

Turning of the Wheel:
The Interplay of the Unique and the Universal

Humanities Exploration
University of Idaho, 2011-2012

Invisible Spokes:
The Ubiquity of Magic in the West
by
Garth D. Reese, Jr.

Magic no longer holds the place of respectability it once did. This is probably news to you. Not that magic has fallen from its illustrious position that is, but that it ever occupied a place of respectability in the first place. Yet, even this notion of respectability is tricky... as is the term “magic.”

So I should back up, and talk a bit about what magic or its respectability has to do with this colloquium. Specifically, I contend that magic and alchemy along with other occult modes of thinking have become invisible spokes in the wheel of western thought in general, and the study of the humanities in particular. I say “invisible” as opposed to “absent,” because I believe these spokes are still in place – the wheel certainly couldn’t turn without them.

While terms like ‘alchemy’ and ‘astrology’ are relatively straightforward, describing what alchemists and astrologers were doing in terms they themselves would have understood, ‘magic’ is much more slippery. Meaning is determined by so many factors that, as D.P. Walker noted, magic would often “dissolve into something else: music and poetry ... orthodox Christianity ... unorthodox Christianity ... Magic was always on the point of turning into art, science, practical psychology, or, above all, religion.”¹ In short, magic was whatever one wanted

¹ “[D]emonic magic, combined with mediaeval planetary magic, led to the overtly demonic, recklessly unorthodox magic of Agrippa and Paracelsus.” D.P. Walker, *Spiritual & Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (1958) (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 74-76.

it to be. Until the so-called Scientific Revolution, scholars in the west regarded “magic” as the only truly universal system. Granted, they rarely called it magic. Often they called it theology, or philosophy, or later, *prisca theologia*, a primordial wisdom inherent in Creation, but lost to humanity through the Fall of Adam and subsequent ages of sin.

For many in medieval Europe, however, all magic was illegal, if not demonic – there was no nuance. This has created interpretative obstacles down to the present, wherein magic’s overall illegality in the ancient world contributed to its poor reputation in the minds of subsequent historians, even though magic’s practitioners were usually *not* trying to go against the law, or the church. Magic, and its association with divination, carried its negative connotations from the ancient world through to the thirteenth century, when writers “began to see natural magic as an alternative to the demonic form.” Additionally, “the term came to be used for operative functions such as healing as much as for divination.”² Other writers, especially theologians, began to make similar distinctions, though many wrote of ‘occult’ forces and left out ‘magic’ altogether, natural or otherwise.

In discourses from the late ancient through the early modern periods, however, the meaning of terms like ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’ are usually only discernible in context: “one group’s holy man is another group’s magician: ‘what I do is a miracle, but what you do is magic’” (...or ‘witchcraft,’ or ‘sorcery’).³ As David Chidester observes, “the very definition of religion, as legitimate access to superhuman power, depended upon its opposition to other forms of access alleged to be nothing more than illegitimate superstition... [and] modern historians continue to live with the dilemma contained in that opposition: there is no substantial difference

² Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12.

³ Jacob Neusner, “Introduction,” in Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs and Paul V.M. Flesher, eds., *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4-5.

between what are called miracles and magic. Rather, the distinction implies a religious judgment holding that some exercises of superhuman power are legitimate and some are illegitimate. In the context of any religious community, the distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘magic’ depends upon the essentially religious discrimination between *our* real miracles and *their* fraudulent, deceptive, and illicit practices of magic.”⁴

Originally derived from the Greek terms *magos/mageia*, ‘magic’ was initially used in references to Persian priests, known to the Greeks for their exceptional piety and power – the same term the author of the New Testament book of Matthew used to refer to the “wise men” who came from the east to visit the infant Jesus. In time, *magos* took on a more barbaric sense, and was linked by later Greeks and Romans with *goeteia*, a term usually referring to magical invocation, but also a common term for the howling of barbaric or nonsense words.⁵

Philosophers and other scholars practicing ‘magic’ thus referred to their activities as *theurgia* (divine work), to distinguish themselves from this perceived ‘low-brow’ *goeteia*, the practice of “common magic,” or witchcraft. This ‘low magic’ eventually became known generally as *magia*, and was proscribed in Greek and Roman legal statutes—the same *magia* that was collapsed with *maleficia* in late ancient and early medieval interpretations and was subsequently applied to witchcraft statutes. (Incidentally, *maleficia* simply means “to do evil,” so you see the flexibility of terminology is everywhere.) In this tradition, the magician was considered a criminal, a quack, or worse. Legitimate practices might appear quite similar to ‘magical’ ones and might or might not receive the label ‘magic.’ As late as Roger Bacon in the 13th century, scholars tended to hold the position that “if a practice is licit, it is not magic; if it is illicit and has to do with the misuse

⁴ David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 20.

⁵ Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, “Introduction,” in *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, eds. Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 2-3.

of knowledge, it is magic.”⁶ To be licit *and* magical required a change in both the definition of ‘magic’ and ‘licit.’

The early Middle Ages inherited magic’s long history of condemnation. The term *magia* retained its sting and as a result, “few of the activities ranged under this rubric could readily be rescued from the burden of imperial proscription. But some could. And [in time] many people became increasingly convinced that they had to be.”⁷ Magic was real and threatening to many people, and calls for the death and destruction of all practitioners were not uncommon. Still, whether from some memory of the Persian *magi*, or awareness of Jesus as a kind of magician, the link between priest and magician began to confer potential legitimacy on the practice of magic,⁸ as did the fact that what these early modern magicians were doing was something very different. The questions that remained were who or what would determine which of those magical forces might be legitimate and who, exactly, could legitimately invoke such forces. The things that do emerge clearly from the surviving texts were that in the practice of magic, as with alchemy, the holiness and spiritual purity of the practitioner was paramount. This was no mere grasp for demonic power—the goal for most “real” magicians was the “divine vision,” which effectively allowed one to experience the mind of God here and now. I will go into this more in a moment.

A thorough examination of the etymologies of magic, witchcraft, and alchemy could easily overtake this presentation, so I won’t dwell on them too much longer. I will, however, strive to use these terms as the people I study would have used and understood them. The

⁶ A.G. Molland, “Roger Bacon as Magician,” *Traditio* 30 (1974): 459.

⁷ Valerie I.J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3.

⁸ Flint, 17.

definitions of these terms have always been contentious, and it may not be possible to completely rehabilitate the term ‘magic’ for use in contemporary historical discourse. One of the many conceptual hurdles set up by the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment was redefining the terms of “reality.” Before this the world could roughly be divided up into three realms: natural, supernatural, and unnatural. Everyday things that people understood were “natural;” things like miracles and so forth that God controlled were “supernatural;” and then weird stuff was “unnatural.” That didn’t necessarily mean that God wasn’t involved, but it was different – a tree was natural, but a clock or a projectile fired from a cannon was “unnatural,” in that those things don’t happen in nature. A calf with two heads or similar mutations were also unnatural, because they went against the perfect universe God supposedly created. As you can imagine, it wasn’t much of a leap from “unnatural” to evil. Even something like gravity was considered “unnatural,” if for no other reason that it was hard to conceptualize a force acting on another object invisibly across space (even now gravity is still a bit confusing). Magic too was unnatural, as was medicine, but less often in the sense of being “supernatural.” With the Scientific Revolution, scholars started re-classifying things as “real” or “unreal” according to the new natural laws being developed. Thus, even “unnatural” things like two-headed calves were regarded as “real,” albeit rare, whereas magic and the “supernatural” were simply classified out of existence.⁹

And yet, in the midst of all of this, we debate the definition of magic as though the meaning of the term “religion” was already agreed upon. Thus, when contemporary scholars contrast “magic” and “religion,” they are effectively contrasting two terms that didn’t actually

⁹ See Dan Burton & David Grandy, *Magic, Mystery, and Science: The Occult in Western Civilization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 36-40.

exist for the actors in question. In fact, not even scholars made such contrasts until the early 19th century and the launch of James Frazer's magnum opus, *The Golden Bough*. Medieval and early modern churchmen never claimed that "orthodox" Christians (for instance) did not practice magic, they claimed that orthodox Christians didn't use any incantations or other "wicked, curious arts." And this is the key distinction: it's not a case of magic vs. religion, it's a case of orthodoxy, or normative religious practice, vs. heterodoxy, or non-normative religious practice. Most writers defined magic in terms of what it was not, and sometimes this is as precise as we can get. However, there are a number of practices that are non-normative and yet, not magic. And there are other practices we might assume to be normative that under other contexts we might call magical. Take prayer, for example. In Ivan Turgenev's (tur-gain-yev) poem *Prayer*, he writes, "Whatever a man prays for, he prays for a miracle. Every prayer reduces itself to this: Great God, grant that twice two be not four." How is this different from even the most basic concept of a "spell"? Not very, I would suggest. Both spells and prayers often ask for something outside of the present reality; both call on the aid and/or power of an extra-worldly entity to achieve this; and both tend to work best when performed by professionals (e.g., priests & magicians) who have been specifically trained and mystically indoctrinated into secret (albeit licit) practices, using secret languages, special charms, etc. This is an admittedly provocative position to take, but it gets to the root of how we analyze terminology and sub-consciously (or consciously) privilege certain modes of thought over others.

For many early modern magicians, the concepts of prayer and spell seem to be thoroughly collapsed. For Thomas Vaughan, about whom I will say much more soon: "*Magic* is

nothing else but the *Wisdom* of the *Creator* revealed and planted in the *Creature*.”¹⁰ Magic was explicitly theological *and* orthodox for Vaughan and he was not unique. In failing to comprehend this, historians, theologians, and religious studies scholars compromise the understanding of not only early modern ‘magic,’ but also early modern religion and early modern culture in general. This is a vital spoke... perhaps more than one.

As you might expect though, few reform-minded theologians in seventeenth-century Europe would have listed magicians and alchemists among their sources of inspiration. Yet these theologians were familiar with magical and occult texts; they had them on their bookshelves and evidence in the form of annotations in the surviving texts indicates that they read these works. In my research, I demonstrate the common intellectual heritage of theologians and magicians and draw out connections between theological and magical writings in the early modern period.

More specifically, I study the writings of Thomas Vaughan, an Anglican priest and practicing alchemist and magician, who was active in the decades during and after the English Civil War, a period in which politicians, philosophers, and theologians called for “universal” reform. Vaughan, known to most of his readers as Eugenius Philalethes (‘the well-born lover of truth’), was born around 1621 in Newton, Wales. He went to Jesus College, Oxford, was ordained to the priesthood in 1645, and assumed the rectory of St. Bridget’s in Newton. Vaughan’s alchemical writings and theological beliefs reflect the degree to which science, religion, *and* magic interacted and presented ideas for reform – he called it “magical theology.” Just as early modern developments in the ‘new science’ influenced reforms in early modern theology, so did magic and other occult philosophies have similar, and equally influential, interactions with theology.

¹⁰ *Magia Adamica, or The Antiquitie of Magic, and The Descent thereof from Adam downwards, proved, Whereunto is added a perfect, and full Discoverie of the true Coelum Terrae, or the Magician’s Heavenly Chaos, and first Matter of all Things* (1650), in *Works*, 150.

Due to his support of King Charles I during the Civil War, Vaughan was formally evicted from his parish in 1650. He returned to Oxford and took up full-time research into natural magic, alchemy, and theology. Vaughan became very interested in the universal reform movement associated with Samuel Hartlib and a number of English and Continental scholars. He allied himself with a magical branch of reform associated with the late fifteenth-century magician Marsilio Ficino and sixteenth-century magician and alchemist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. Vaughan hoped to restore peace and religious unity through the *prisca theologia* of magic.

Vaughan understood creation as a kind of divine alchemical process. This implied yet another turn from much of the theology of his day, in the form of his complete rejection of the tenet of *creatio ex nihilo* (or, creation from nothing). For creation to be the work of transmutation implied preexistent materials, which worked just fine for Vaughan who noted, “to thinke that God creates any thing *ex nihilo* in the worke of Generation, is a pure *Metaphysicall Whymsey*.”¹¹ Yet, these preexistent materials do not necessarily imply a non-divine or non-spiritual component in the universe. In the course of correcting what he perceived to be scholastic errors concerning motion and what impels movement in bodies, Vaughan concluded that there was, in fact, a “principle” that animated everything: the “*Anima Mundi*, or the universall *spirit* of Nature.”¹² For Vaughan, the *Anima Mundi* was the means by which the divine interacted with, and acted in and on, the world, imparting not only physical form, but knowledge (via revelation) and even instinct to all creatures.

Although the distinction is subtle, Vaughan tried to show that all of creation was ‘divine’—but was not God *per se*. This proto-panentheism fits logically amidst Vaughan’s other

¹¹ *Anthroposophia Theomagica*, in *Works*, 87-88.

¹² *Anima Magica Abscondita*, in *Works*, 109.

Neoplatonic influences. Although Vaughan does not seem to have been tempted by classic Platonism, Plotinus's understanding of the physical world as an emanation of the One, but not separate from the One, likely informed Vaughan's theory of how the divine interacted with creation. Vaughan explained, "*Nature* is φωνη του θεου [the "voice of God"] not a meer sound or Command, but a substantiall active Breath, proceeding from the Creatour, and penetrating all things."¹³ This perspective ultimately proves essential to understanding every aspect of Vaughan's thought. That the divine "breath" penetrated all things meant that all things were intrinsically good and worthy of study, if not outright reverence. In Vaughan's view, God remained active in this creation, employing "himself in a perpetuall *Coction*, and this not onely to *generate*, but to *preserve* that which hath been *generated*."¹⁴ The language of "coction" is explicitly alchemical and the significance of it for Vaughan's theology was that, like an alchemist overseeing the progress of an experiment which required not only technical skill but faith for the outcome, God was constantly overseeing creation, even intervening at times to ensure the proper results.

Accordingly, Vaughan addressed the active theomagus: "Thou hast resolved with thy self to be a *Cooperator* with the *Spirit* of the *living God*, and to *minister* to him in his *worke* of *generation*."¹⁵ This was a particularly radical statement: that God could conceivably use, and even require, the efforts of humans to redeem creation. This deviated substantially from the notion that humans could not will, nor effect, any good apart from the spirit working in them.

¹³ "*Logos spermatikos*," or the 'seminal logos.' *Anima Magica Abscondita*, in *Works*, 114.

¹⁴ *Magia Adamica*, in *Works*, 219-20.

¹⁵ *Magia Adamica*, in *Works*, 231.

Vaughan believed that God was calling him and others to assist in the redemption of the world... through magic.

Vaughan understood the greater act of creation as a form of transmutation. Specifically, he wrote: “in a word, *Salvation* it self is nothing else but *transmutation*.”¹⁶ That is, the means to humanity’s restoration were contained within humans themselves. Vaughan did not intend this statement in a metaphorical manner: the individual human would be completely changed through the transmutation of salvation. The potential for lived redemption in this existence seems to have been a possibility for Vaughan, even though he never pointed to its realization. In a sense, Vaughan was transmuting salvation itself: fallen souls were no longer “salvaged” from the wreckage of creation, but were instead incorporated into the “sediment” of the ongoing transmutation of the universe.¹⁷

One of the most important things to recognize in this discussion is how truly alien this world is from ours. You may have heard it said that “the past is a foreign country,” but that doesn’t quite hit it. This belief in and practice of magic in the early modern period cannot be explained away as ignorance and superstition any more than can the conclusions of contemporary astrophysics. Why? Like any other form of human knowledge, they are the result of an artificial structure, developed by scholars to frame questions about things that exist within this structure. There’s nothing wrong with this, but it’s important for us to recognize the limitations. History has countless limitations, and perhaps the one most relevant to this study is the frequent mistake of correlating history with evolution, or progress. This is a relatively new perspective, thanks to the interpreters of the “Scientific Revolution,” but one that dominates

¹⁶ *Lumen de Lumine*, in *Works*, 357.

¹⁷ David Crane, “The Poetry of Alchemy and the Alchemy of Poetry in the Work of Thomas and Henry Vaughan,” *Scintilla* 1 (1997): 116.

many narratives today. Things are always getting better... computers are getting faster, cars are getting safer, people are living longer... this is all viewed as an implicit improvement on the past, which by default, must have been slower, more dangerous, and more deadly. For other contemporary observers, the fact that many societies are becoming more secular is also a sign of “progress.” And so, when faced with a worldview that takes for granted the means to employ angels and demons in ritual workings, talk with divine powers, and discern the mind of God, it’s no wonder that this seems hopelessly backward, because, of course, NONE of these things could be real.

I’m not here to convince you that magic and alchemy and astrology were or are real (even though they were and are); nor am I here to convince you that all of your subsequent research should somehow include magic and alchemy (even though that would be really cool if it did). I’m trying to address a lesser known prejudice in the academy that not only skews scholarship, but can serve to enable greater prejudices. It may seem obvious, but magicians in the 16th century were different from magicians today. This is an important statement not just for scholars who might discount the influence of 16th-century magicians. Contemporary pagans and other occult practitioners *also* need to understand that they are nothing like 16th-century magicians – chiefly because most magicians in the past were rather devout Christians—which is the whole point: things are not as they seem... even when they are.

So many of our scholarly approaches privilege the scholar over the object of study. Often, we do what is convenient for us rather than adapting our inquiry to the nature of our subject. Sometimes this is because this is how we were trained; and sometimes it is because doing anything else would result in us not being taken seriously by our colleagues. This isn’t where I try and convince you to revolutionize history. I’m merely highlighting some of the obstacles

present in revising scholarship, and people much cleverer than I have addressed this more than adequately.

Over the past fifty years or so, historians of science have done an admirable job of integrating the history of magic and alchemy into their histories of the emerging ‘new science’ of the early modern period. Indeed, the majority of early modern scholars did not distinguish between theology and science at all—all branches of learning existed to facilitate one’s greater understanding of God and ‘His’ creation. Theology was truly still the “Queen of the Sciences.” And yet most histories of Christianity are written from a perspective that renders the inclusion of the occult less than desirable (to say the least) in the minds of most contemporary Christians. When historians of Christianity do engage the occult, they do so to point out superstitious and/or pagan vestiges in European culture that Protestantism worked to purge. This is problematic, since magic and the occult influenced early modern theology just as much as the science of the time did. In early modern libraries, magical and occult texts were shelved together with theological texts.

Interdisciplinary approaches to resolving the place of magic in the early modern period are becoming increasingly common. Typically, these approaches originate in one of three fields: philosophy, religious studies, or history. Despite the added flexibility of combining these disciplines, however, the results are rarely different from previous efforts: magic is disregarded and ultimately relegated to the pre-Enlightenment world of ‘superstition’ and silliness. Philosophers condemn occult thinking as ‘bad philosophy’ and point to the fact that no ‘occult’ philosophers made a significant impact on the development of western philosophy as it is understood presently (which is false). Religious studies scholars often believe that they treat the occult with more respect, when in fact, what they do is deem it “magic,” as opposed to

“religion.” In short, they mystify it, and place it beyond the reach of investigation. Church historians, presuming they have overcome the confessional limitations that have limited church history for so many years, insist that the occult was explicitly, or at least tacitly, regarded as non-Christian throughout the history of Christianity, and thus refuse to include it in their studies. Regardless of what one might believe about occult studies today, for scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, magic, alchemy, and the like were real and valid means for understanding the world in which they lived.

Transdisciplinarity can enable one to literally transcend the limitations lingering within these disciplines, and formulate entirely new questions, but hopefully not new disciplines! Thus, rather than wondering whether Vaughan was a ‘good Christian’ simply because he practiced magic and alchemy, I inquire how English Christianity was different in the seventeenth century, such that a respectable (and respected) Anglican gentry priest could have written about and practiced magic, and then how he not only avoided criticism from the church hierarchy, but was rewarded with strong book sales, membership in the Hartlib Circle (one of the most renowned reforming think-tanks in Europe at that time), and a position in the Restoration court of Charles II.