

Review – Ars Notoria: The Notory Art of Solomon

The Ars Notoria was perhaps the most popular work of magic of the high Middle Ages. At the time, one of the best ways to obtain money, fame, and status, for those not born with them, was through the clergy. Joining their ranks meant pursuing study through the university system, first through the trivium of grammar, logic, rhetoric, then into the quadrivium of astronomy, music, arithmetic, and geometry, and finally mastering theology itself. As one can imagine, this was a time-intensive task that many students sought to work their way through as quickly as possible.

Today, some of these individuals might take courses from a dubious online school or order credentials from a diploma mill. Back in the day, they'd turn to the Ars Notoria, a collection of prayers and notae, or diagrams, purportedly the work of Solomon. Through solitude, abstinence, and beseeching of God with the right prayers, one could obtain all of the desired knowledge on a particular topic in four months.

As the medieval curriculum fell from favor, so did the Ars Notoria. In its first publication, by the Beringos Brothers or their pretenders, it was bundled together with the works of Agrippa, sans the diagrams that provided its name. Robert Turner published it in English in 1657, and his translation has remained the standard for many years. The manuscript tradition was still respected by some, including Papers favorite Frederick Hockley, who copied his own manuscript of the book from Turner's work in 1839. This manuscript has now been published by Teitan Press in their ongoing series of magical works from the collection of Hockley.

With me so far?

The best edition of the Ars Notoria is undoubtedly Julien Véronèse's scholarly edition of the medieval manuscripts, but for many readers, this Latin text with French notes from an Italian publisher poses serious challenges. What Teitan has presented for English readers is an accessible edition of the book with plenty of interesting data on its history.

This version of the Ars begins with an introduction by Alan Thorogood, covering in great detail the history of the book, from its possible origins to the text in front of us, detailing its many variations and evolutions. All of this is excellent and certainly worth it for those who want to know more about this work. This is followed by an article by Robin Cousins dealing with the 17th century publisher Robert Turner. Even if you have a copy of the previous version of this piece from Elizabethan Magic (hey, that price has dropped considerably), you might want to check it out again.

We then have the bulk of the Ars Notoria itself, detailing the entire procedure for gaining in-depth knowledge. The editor has been thorough, so you can look into the notes to see Hockley's notes, the pagination from the manuscript and the Turner book, notes on discrepancies from the medieval works, and all manner of other items of interest. A black and white reproduction of Hockley's manuscript follows. What none of this truly tells us is why Hockley copied this book, as he did so many others. I'd love to find some sort of letter from him explaining what happened.

The appeal of this book for those interested in the history of magic is clear. Practitioners should note that some of the prayers within can be used for obtaining eloquence, driving away wild animals, and performing other tasks that are outside the months-long operation itself. I should also add that the book provides web links to those who wish to see the original notae which graced these books before their publication.

Nonetheless, either group should beware the book's grave warning:

For this oration is such a mystery, as King Solomon himself witnesseth, that a servant of his house having found this book by chance, and being too much overcome with wine in the company of a woman, he presumptuously read it; but before he had finished a part thereof, he was stricken dumb, blind, and lame, and his memory taken from him; so he continued to the day of his death.

Bear in mind, therefore, that the Ars Notoria is not to be read while drinking or – gasp! – around women. (If you are a woman, I suppose you'll just have to take your chances.) Nonetheless, for those who can avoid such dangers, this is a welcome addition to the literature of magic and the burgeoning library of works derived from Hockley.