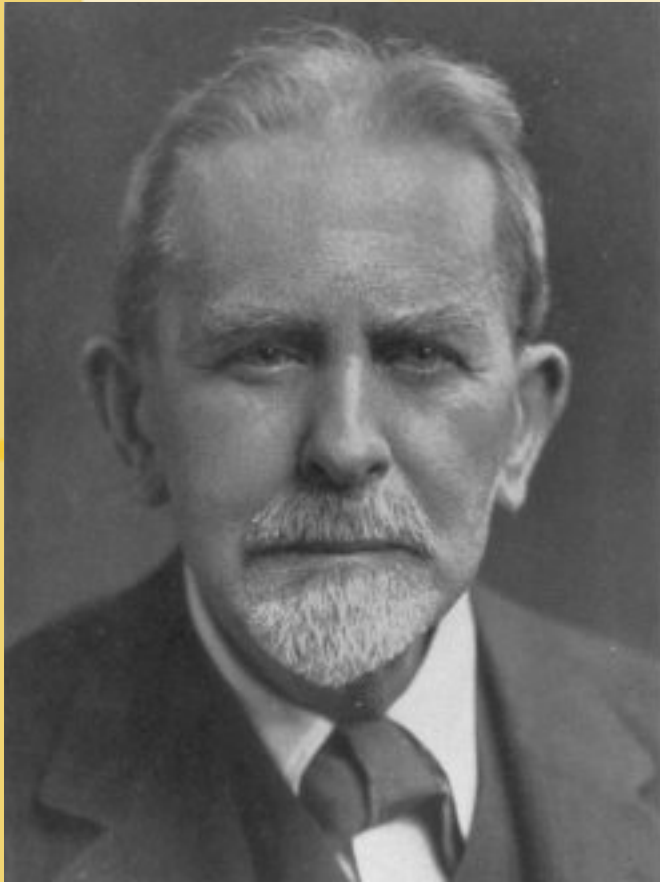




Psychology and Magic

Definitions of magic

Sir James G. Frazer



- In the late 19th century, James Frazer, in his influential work *The Golden Bough*, postulated a sharp distinction between religion and magic. He viewed magic as a primitive form of religion. Magic was defined as the coercion of supernatural powers, while religion involved ‘asking’ or ‘praying to’ the gods. Despite the contradiction of historical evidence, this modernist distinction has been perpetuated in scholarly interpretations of magic until very recently.
- Christian prejudices combined with modernist attitudes have resulted in magic being viewed as ‘bad’ or ‘sinister’ compared with the ‘good’ practices of religion.

- In the 1950s, William J. Goode insisted that the difference between magic and religion lay in their objectives as well as their methods. Magic, he declared, exhibited ‘concrete specificity’ in its goals, a ‘manipulative attitude’, instrumental causality, and individualistic practitioners who developed their own methods and rituals.
- Challenges to these modernist views began in the 1950s with the realisation that different cultures define magic differently, and that imposing anachronistic definitions and artificial divisions (e.g. magic vs. religion, magic vs. mysticism) on other cultures was dishonest scholarship which would result in confusion and misunderstanding.
- Despite these challenges, magic is still primarily viewed as the manipulation of the secret forces of the cosmos or of nature, and is understood as ‘the appropriation of ritual power for personal ends’, as distinct from religion, which is viewed as aiming for the benefit of the community or of humankind.
- Some scholars have recently attempted to replace the word ‘magic’ with terms such as ‘ritual practices to gain power’. This does not help matters. We can still use the term ‘magic’ heuristically, as long as we are aware of how the culture being researched viewed perceived practices concerned with creating and maintaining bridges between visible and invisible worlds.

Some historical contradictions to Frazerian 'evolutionism'

- The Western magical tradition has remained relatively consistent over the centuries and is primarily derived from the Hellenistic world. One of its two chief components is Greco-Egyptian (Hermetic) magic, derived from Hermetic texts of the first centuries CE and from medieval Arab magic, which absorbed Hellenistic magical theories and practices when the Arabs conquered Egypt in the early medieval period. The Greco-Egyptian magical tradition includes alchemy and astral magic.
- The second major component in the Western magical tradition is ancient Jewish magic. Jewish and Hermetic texts freely borrow from each other and combine elements to produce a syncretic approach that involves the invocation of both pagan gods and the Hebrew Yahveh, the invocation of Jewish angels and Greco-Egyptian *daimones*, the magical use of numbers and alphabets, the application of formulae of Divine Names, and rituals intended to induce a *nousanodia* or ascent of the soul to a union with god (s).
- Jewish and Egyptian cultures did not distinguish between magic and religion – only between good and bad magical practices and good and bad magicians – and incorporated magical rituals as part of the fabric of religious life. Magicians were not 'outsiders' but were usually priests (in Egyptian society) and rabbis (in Jewish society). Magical rituals could serve the community as well as facilitating the spiritual life of the individual.

Moses, Solomon, and Hermes: the great magicians of late antiquity



A late 16th century version of Moses triumphing over the Egyptian Pharaoh:
My magic is stronger than your magic.

Sir Henry Unton, 'Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh', 1596



A medieval woodcut portraying Solomon commanding the astral demons to build his temple. The image illustrates the *Testament of Solomon*, an originally Jewish magical text c. 3rd or 4th century, later Christianised. The chief demon, Orneus, rules the sign of Aquarius.



A 17th-century engraving portraying the Greco-Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, purported author of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the great mythic teacher of magic in late antiquity. Hermes is sometimes conflated in both Arab and Jewish medieval texts with Enoch, the Hebrew sage who was taken up bodily to heaven and transformed into the angel Metatron. Hermes is also sometimes conflated with Moses.

Two useful definitions of magic

- Magic may be conceived of as ‘embracing any formalised practices by human beings designed to achieve particular ends by the manipulation and direction of supernatural power or of spiritual power concealed within the natural world’.
 - Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids, and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon, 2003), p. 106).
- Magic may also be conceived of as a group of practices which are specically concerned with developing and maintaining, through the application of the human will, ‘the system of bonds and relationships between the revealed and concealed worlds’ .
 - Rachel Elijor, ‘Mysticism, Magic, and Angelology: The Perception of Angels in Hekhalot Literature’ , *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 1 (1993), 3-53, on p. 16.

Ancient attitudes toward magic

- Not all Greeks approved of magic, especially in the classical period. Plato attacked those who, for financial rewards, promised to ‘bewitch’ the gods and *daimones* with incantations, sacrifices, and prayers. Plotinus abused the Gnostics for ritual practices intended to ‘draw down’ the supernal powers for the benefit of humans. Greeks and Romans in the classical world believed that magic originally came from Egypt and ‘Chaldea’ (which included both Jewish and Persian magic and ‘Chaldean’ astrology).
- The Christian church has always publicly opposed magic, although many Christian rituals, such as the Mass, are magical by anyone’s definition, ancient or modern. Magic in early Christian perceptions was viewed as an alliance with evil demons. Augustine included astrology in this category.
- The early Christian world also believed that both the Egyptians and the Jews were skilled in magic, and that Moses was initiated into Egyptian magic and then taught it to the Jews. Origen’s *Contra Celsus* (3rd century CE) declares that the Jews ‘worship angels and are skilled in sorcery, in which Moses was their instructor’.

Jewish astral magic and the medieval grimoires

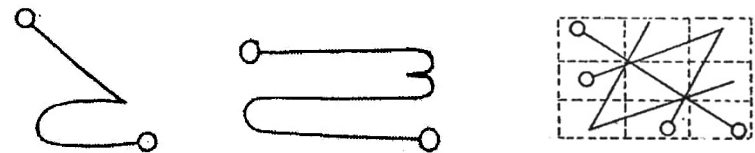
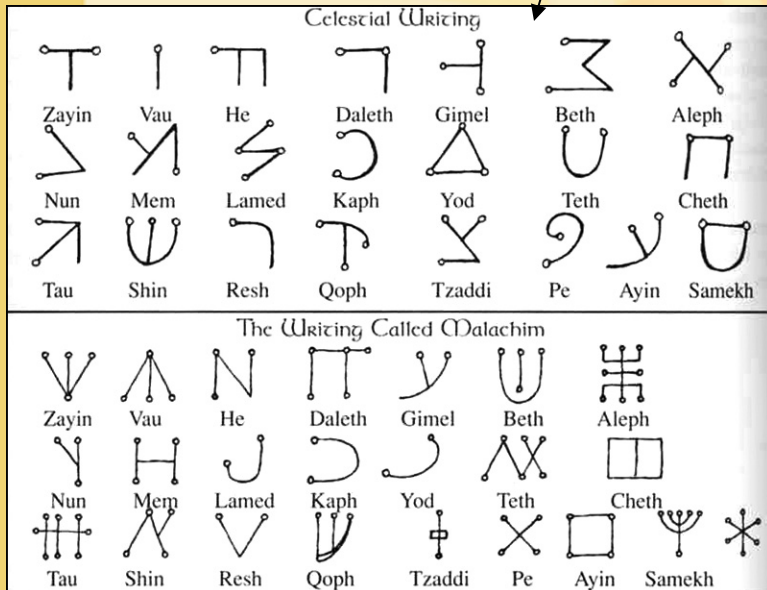
- Adepts involved in the revival of ritual magic in the occult revival of the late 19th century attributed Western ceremonial magic to the Jewish magical tradition. They had considerable justification for their belief.
- The Christian ‘grimoires’ (magical recipe-books) from which the Western magical tradition is derived were developed from earlier Jewish sources such as the *Sefer ha-Razim* and the *Testament of Solomon*. These magical works from late antiquity concern the adjuration of angels associated with the planets and zodiacal signs.
- Talismanic magic – the use of particular stones, metals, and plants associated with specific planetary gods, angels, or powers – is derived partly from Hermetic traditions, incorporated into medieval Jewish magical texts. Arab magic, as found in medieval works such as the *Picatrix*, combine these two currents.
- Magical practices found in medieval Kabbalistic works also incorporate Neoplatonic philosophical ideas as well as Gnostic formulations about drawing down supernal forces and learning the ‘seals’ necessary to make the soul’s ascent to a *unio mystica*.
- Medieval grimoires such as the *Sworn Book of Honorius* are rooted in Jewish traditions of astral and linguistic magic. Scholars such as Richard Kieckhefer have just begun to acknowledge the impact of early Jewish magic on these Christianised magical texts.

Magical alphabets and linguistic magic: a long tradition



A magical alphabet from the Jewish grimoire, *Sefer ha-Raziel*, first published in the 17th century but circulating in MS for several centuries and derived from the 3rd century *Sefer ha-Razim*

Agrippa's magical or 'angelic' alphabets, derived from the *Sefer ha-Raziel*, in *De occulta philosophia*, early 16th century

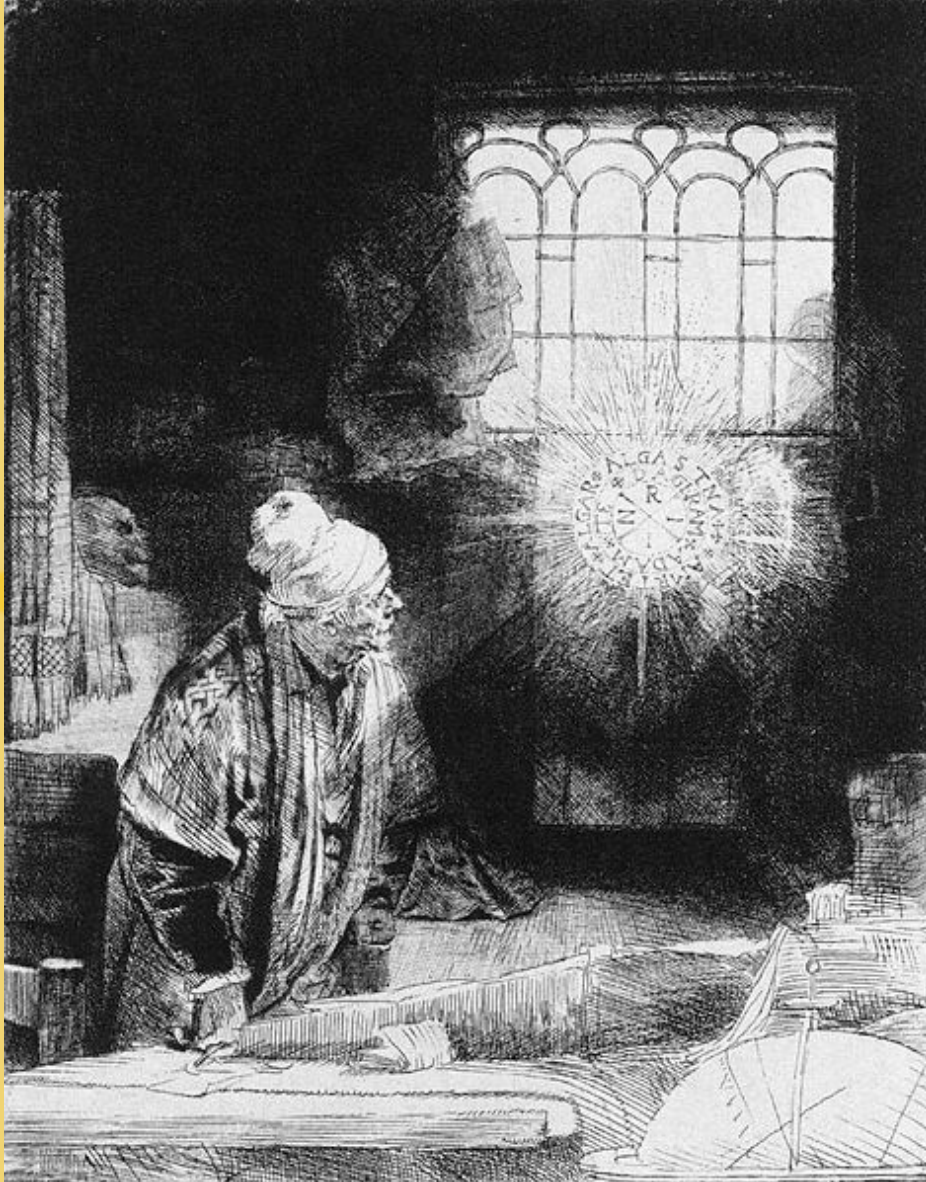


Sigils for the ‘intelligences’ of Saturn,
from S. L. MacGregor Mathers’
documents for the Golden Dawn, late 19th
century; derived from Agrippa’s *De
occulta philosophia*

Renaissance and early modern magic

- Marsilio Ficino's 'natural' astral magic involved the use of Hermetic talismanic substances with music and 'fumigations', but avoided the use of adjurations of angels and *daimones* in order to remain on the right side of the Church.
- Pico della Mirandola appropriated Jewish Kabbalistic magical practices, including the use of the Divine Names. Unlike Ficino he challenged Church authorities, and was persecuted by the Inquisition.
- Magicians following Pico, such as Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, freely combined Jewish astral and angel magic with divinatory astrology, alchemy, and Hermetic talismanic magic. Agrippa also appropriated the use of 'magical alphabets' from late antique Jewish texts such as the *Sefer ha-Razim* to create 'angelic alphabets' that were later taken up by Elizabethan magi such as John Dee.
- In the seventeenth century this hybrid Jewish-Hermetic magical and alchemical tradition was transmitted through Paracelsian alchemy and later through Rosicrucian and Masonic currents. It was directed primarily at the spiritual evolution of the adept and the consequent benefits to the community and the nation. The 'Rosicrucian Enlightenment' of the early 17th century involved the 'rediscovery' of this magical tradition within a mystical Christian framework. In Britain the chief exponent was Robert Fludd.

Faust: the quintessential magician



Rembrandt's engraving of Faust, used by Goethe as the frontespiece for the first publication of *Faust*. The wheel of magical letters and Divine Names is characteristic of the Christianised medieval grimoires derived from early Jewish magical texts.

Hermes Trismegistos in early modern alchemy

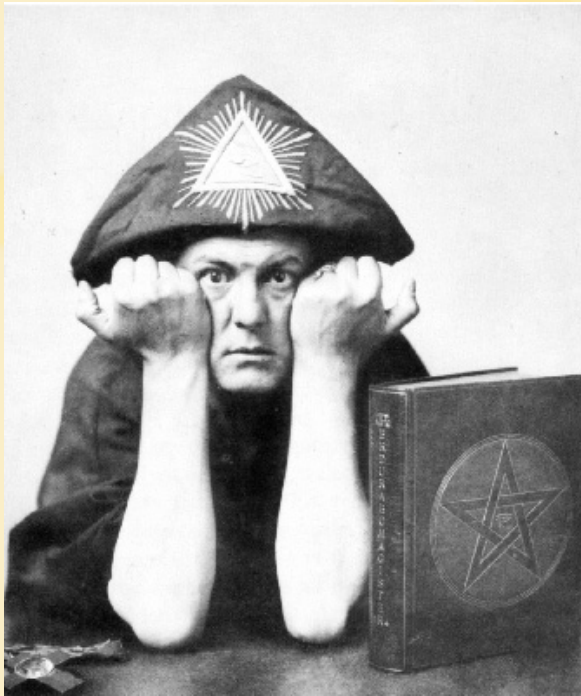


The figure of Hermes Trismegistos (‘thrice-greatest’ Hermes, lord of the three Kabbalistic worlds of Briah, Yetsirah, and Assiah) is both the alchemist as Hermetic magician and the magical agent in the alchemical work. He accomplishes the transformation of the metals as well as being the ancient quasi-divine Hermes, purported author of the late antique Hermetic magical and alchemical texts. Because he can transform the metals, he can also transform the planetary fate which corresponds to them, and is thus shown as lord of the Sun, Moon, and planets.

Magic in the modern era: the occult revival

- Contemporary spiritualities, sometimes called ‘New Age’ spiritualities, owe their magic to the late 19th and early 20th century European occult revival, which began in France in the mid-19th century with Éliphas Lévi and incorporated the work of Mesmer (late 18th century) with spiritualism and the Jewish-Hermetic magical tradition.
- Astral magic formed an integral part of the occult revival. Although divinatory astrology was used to determine the appropriate timing for specific rituals and the character analysis of individuals, the adjuration of the planetary and elemental powers relied almost entirely on astral rituals derived from earlier grimoires and Jewish texts such as the *Sefer Yetsirah* and the *Sefer ha-Raziel*. Egyptian deities and Jewish angels mix freely in these rituals, with each planet being associated with a particular *sefira* on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, and meditation exercises and rites geared toward their invocation and interiorisation as psycho-spiritual states.

In the first decades of the 20th century, occultists appropriated the psychologies of Freud and Jung to explain the processes of magic as interior psycho-spiritual transformations. The hybrid magic of occultists such as Aleister Crowley and Dion Fortune combines magic with depth psychology. This combination of magic and psychology is still used in contemporary spiritualities concerned with ceremonial magic.



Crowley as the new Solomon



Dion Fortune (Violet M. Firth)

Magic and science, magic and psychology

- Magic is often perceived as the predecessor of modern science because of its 'instrumental causality'. In other words, science is magic with the supernatural element removed – a manipulation of the hidden forces of nature.
- Magic can also be perceived as the predecessor of modern depth psychology in the sense that the Jewish-Hermetic magical tradition, unlike the more down-market sorcery associated with witches and curse-tablets, is a theurgic or religious process intended to induce altered states of consciousness and induce a mystical experience which transforms the personality.
- Both Freud and Jung drew on earlier Jewish and Hermetic magical traditions in their psychological formulations. Freud drew on Jewish Hasidic Kabbalah, while Jung began with Hermetic alchemy and later appropriated Kabbalistic materials in his ideas about individuation and the use of 'active imagination'.
- Transpersonal psychologies also draw on these older traditions in their use of 'guided imagery' to induce what cognitivists call 'religiously altered states of consciousness'.

Jung's 'active imagination' as magic

- 'Active imagination' is an analytic technique which, through meditation on and emotional engagement with images emerging in dreams or spontaneously in waking states, is intended to allow the individual access to the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Jung seems to have begun developing his ideas in this area from around 1921.
- Jung believed this technique emerged in early modern alchemy, but it seems to have been extant in astral magic since late antiquity and involved meditation on astrological symbols, the creation of astral amulets, and efforts to invoke specific planetary deities.
- Dion Fortune, writing at the same time as Jung and borrowing his ideas, applies active imagination to the Kabbalistic Tree of Life and its planetary correspondences, and advises:
'Each symbol upon the Tree represents a cosmic force or factor. When the mind concentrates upon it, it comes into touch with that force...a channel in consciousness has been made between the conscious mind of the individual and a particular factor in the world-soul...This results in a tremendous access of energy to the individual soul'. (Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah*, London, 1935, p. 18)

Some questions about psychology, astrology, and magic

- Is the practice of astrology a ‘magical’ act?
- Is astral magic ‘psychological’ ?
- What role does ritual play in the practice of psychotherapy?
- Is all ritual magical? Is all magic ritualistic?
- What role does ritual play in the learning and practice of astrology?
- To what extent does the astrologer utilise ‘active imagination’ in focusing on the configurations of the horoscope? Can the horoscope be considered a magical talisman?
- To what extent are our modern attitudes conditioned by Frazer and by centuries of Christian opprobrium, rather than by the customs and traditions of the syncretic cultures from which we derive our astrological systems?