In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, learned magic texts of Arabic and Jewish origin were translated into Latin, introducing new ideas about angels to medieval Europe. Although the Christian Church accepted the existence of invisible spirits, scholars were engaged in uneasy debates over their corporeality, man’s ability to comprehend them and the nature of their influence in the sublunary world. The imported magic texts, on the other hand, were full of tangible certainties. They gave angels names, attributes and locations, revealing a vivified cosmos in which temporal divisions – the hours, days, months and seasons – and physical elements – fire and the air, winds, sea, stars and earth – were ruled over or personified by spirits. This was a pragmatic cosmology: the attributes of a spirit told the magic operator what purpose it would be useful for, its name gave him the power to speak to it directly, and descriptions of the spirit’s relationship to the physical world instructed him in the best materials and times for his operation. From the thirteenth century, ecclesiastical authorities condemned learned magic texts for encouraging interaction with demons rather than for presenting fraudulent operations; that is, the authorities accepted that the spirits described in the texts had real powers but classified them as demonic. This allowed elaborate and alien hierarchies to be absorbed into the Christian cosmos. For readers and operators of magic texts, however, it was always possible to regard the angels and spirits of magic texts as good or neutral beings rather than evil demons.

The learned magic texts in circulation in late medieval Europe contained diverse approaches to speaking with spirits. Two significant traditions were Hermetic and Solomonic magic.¹ Hermetic texts belonged to Greco-Roman and Arabic traditions of magic, and involved the invocation of celestial spirits and drawing down planetary spirits or forces into astrological images.² This genre of magic, also called ‘astral magic’ to include works not specifically attributed to Hermes, incorporated a range of attitudes to spirits, from supplicatory prayer to trapping them in matter.³ Solomonic magic texts had Jewish origins or significant Jewish influences. They included prayers
to angels but also allowed the compulsion of inferior spirits through their exorcism by certain names and the use of magic circles, characters and sacrifices. Although a broad distinction between the two genres is useful, no ritual element is unique to one group of texts; texts from both genres share many ritual aspects, such as the petitioning of higher spirits to send lesser spirits to assist the operator. Both traditions of magic frequently use the ambiguous or neutral term ‘spiritus’, but the Christian emphasis on good and evil sources of power led to different approaches to spirits in Christian ritual magic texts written under the influence of Hermetic and Solomonic magic. Ritual magic texts by Christian authors tended either to direct most of their rituals to God and the angels (angelic magic, or theurgy) or to focus particularly on summoning demons (demonic magic, or necromancy). Christian necromantic experiments to summon demons cite Solomon more frequently than Hermes as the original operator or inventor of a ritual, and angelic magic texts claim Solomon as the original recipient of the revelation more often than Hermes. The influence of Hermetic magic can be seen, however, in the attention to astrological timing and the celestial locations and attributes of many spirits. Moreover, necromantic experiments were collected with items of astral magic in compilations that reveal the popularity of both genres.

This paper focuses on what was distinctive about rituals in learned magic texts for speaking with spirits and explores the reasons for the appeal of these rituals to medieval readers enthusiastic for spiritual experience. These pragmatic texts showed how humans and spirits could interact and included rituals tailored to the natures of particular spirits. Some rites purified the operator to prepare for angelic conversation, and others protected him while interacting with demons. I will argue that although magic texts treated conversations with spirits as instrumental actions to further the goals of the operator (for example, offering him increased knowledge of the cosmos), such conversations were also desirable for their own sake and provided possibilities of spiritual elevation, companionship, even friendship and love.

Magic texts consulted for this paper include all the main genres of learned magic that involved interaction with spirits. Jewish magic, with its significant angelological tradition, is particularly important in this respect. It reached a Latin audience primarily through the Liber Razielis, a compilation of seven works of Jewish magic collected and translated under the patronage of Alfonso X, ‘El Sabio’, King of Castile (1252–84). The Liber Razielis is associated with Solomon, but individual parts of it regularly cite Hermes, and the compilation should be viewed as a synthesis of the two traditions. The seven magic texts circulated as a complete set but also individually, in smaller groups and in a summarized version translated into many European vernaculars. Although the preface cites a single Hebrew original for the compilation, it is likely that the structure was partly a creation of Alfonso himself and his translators, who appended nine works of magic to the