

## Comment on the Papers by Reva Wolf and Catherine M. Jaffe

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Good morning!

Although it is commonly assumed that David is the first king in the Abrahamitic tradition, there is an important figure that precedes him. This first king, often said to represent a “failed beginning”<sup>1</sup> stands at the point of origin of a long complex history in which magic and sovereignty relate to each other. While we usually assume that magic is a premodern practice that disappears with modernity, the exclusion of magic is from the beginning part of the history of sovereignty. According to the book of Samuel, Saul, the first king of Israel, who was made king by the 12 Israelite tribes to defend Israel against the Philistines, was selected by the seer Samuel, who later rejected by Saul because of his failure in religious duties. In the Hebrew Bible, Saul turns to the witch of Endor, whom he asks to conjure up Samuel’s spirit to foretell the future before a decisive battle with the Philistines. Because King Saul has outlawed sorcerers, he has to assure her that he will not apply the law to her. Samuel, the story continues, foretells the death of Saul and his sons in the battle. From Chaucer to Dante and Boccaccio to Hardy, Saul has fascinated writers and inspired authors to reflect on the relationship between magic and politics. Like no other figure, Saul works through the contradictions of their relationship that we assume to be characteristic only of our own times that we sometimes call modern. Saul outlaws sorcery but turns to it in an emergency and makes an exception to his own law. It is this “deep” history of the relationship between magic and politics that has already appeared in the first day of our workshop. And it is this history that the two papers of today’s panel return to.

For today’s panelists, I’d like to raise some questions about the eighteenth-century tradition of sovereignty. Both papers bring us, in a sense, to the eighteenth century but also into the nineteenth century. But I think they both could be inserted in the tradition of failed sovereignty, or of sovereignty that when under threat resorts to magic, while at the same time trying to exclude it through laws.

Catherine Jaffe’s paper is about the communicative network between the colonies and Europe. In it, a novel, *La Quijotita y su prima*, with an educational purpose, illustrates a monomaniacal decision. On the one hand, we have a woman who exhibits an exuberant sexuality, so the question of female authorship and agency is very much at stake. But on the other hand, with her religious turn, when she decides to live as a *hermite* and to take Saint Rosalía as her role model, the book characterizes her decision as a form of mania. And so, the novel seeks to inoculate readers and make them part of a project of educational modernization. Also, I think the paper reconstructs an interesting pathway of how Saint Rosalía becomes who she is. Remember she is discovered much later than her actual life takes place, a few hundred years later, in 1624, during a plague epidemic. It is then that her relics are discovered and carried

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<sup>1</sup> See the monograph by Niklas Bender, “Saul, der missglückte Anfang”, Wallstein Verlag 2025.

through the city, and there is a miraculous healing. By coincidence Van Dyck is there to produce a wonderful painting.

So, in a way, magic is used as a counterexample in the educational novel. It is produced in a communicative network that relies on coincidences to become something that is endowed with magical powers. On the one hand, it tells us of the emergence within a communicative network of a figure, a religious figure, standing for a certain type of magic. But then in a very ambivalent way, it also seeks to register the danger and to warn against it. It seeks both to emulate the logic of magic and but also seeks to translate it into a different form by trying to become a force of immunization. I think in the end the two aims strangely converge: the magical project and the delivery project.

In Reva Wolf's paper, we have an archaeology of a magical feature of a certain chapel central to the emergence of Freemasonry in Scotland. It's obvious that this is a national history, embedded in a national rivalry between England and Scotland. The chapter of England is the older one, but she shows in a brilliant way how certain paintings and illustrations produce an iconography that becomes essential to the construction of a national story that claims the privilege of being older and more historic (in Scotland). So, both chapters claim historical depth as part of a competition between the Freemasons. But the Scottish chapter also seems to rely on magic, namely on the legend that the chapel burns without being consumed each time the directorship of the Freemasonry is passed on. So, on the one hand, this archaeology relies on magic and the supernatural. But on the other hand it embeds it in a national history and relies on a powerful institution—an Enlightenment institution—to produce these seemingly archaic elements.

I think both stories make us question the way that modern histories use the concept of magic while at the same time excluding it. They are stories of political institutions—institutions that come with a great deal of hierarchy. Earlier when I pointed to the history of Saul, which is part of the construction of Western sovereignty, I think the questions raised by that Biblical history reappear here in different registers.

There is certainly more in each individual paper to unearth. But those were the points that I wanted to take away and at the same time link to the comments from yesterday's discussion. I hope that that was helpful.