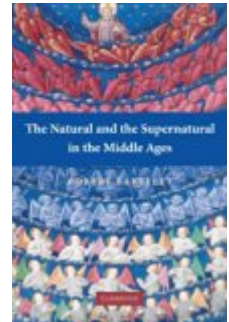


Robert Bartlett. *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages.* The Wiles Lectures Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 170 pp. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-70255-3.



Reviewed by Christopher LeCluyse

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Historians commonly accept the degree to which modernity has been defined against the medieval past. In the common formulation, the Middle Ages stand as the Other to the supposedly rational, enlightened, civilized modern age, which began with the Renaissance. Pejorative coinages like "Gothic" and "Dark Ages" sought to distinguish the advancements of post-medieval Europe from the reputed ignorance of the prior millennium. Even among those who advance a more positive image of medieval thought, however, it can be easy to paint the earlier period in broad strokes by advancing such reductionist concepts as "the medieval mind" or by assuming that medieval schools of thought were necessarily homogenous and monolithic.

In this book, Robert Bartlett shows us just how mistaken these limiting concepts of medieval intellectual culture are. Medieval discussions of nature were marked by "debates, alternative and competing theories, and differing views about the boundaries and the substance of the natural and

the supernatural" (p. 145). Bartlett's central interest is determining when and to what extent mechanistic explanations of nature were advanced during the Middle Ages, what beings and phenomena were considered natural according to those explanations, and how the concept of the supernatural developed as a category. As he shows, throughout the Middle Ages mechanistic explanations of nature existed alongside supernatural ones, so that an eclipse could be regarded both as the result of predictable natural processes and a divine portent, and skepticism over witches and other monstrous or demonic beings competed with certainty over their existence.

Adapted from presentations delivered for the Wiles Lectures at Queen's University, Belfast, Bartlett's study is divided into four chapters. The first, "The Boundaries of the Supernatural," traces the rise of the term "supernaturalis" to the early thirteenth century, when newly formalized procedures for canonization required ecclesiastical officials to determine whether miracles worked by

would-be saints were the result of natural or divine causes. The creation of this "significant tool for organizing thought" (p. 12) led to subsequent development by scholastic theologians like Thomas Aquinas and others in the newly formed mendicant orders. As Bartlett states, "The mendicants, high Scholasticism, and the supernatural were born together" (p. 16). The subsequent two chapters then examine how various phenomena were defined within this natural-supernatural dichotomy. "'The Machine of This World': Ideas of the Physical Universe" addresses mechanistic and supernatural explanations of solar and lunar eclipses, while "Dogs and Dog-heads: The Inhabitants of the World" examines varying explanations for one of the monstrous races held to inhabit unexplored regions--the "cynocephalii," or "dog-heads"--as well as witches and a type of cannibalistic demoness known as a "striga." The final chapter, "'The Secrets of Nature and Art': Roger Bacon's *Opus maius*," studies the mechanistic thinking that has earned Bacon the title of "precursor of modern science," even though Bacon's naturalistic explanations extended to the evil eye and magical incantations (pp. 111-112).

The fascinating subject matter should be enough to attract many readers. Besides the obvious audience of medievalists, historians of science would do well to follow Bartlett's lead in reconsidering medieval thought on the supernatural. Throughout the text, the author shows himself to be a skilled writer and a careful intellect. For example, early on Bartlett is careful to avoid linguistic determinism, the hard-to-eradicate belief that words and ideas have a one-to-one correlation, and that having a word for a certain concept determines whether people can think about it (one thinks here of the old observation that Inuits had many words for snow). Bartlett avoids this trap by focusing on the social motivations for referring to concepts. "Even if the mere word 'supernatural' does not enable writers and thinkers to say something they could not say before," he writes, "its ap-

pearance surely indicates that they wanted to say it more often and more conveniently" (p. 13).

In what may come as a shock to many readers used to drier fare, Bartlett's prose is also downright entertaining. His parenthetical comments in particular add to the engaging quality of his writing, for example: "even more telling is a miracle involving a boy who had been standing on the bridge at Avignon (really)" (p. 11), and "How many books ... are titled 'Age of ...' something--Absolutism, Adversity, Affluence, Anxiety (especially popular), and that is only the beginning of the 'A's'" (p. 33).

Any limitations to the book arise from its original lecture format. Bartlett himself admits that in the first three chapters he chose examples "in a cavalier fashion from many centuries, as long as I thought they could enlighten a topic" (p. 111). The author's purpose seems thus to offer a tantalizing introduction to each topic, inviting readers to seek further depth in the works he cites or in their own research, rather than a comprehensive analysis. The author also favors an inductive organization that no doubt contributed to the interest of a listening audience, but may leave readers searching for a thesis, which is usually not stated until late in each chapter.

Regarded as the beginning of a fascinating line of inquiry, however, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* is sure to interest scholars and students from a range of fields. In this work, Bartlett has offered an encouraging model of how academic writing can not only spur the intellect but also stir the imagination and spark humor.

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