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# THE HISTORY OF WESTERN MAGIC: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

*Dieter Harmening*

The word 'magic' is a derivation from a Latin term *magia* (Gk. *mageía*, Iranian OPer. form *magu[s]*); the word is also related to the Greek notions *méchos*, *mechané*, the Gothic *mahts*, German *Macht*; the Indo-European verb stem *\*magh* signifies 'to be able to, to help'.

Originally, the Latin noun *magus* (from the Greek *mágos*) designated the members of the spiritualist-priest class, and later came to designate 'clairvoyant, sorcerer' and in a pejorative sense also 'magician, trickster'. Thus the first meaning of the word 'magic' was the teachings of the Magi, i.e. the arts of acquiring supernatural powers and force, while later it was also applied disparagingly to fraudulent witchcraft.<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned etymological explanations indicate three important factors in the development of the notion 'magic': 1) magic as a science and the knowledge of divine forces in nature and in the process of creation (*magia naturalis*), 2) magic as the exercise of such knowledge in prophecies, oracles and conjuring, and 3) deceitful witchcraft. The latter opinion played an important role in the Christian demonisation process.

In his treatise *Aurora philosophorum*, Paracelsus (c1493–c1541) wrote: "Many could not only understand the secret wisdom of the Magi, Chaldeans, Persians and Egyptians, but also exercise it for public and secret purposes, and it has been pursued till the present day" (Peuckert 1976: 9),<sup>2</sup> therefore proving that the Occident was aware of both the theoretical approaches as well as the practice of magic skills. Cicero argued that a *magus* was "a Persian scholar or wise man."<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament mentions the astrologers or soothsayers of the Chaldean people,<sup>4</sup> and the three kings of the New Testament were also known as the Magi and the Wise Men from the East (cf. Gnllka 1986: 35 ff). Several Greek philosophers (Goldammer 1980: 632) such as Empedocles (5th c. BC) (Diels & Kranz A 14), Democritus of Abdera (5th–4th c. BC) (Ibid. A 1.2.9.16.40), Pythagoras of Samos (6th c. BC) (Ibid. A 9) and Protagoras of Abdera (5th c. BC) (Ibid. A 2) were probably familiar

with the teachings of the Persian Magi,<sup>5</sup> and according to Aristotle (4th c. BC) the approach was merely an attempt to explain existence through a higher principle.<sup>6</sup> The Magi were acknowledged as true authorities by the Neoplatonists of late antiquity.

Iamblichus (c275–c330 AD)<sup>7</sup> attempted to “explicitly and accurately pass on the established dogmas of the Assyrians” (Iamblichus 1978), i.e. their teachings, while Philo Judaeus (c25 BC–50 AD) has characterised it as “the science of observing”, “which attempts to explain the creation of nature through comprehensible explanations.”<sup>8</sup>

The development of the western notion ‘magic’ led to far-reaching conclusions in the demonological and cosmological discussion of the Neoplatonists.<sup>9</sup> Their approach was based on the theory of a hierarchically organised cosmos, where according to Plotinus (c205–c270 AD) a noetic substance (mind, intellect) was formed as the result of timeless and infinite radiation (emanation) based on the supreme principle; this in its turn gave rise to a psychic substance, which formed the foundation of the material world. Later on, these different stages of emanation came to be considered as certain forces, which under the influence of angelic and demoniac beliefs during late antiquity were personified as humans. The hierarchical cosmos of Iamblichus merely proves the validity of this process. In his work the Neoplatonic cosmology has found an outlet through the syncretism characteristic of the late antiquity and in the spirit of Greco-Oriental polytheism, which is supported by the elements of the Pythagorean mathematical ratios and completed with a dimension of magic. “Superior” emanations are brought closer to “inferior” ones by certain intermediary creatures. The higher the position of the intermediaries, the more they resemble gods and demons; the lower they are, the closer they stand to the psychic-spiritual aspect. The aforementioned group of intermediaries has been arranged in order of succession (*serai*) on the basis of cosmic gravity.

Proclus (c410–485 AD) (Proklos 1974; Hopfner 1974: 19) has described the system discussed above in greater detail: in the hierarchical “chains” of cosmic elements the power and nature of a certain star god affects everything inferior, and with increasing distance the influence gradually becomes weaker. During its historical development, the Neoplatonic cosmological theology and related criticism

affected the formation of modern natural history. Lastly, we owe the preparation of today's concepts of nature to this legacy and the following discussions. At the same time this doctrine, with its fantastical demonological constructions, brought about a misinterpretation which threw the whole of Europe into the chaos of a witch-hunt. Many approaches and processes associate the following events, which took place in early modern times, with the theological-cosmological tendencies of late antiquity: the formation of Christian demonology and theory of superstition, medieval debates about the acceptance of natural magic (*magia naturalis*), the Arabian sources on the natural philosophy of the antiquity with elaboration, and the reception of Neoplatonic natural theology during the Renaissance (Thomsen *et al* 1983: 692).

In 1256 Alfonso of Castile ordered the translation of a book from Arabic into Latin, which became to be known under the title *Picatrix*. He therewith introduced to the European public the changes made in the Neoplatonic cosmology by the Arabian thinkers. The magic-natural philosophical tone of the Arabian collection is represented by Johannes Hartlieb (before 1410–1468) (Hartlieb 1989: Ch. 35, pp. 48–49), but also in the works of Peter of Abano (1257–1316) (Thorndike 1944), Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516) (cf. Arnold 1988: 217–240) and Johannes Weier (1515–1588) (Biedermann 1968: 376 ff), and is most clearly manifest in the reception published in *De occulta philosophia*<sup>10</sup> by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486–1535). Although generally written in the spirit of Neoplatonic ideas, *Picatrix* demythologises the succession of cosmic gravity into mere astrological chains: planets move along their trajectories, which sometimes make them ascend to the groups of fixed stars (constellations), and sometimes descend towards the earthly world, bringing along ethereal influence and forces. The astrological magic described in *Picatrix* searched for means of reaching these supreme forces, which regularly affected human actions and destinies. In order to accomplish that, efforts were made to accumulate the affecting forces to a substratum related to planets, e.g. a talisman. By bringing together as many elements characteristic of a given planet as possible, a special room (something like an accumulator) was formed for receiving the forces and influences of stars. Thus, “the influence of the talismans is the result of their relation with celestial bodies.” In reality the western world had long before been aware

of celestial influences caused by natural factors (*agens naturale*), but in addition to the purely demonological explanations *Picatrix* introduced yet another tendency: namely, the astrologically affected chains, or in other words, the idea of the astrologically affected (and therefore predestined) nature.

The discussion and critique of magic-astrological causality was revived in Renaissance philosophy, particularly in Florentine Platonism (see Cassirer 1963: 103 ff; cf. Thomsen *et al* 1983: 694 ff). The Humanists approached the Platonic ideas from the perspective of the legacy of late antiquity, and were therefore first introduced to the Neoplatonic form of the doctrine. In becoming aware of the Neoplatonic philosophical dogmas, the Humanists also had to deal with magic-astrological cosmology. The idea of astrological causality played an important role even in the Middle Ages, but the concept of absolute astrological predestination had lost its earlier consequence, at least until the belief in the divine supremacy superior of the stars prevailed (*astra regunt homines, sed regit astra deus*, ‘the stars rule over man, but God rules over the stars’). “But the farther mankind has come, the more people seem to realise that pursuing mundane interests and prioritising secular knowledge increases the bias towards astrological principles.” (Cassirer 1963: 105). The idea of the irresistible magical-astrological causality exerted an influence on the Renaissance treatment of nature practically until the 17th century.

Marsilio Ficino’s (1433–1499) treatise *De Triplici Vita*<sup>11</sup> on the astrological system clearly indicates the intention of introducing the notion of freedom in this established chain of cause and consequence. And since Ficino’s work has been written in the spirit of emanation theory, and the author has been convinced of the existence of the superior and inferior spheres described in *Picatrix*, he argues that a person’s birth planets affect the human mind and actions. At the same time all humans have the freedom to make choices within the range of the options and influences of the given planet, and thereby develop and perfect themselves (Cassirer 1963: 119 ff). Ficino also introduces a new definition of the term ‘magic’, associating magic with love: both are based on the attraction (*attractio*) “exerted by one object through a certain essential relativity to another

[---] From this arises love and the mutual attraction of lovers. This is real magic.”<sup>12</sup>

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), one of the leading figures in the Academy of Florence, was the first to publicly oppose the principles of the magical-astrological world view (cf. Thomsen *et al* 1983: 695 ff). Unlike Ficino, who searched for personal freedom within the limits of the astrologically predetermined cosmos, Pico della Mirandola refused to accept the idea of astrological predestination. According to him the material world cannot be perceived through vague assumptions or ideas, but only through evident causes. We need not go far to search for the reason for everything offered from above, as it originates from nothing other than light and warmth, easily verifiable, well-known factors. Only these factors function as intermediaries between humans and celestial influence, and also serve as mediums dynamically connecting the geographically distant objects (Cassirer 1963: 123). Pico della Mirandola’s idea of true cause, or *vera causa*, was later supported by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) and Isaac Newton (1642–1727). In the context of the Neoplatonic chains of cosmic attraction and the magical-astrological chains of *Picatrix*, Pico’s summoning points to the need to prove that the constant alternation of one influence and another even existed, and after that formulate it as a theory. Only then do we have reason to speak of the chain of causality.

The general meaning of the notion ‘magic’ was already known during antiquity. Diogenes Laertius (3rd c. AD) has drawn comparisons between the Indian gymnosophists and the Celtic druids, thereby extending the scope of meaning of the word (Goldammer 1980: 632). According to Laertius magic was created by Zoroaster (Zarathustra); later, Saint Isidor of Seville (c560–633) introduced the same assumption among medieval thinkers (Harmening 1979: 302). Isidor used the word combination ‘magical art’ in his conclusions on prophecies, oracle methods and the invocation of the dead. Hugo of St. Victor (late 11th c. – 1411) has used the term as a general label for all prophetic and magical arts (Harmening 1979: 219 ff), and from then on the scope of the term ‘magic’ came to coincide with the Latin term *superstitio*, or ‘superstition’. At the same time the medieval (and later) magic-terminology originated in antiquity, when terms such as necromancy, geomancy, hydromancy, aeromancy,

pyromancy, astrology, divination, incantation (spell), auspices, augur (a priest prophesying God's will from the behaviour of birds), haruspex (priests who based their predictions on the interpretation of animal entrails, etc.), mathematics, horoscope, etc. were adopted into Christian literature through Augustine and Isidor of Seville (Ibid.). In case some fields had to be isolated from others, the inspection of omens came to be referred to as 'observation', and the scientific-technical art of prediction – 'divination'. Only in the late Middle Ages were the ancient terms used by the scholars substituted by the popular names 'witch', 'soothsayer', 'fortune-teller', 'predictor from wax', 'seer', etc. (Harmening 1980: 31). The humanistic preoccupation with everything antique led to the borrowing of other antique terms or the derivation of analogous word forms (Pfister 1933).

3. The Christian magic *critique* regarded magic as one of the sins violating against the First Commandment, and backed its criticism with rules against witches in the Old Testament,<sup>13</sup> the early Christian apologetic literature and the previous rulings of the church council (Harmening 1979; 1980: 30 ff). In addition to the aforementioned explanations the Christians also employed natural scientific and rationalist arguments, whereas these were often used side by side with the aim of attributing the subordination of nature to the omnipotent will of God; these arguments were supported by Maximus of Turin (born c420),<sup>14</sup> Abogardus of Lyon (799–849)<sup>15</sup> or Hrabanus Maurus (780–856).<sup>16</sup> According to them magical acts, which in principle lack efficiency, cannot possibly interrupt the irresistible regularity of nature. Nevertheless, demons are attributed the power to contribute to the influence resulting from the manipulation with witchcraft with their intellectual and technical capacity, or by deception (the evocation of illusions). While in the early Middle Ages the illusion theory was prevalent, as becomes evident in the text *Canon episcopi* (presumably of Carolingian origin; see Regino of Prüm 1840), in the late Middle Ages the theory was discarded with the argument that magic apparitions were real: this was particularly strongly emphasised in the *Witch Hammer* by Heinrich Kramer (Harmening 1979; on the *Witch Hammer* cf. Arnold 1988). In the course of these changes Thomas of Aquinas introduced his ideas about Augustine teachings, which concerned the arrangement with demons,<sup>17</sup> and was soon applied to all forms of magic and predic-

tion.<sup>18</sup> With his considerations of Neoplatonic demonology, Augustine had established the basis for the development of the Christian demonological conception and the theory of magic: according to him demons were fallen angels. Demons lived in the air and could enter the humans with their nonmaterial bodies and evoke illusions. The physical and intellectual capacity of their spiritual character enabled them to perform all kinds of frauds. And they had invented magic to make humans worship them instead of gods. Augustine substituted the Neoplatonic hypothesis, which postulated that according to cosmic gravity demons could be restrained with the matter-of-factness similar to the laws of nature, with the concept of establishing a symbolic agreement with the demons. According to the agreement there was no need to restrain the demons, but by using certain signs they could be evoked for certain purposes. Augustine has interpreted the means (manipulation, etc.), often represented as counterparts of some act of god worship, as elements of a sign system for communicating with the demons and for concluding the agreement. In order to guaranteeing the equal communication between humans and demons there had to be an ancient contract to explain the magic signs. As language is based on the universal agreement and its usage is a precondition of the tacit acceptance of the system, thus are the magic arts based on the communicative contract with the demons. In their comments to the maxims, medieval philosophers Albertus Magnus (1200–1280), Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and Bonaventura (1221–1274) also mentioned the contract with the Devil, emphasising that its nature calls for profanity (Harmening 1974: 825). Thomas of Aquinas contributed to the pact by differentiating between the explicitly expressed (*pactum expressum*) and tacit agreements (*pactum tacitum*). This theoretically justified the interpretation of all kinds of magic actions and witchcraft as a pact with the Devil, which encouraged people to reject the faith. Therefore it became possible to exercise the inquisitional tribunal formed for the persecution of heretics also on those suspected of witchcraft, or to restrain the members of ‘the witch denomination’.

Even in the Middle Ages it was important to distinguish between philosophical-natural scientific magic and demonic witchcraft. During the period following the Middle Ages this was repeatedly emphasised. Albertus Magnus (c1200–c1280) drew a distinction between

magicians, diviners (*aruspices, divinatores*) and conjurers (*necromantici, incantatores*), and saw magic as a science about the natural cause of things.<sup>19</sup> William of Auvergne (c1180–c1249) compared *magia naturalis* with medicine, as this type of magic was often used for healing purposes.<sup>20</sup> Roger Bacon (c1120– after 1292) claimed magic to be deceitful and illusory, but was forced to accept that it possessed a certain veracity.<sup>21</sup> Yet the tradition of speculative magic remained. Complemented with various cabalistic elements in the post-medieval period (Thomsen *et al* 1983: 699–701), it was an attempt to search for God’s manifestations in nature and connect these exclusively with the learned elite. Among the authors of speculative magic we might mention Valentin Wiegel (1533–1588), Robert Fludd (1574–1637), Johann Valentin Andreas (1586–1654) and a number of Rosicrucians. With its demonological treatment of magic, the magic connected to the devil pact (*magia demoniaca*) gained more and more public attention due to the discussion of the witch trials. Jean Bodin (1529 or 1530–1596), Antonio Martínez Delrío (1551–1608) and Benedictus Carpzov (1595–1666) considered the idea of signing the pact with the Devil to be realistic, while Johannes Weier (1515–1588), Balthasar Bekker (1634–1694) and Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) took a stand against the idea (Harmening 1974: 825). The 18th century finally put an end to the academic theological-philosophical and legal debates over witchcraft and the nature of witches, thereby terminating the persecution of witches. Nevertheless, speculative magic played a certain role in the development of contemporary natural science. The substitution of the concept of astrologically predestined nature with the concept of mathematical-physical causality led to the disposal of the (both astrological and demonological) teaching that speculated with magic powers. The noetic approach concerning the structures and centres of the world order based on cosmic attraction was forced to make way for the empirical verification and objective observance of various associations. Only that which could be proven with concrete measuring was considered true (Harmening 1985: 38 ff).

As the termination of the witch-hunt put an end to the fear of the practice of magic, the 18th century saw the publication of series of occult literature; numerous first prints and reprints of the ancient occult texts were issued. Examples of this are the historical-antiquarian text collections by Johann Christoph Adelung,<sup>22</sup> Georg C.

Horst<sup>23</sup> and J. Scheible,<sup>24</sup> but also various reprints for commercial purposes, known to the present day: the Books of Moses, *Claviculae Salomonis*, etc. These are collections of extremely heterogeneous texts of extremely different origin, their authors are often fictitious (Moses, Salomon, Albertus Magnus, Doctor Faust), and so are the places of appearance (Rome, Venice, Toledo) and mysterious sites of their discovery (the dungeons of the Vatican, chained in the cellars of monasteries), these are claimed to be written in blood or phosphor, might be sealed with a red-black impression of the shape of a skull, bound in black and the cutting edges of the pages red. The books contain prayers, commemorative psalms, epic accounts of healing and witchcraft, the spells for invocation of the Devil, charms, secret seals, formulae serving as amulets and magic tools (Harmening 1985: 34). Today's occult market also offers, in addition to books, abounding paraphernalia for practising magic: amulets, talismans, pendulums and magic rods. Although complemented with modern elements and pseudoscientific arguments to give some weight to the requisites, they are nothing but the remnants of the western traditions of magic (Harmening 1991).

## Comments

1. Kluge 1967, see the verb 'mögen'; Mackensen 1966, see the word 'magisch'.
2. On the following cf. Thomsen, Harmening & Daxelmüller 1983; Harmening 1983; 1979; 1980.
3. "genus sapientium et doctorum [---] in Persis", Cicero *De divinatione* I, 23 (46), 41 (90f); *De natura deorum* I, 16 (43); *De legibus* II, 10 (26).
4. Js 44,25; 47, 9.2; Jr 27, 9; Hs 21,21; Tn 1,20; 2,2.10.27; 4,4; 5,11.
5. Cf. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) *De finibus et malorum* V, 87.
6. Aristotle of Stageiros *Metaphysik* XIII, 4, 1091 b 10.
7. Iamblichus of Chalkis [*De vita Pythagorica*] 17.151.154.; Porphyrios von Tyros (243–c270 AD) [*Vita pathagoreae*], 6.41; [*De abstinentia*], Iv, 16.
8. Philo of Alexandria *De specialibus legibus* III, 100; Goldammer 1980: 632.
9. On the following cf. Thomsen *et al* 1983: 691 ff.

10. Published and commented by K. A. Nowotny. Graz 1967.
11. Marsilius Ficinus 1576. *De Triplici Vita. Opera omnia*. I. Basel, reprint Turin 1962; see dpr. of the 1489 Florence edition <http://gallica.bnf.fr/scripts/ConsultationTout.exe?O=n053426>; cf. Kristeller 1943.
12. Marsilius Ficinus *Commentarius in Convivium Platonis de amore* VI, 10; *Opera omnia* II, 1348; Goldammer 1980: 633.
13. E.g. 2.Mo 22,17; 3.Mo 10,27; 5.Mo 18,9–12.
14. Maximus Taurinensis Homilia 100. *De defectione lunae* (I). *Patrologia latina*, 57. Ed. by J. P. Migne. Paris 1878 ff., pp. 483–486.
15. Agobardus Lugdunensis Item liber contra insulsam vulgi opinionem de grandine et tonitruis. *Patrologia latina*, 104. Ed. by J. P. Migne. Paris 1878 ff., pp. 147–158.
16. Rabanus Maurus Homilia 42. *Contra eos qui in lunae defectu clamoribus se fatigant. Patrologia latina*, 110. Ed. by J. P. Migne. Paris 1878 ff., pp. 78–80.
17. Augustinus 1963. *De doctrina christiana*. II. *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* 80, 33–78. Ed. by W. M. Green. (Cf. [http://www.oeaw.ac.at/~kvk/kv01\\_1.htm](http://www.oeaw.ac.at/~kvk/kv01_1.htm))
18. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae* II.II.92 sqq. Cf. Harmening 1980: 31.
19. Albertus Magnus 1893. *Evangelium Matthei* II, 1. *Opera omnia*, 20. Ed by A. Borgnet. Paris, p. 61.
20. William of Auvergne 1674. *De universo* III, 2, 21 sq. *Opera omnia*. I. Paris & Orleans 1674, p. 1058.
21. *Opus maius* I, 14. London 1773.
22. *Geschichte der menschlichen Narrheit*, 1784.
23. *Zauberbibliothek*, 1821–1826.
24. *Das Kloster*, 1846.

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