

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

WIZARDS

FROM MERLIN TO FAUST



DAVID & LESLEY McINTEE

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

WIZARDS FROM MERLIN TO FAUST

BY DAVID AND LESLEY McINTEE
ILLUSTRATED BY MARK STACEY



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
THE ORIGINAL WIZARDS	7
DEDI ☯ HERMES THRICE GREAT ☯ SIMON MAGUS	
WIZARDS OF THE FIRST MILLENNIUM	19
VIRGIL ☯ GEBER	
THE WIZARD OF CAMELOT	28
MERLIN	
WIZARDS OF THE EAST	41
ZHANG GUO LAO ☯ THE NAMELESS WIZARD	
WIZARDS OF THE RENAISSANCE	53
NICOLAS FLAMEL ☯ BENVENUTO CELLINI	
THE GOLDEN AGE WIZARDS	62
FRANCIS STEWART, 5 TH EARL OF BOTHWELL ☯ DR JOHN DEE (AND EDWARD KELLEY) ☯ JOHANN GEORG FAUST	
WIZARDS TODAY	79
BIBLIOGRAPHY	80

INTRODUCTION

A belief in magic has always existed. In the earliest societies, shamans tried to establish control over nature in order to help their communities survive. Some tried to propitiate the gods, starting religions, while others tried to replicate natural effects. The shaman was believed to maintain the balance between man and nature, to travel to other realms, and to transform himself into animal form.

As civilization developed, the purpose of magic changed. It became an expression of greed, for knowledge, power, or money. Sometimes it became a weapon. The best intentions, like the desire for wisdom, were seen afterwards as bad deeds. Knowledge was a dangerous thing in times of scientific ignorance or religious extremism. ‘Magus’ was a term of respect in the Near East for a learned man, but if you earned the reputation of being a ‘sorcerer’ in the European Middle Ages, you were in serious trouble. Such accusations were convenient political tools for enemies of some of those who appear in this book.

Whether there really were people who could use words to change themselves into animals, fly through the air, summon devils, or turn lead into gold, one thing is certain – wizards and their talents have always been a popular subject for entertainment.

Many of their tales share similar tropes. Academic Elsie Butler concluded that there is a universal ‘myth of the magus’, with very distinct and recognizable elements. It usually starts with the wizard’s strange childhood; they might be fostered, or show magical powers from birth or around puberty. Harry Potter was lucky as most wizards of myth and legend did not have an easily-accessed education. They had to travel far and wide to gain their knowledge and were often outcasts.

For some wizards of legend, there is a period of wandering in an inhospitable environment, while others were apprenticed to an existing wizard to be formally taught their craft. All of the great magi of legend underwent tests, trials, or temptations to prove their worth. They would have a formal initiation, which marked them out as different to their fellow men and invested them with some form of authority, even if only within a clandestine group. One of these tests is a magical duel to the death with another wizard, and a number of legends suggest the apparent death and rebirth of the wizard as part of the ongoing learning process. The experience of death allowed the wizard to communicate with spirits.

(OPPOSITE)

Throughout history, wizards have worked in their magic circles to conjure spirits or demons and to acquire power or knowledge, as in this 19th-century painting. (North Wind Picture Archive / Alamy)



By the end of their lives, it was imperative that they find someone worthy of receiving their knowledge and carrying on their work. So, where we find a wizard we usually find an apprentice or two. One of the most famous magical books, the *Sworn Book of Honorius*, made its keeper promise to make three copies only before his death, to pass to his successors.

Some of these stories might seem familiar to us from their very recent retellings: the wizard as a young boy, discovering his talents; magical books that have a tendency to develop a life of their own and may need to be chained down; arcane languages, alphabets, and words like 'Expelliarmus!' or 'Abracadabra!' or 'Stercus stercus moriturus sum'.

From behind the friendly face of the old grey-bearded wizard still peeps the shaman in his skins and hides, half-man, half-beast, lost in the mists of prehistoric time; the alchemist in his smoke-filled den, risking death by explosion as he mixes his impossible elixirs; the scholar, hiding his thoughts in code. Behind all of those shifting faces and identities, the trickster god of the old pagan world stretches out his hand to grant universal truth, but only if it is earned through hard work and even then at a price.

The Brothers Grimm should have the last word, though. In 1816 they wrote, "The stories of witches and wizards have survived better - and will survive better than any others - as our superstitious minds expect a better tale of good and evil from a wizard than they would from a giant or dwarf, which is why these are the only tales of the people that are welcome also among the educated classes."