Anthropology Book Forum
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Locating the materiality of anxiety and magical practices in Puritanical New England

C. RILEY AUGÉ, 2020, *The Archaeology of Magic: Gender and Domestic Protection in Seventeenth-Century New England*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 304 pp., ISBN 978-0-81306-611-0.

Keywords: magic, apotropaic practices, religion, gender, Puritans

Ritual and magic have long been subjects of anthropological fascination, though while extensively explored in historical studies (especially regarding the consequences of witchcraft), archaeological inquiry with such a specific focus is rare. C. Riley Augé's present study aims to explore how seventeenth century British colonists, new to New England, engaged in magical practice, specifically apotropaic (protective) practices, and whether that practice differed across gender. In compiling evidence from primary documents and folklore, Augé seeks to develop criteria for identifying gender specific apotropaic magical practices in the archaeological record. The book is organized into nine chapters, an introduction (Chapter 1), chapters that serve as the foundation with definitions, theories, and background information (Chapters 2-5), three chapters of data (Chapters 6-8) and a conclusion (Chapter 9).

The first chapter serves as an introduction, in which Augé outlines the need for such a study on the intersections of protective magic and gender, given the lack of previous studies in historical archaeology, as well as how such a study contributes to the understanding of human responses to perceived dangers. Augé situates her book as a contribution to the emerging field of the archaeology of anxiety and affective experience. As Fleisher and Norman (2016) summarize in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Anxiety*, the senses, which include feelings, have a bearing on the construction and reconstruction of our everyday lives. Archaeologists can do better as far

as theorizing and identifying the potential materiality of emotions (Tarlow 2000), a task which Augé undertakes in the present study. This book specifically examines how magic was used as a response to certain stressors and as a strategy of risk management in Puritan society from 1620 to 1725.

As explored in Chapter 2, magic and ritual have been variably defined by anthropologists over the years, and many definitions are context-dependent and rely on a contrast to definitions of religion. Augé herself does not offer a working definition of magic, only that her focus is of magic as an "inclusive, systemized, ritualized practice" (13). As explained in this chapter, the book's focus is apotropaic practices utilized in the domestic space and the material culture reflects what Dušan Borić (2003, 48) calls a "technology of protection," namely as they are structured around the most vulnerable places of homes: thresholds.

Chapter 3 details the theoretical underpinnings of the book that traces the theory of identifying magical material culture archaeologically to the difficulty of abstracting both gender and magic from such material culture. Since apotropaic practices were used by New Englanders as a supernatural solution to certain stressors and uncertainties, Augé brings attention to the psychology theory of fear, how gender influences what we fear, and what approaches were taken to mitigate that fear in the past. The subsequent discussion of agency theory contextualizes the ability and choice of New Englanders to practice magic during a time when it was religiously and secularly sanctioned.

In Chapter 4, Augé effectively explains the Puritanical world view, one governed by strict religious doctrine coupled with a belief in the supernatural and magical ritual, especially of rituals related to risk management and conflict resolution with specific references to numerology and magical symbolism. Then in Chapter 5, Augé describes the multi-faceted struggle which guides the reader in appreciating the stressors faced by the Puritans landing in a New World that was not at all what they expected. Coupled with an understanding of their world view from the previous chapter, Augé highlights the high-stress and risk-filled environment of the early colonists. Here Augé argues that archaeologists must extend their parameters of study beyond the witchcraft trials of Salem in order to comprehensively understand the role of gender in magical practice, while at the same time (in

the next chapter) situating the present study around New England precisely because the witchcraft persecutions offer an abundance of historical evidence.

In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, Augé presents data collected from each of three sources respectively, primary documents (court records, diaries, letters, etc.), folklore, and archaeological excavations. In Chapter 6, tabulations from Salem witchcraft trial papers revealed that both men and women accused women of boundary violations far more often than either accused men. Based on this evidence, Augé suggests that both men and women feared a woman who does not follow appropriate gender norms as outlined by social and religious boundaries as they are most likely to use supernatural destructive power.

The following chapter summarizes the data found from folklore regarding how men and women differentially utilized magic as protection from supernatural forces. The folklore data, especially, delves into beliefs regarding the apotropaic qualities of plants. Here Augé highlights the importance of examining a variety of datasets and how collaboration with ethnobotanists can further identification of ritual practices in the archaeological record. Chapter 8 is then dedicated to the archaeological evidence of apotropaic practices, namely to the artifacts of previous homestead excavations. The chapter reads like a cautionary tale for excavation methodology, since some of the official reports are from excavations conducted over 50 years ago and contain artifact descriptions void of context.

The final chapter serves as a conclusion of how fear of breached gender norms may have contributed to differential use of apotropaic practices. Much of the gendered apotropaic practices identified are centered around the gender roles and division of labor between men and women in Puritan society. In this regard, a more theoretical grounding of gender or feminist theory as it has been applied archaeologically (e.g., Gilchrist 1994; Meskell 2002; Sørensen 2013) would strengthen Augé's analysis of the gendered use of apotropaic practices. Additionally, considerations of power dynamics and the patriarchal implications of both genders fearing the misuse of supernatural forces from women would bolster the analysis of agency.

As Augé explores in Chapter 2, the practice and belief in magic is ubiquitous across time and cultures, so that the methodological and interpretative practices outlined in this book can serve as a template even to archaeologists studying disparate locals. Anthropologists seeking to analyze archaeological evidence, or conduct their own excavation, to uncover the materiality of magical practice, will especially appreciate the framework outlined here. While the framework and methodological considerations are well founded for the topic, the analysis of why men and women differently utilized apotropaic practices is not fully flushed out in the present study. With three major sources of data (primary written documents, folklore, and archaeology), it is hard to organize the presentation and subsequent analysis in a way that completely satisfies the questions posed. Overall, the book is successful in its endeavor, as Augé lays out a logical and straightforward method to not only designing an archaeological approach that is specific to the excavation of magical material culture but also ways in which to examine past excavations for such evidence.

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