church and state produced unprecedented legislation to criminalise the practice of magic. Elizabeth I embraced her 'Arthurian'

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identity to the extent of seeking the advice of a latter-day Merlin, a role eagerly fulfilled by John Dee. Although the political centrality of Dee as an advisor to Elizabeth was subsequently exaggerated by Dee himself, at the high point of Dee's influence a vision of British empire inspired by occult traditions briefly informed official policy under a queen so fascinated by the hidden arts that she personally practised alchemy. However, towards the end of Elizabeth's reign a reaction set in against the intellectual and spiritual explorations of her early years, and occult knowledge came once more to be seen solely as a threat.

The House of Stuart, which ruled Scotland from 1371 and England from 1603, was assailed by magical threats from the fifteenth century, with no Scottish monarch suffering more magical attacks than James VI and I. However, James's reputation as a demonologist obsessed with witchcraft conceals a more subtle approach to the occult, to which James responded with both fascination and scepticism. Chapter 4 disentangles James VI's complicated relationship with occult traditions and witchcraft during both his Scottish reign and his English reign as James I, as well as examining the reputational damage done to the Stuart monarchy by magical scandals at court between 1613 and 1628. Beginning with the Overbury Plot, these scandals culminated in the accusations levelled against the duke of Buckingham and his 'wizard', John Lambe, and ultimately undermined the monarchy as a guardian of godliness in the nation. The chapter concludes by showing how the outbreak of Civil War in England in 1642 unleashed damaging allegations of the political and military deployment of occult power on both sides.

Beginning with the execution of Charles I in 1649, which risked emptying the British monarchy of its mystical power, Chapter 5 explores the continuing entanglement of occult traditions and politics up to the end of the Stuart dynasty's rule in 1714. The republic that succeeded Charles's death witnessed a flowering of popular interest in magic, alchemy and astrology as censorship broke down in the 1650s. Occult ideas inspired several radical religious and political figures of the Interregnum. Belief in the magical significance of the return of the Jews to England would result in the informal re-establishment of a Jewish community in London in 1656. Restored to the throne in 1660, Charles II was perhaps more eager than any previous monarch to revive the magic of monarchy, and turned the ancient ceremony of touching for the 'king's evil' into a major effort to project royal power as natural magic, as well as reviving royal patronage of astrologers and alchemists. The crises associated with the Catholic King James II's accession to the throne and his overthrow in 1688 produced numerous rumours of the political use of sorcery, although William and Mary were the last British monarchs to receive counsel from a practising magician, the Whig politician Goodwin Wharton, who attempted unsuccessfully to reprise the role of Merlin and John Dee. However, political interest in occult practices and witchcraft steadily diminished as the continued existence of such activities came to be perceived as indications of unstable government. This disengagement of the ruling elite from the language of magic prepared the way for the almost complete decriminalisation of magical acts in the eighteenth century.

Chapter 6 traces the changing relationship between politics and the occult from the eighteenth century to modern times. The relationship almost completely faded from view in eighteenth-century Britain, as it became socially unacceptable in elite circles to entertain a public interest in the supernatural. However, the apparent support of some mystical prophets for the French Revolution re-engaged the government's interest, and a tradition of 'mystical nationalism' was born at this time (largely through the writings of William Blake) that would go on to influence British politics to the present day. Elite interest in ritual magic returned at the end of the nineteenth century, and was often connected with traditionalist and ultra-conservative political views. The notorious twentieth-century magician Aleister Crowley has been the focus of numerous more or less credible claims that he was active as a spy, and that he and others used magic against the enemy during the Second World War. Less controversially, the era of the Second World War saw the politically motivated conviction of the Spiritualist medium Helen Duncan under the 1735 Witchcraft Act, if it is indeed true that the government feared that Duncan might reveal military secrets in her séances.

There is even evidence that government interest in magic continued into the Cold War period, perhaps owing to the habitual secrecy of magical groups, and one of the stranger results of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland in the 1970s was the emergence of a politically charged moral panic about black magic. By the 1980s both far-right and far-left politics in Britain had a 'magical fringe'. The British far right, in particular, has drawn in recent decades on earlier traditions of 'mystical

nationalism' associated with an occult interpretation of the British landscape. British royalty's fascination with occult knowledge likewise continued in the twentieth century, primarily through Diana, Princess of Wales's willingness to associate with astrologers, mediums and psychics. Even today, belief in magical ideas has not altogether vanished in British politics, testifying to the persistent and enduring association between politics and the occult.