

06. Ficino: Natural Magic and Cosmic Medicine

1. Framework for Medieval (Pre-Renaissance) Magic

(a) Gnosticism

- Mystical knowledge of religious/spiritual world-order.
- Used for practical purposes by magus.
- *Optimistic gnosticism*: sympathetic magic (draws down heavens into world).
- *Pessimistic gnosticism*: escape from world (requires secret passwords, rites, *etc.*)

(b) Neoplatonic Metaphysics

- Hierarchical structure (three hypostases).
- New element (Stoics, *Asclepius*): "effluvia", "spiritus", *pneuma* = mediator between Soul and physical world.
- Humans as double natured.
- Optimistic *gnosis*: "look within" to commune with the One.

(c) Egyptian element: decans

- 36 Egyptian gods of time: one for each 10° segment of Zodiac.
- 3 decans for each of the 12 houses of the Zodiac.
- Magic in *Asclepius* draws down powers of decans into statues.

(d) Picatrix

- "Ghayat al-Hakim" ("The Aim of the Sage").
- Written by Arabic author in 11th cent.; translated into Latin in 12th cent.
- Manual on sympathetic magic with new element: *talismans*.



14th century fragment
(hdl.loc.gov/loc.wdl/wdl.7305)

Order of Nature in Picatrix



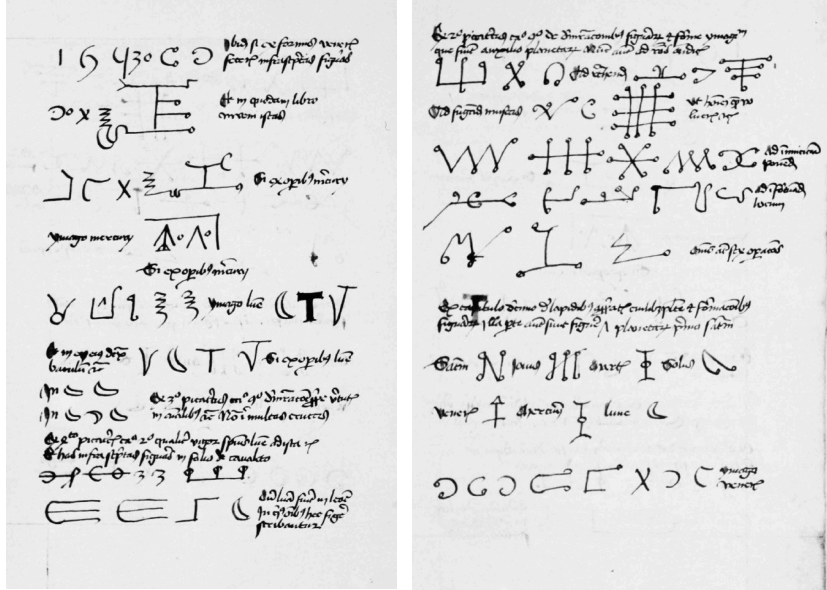
- Standard Neoplatonic tripartite scheme, with addition of *spiritus*.
- *Intellectus* contains 36 decans, 7 planets, 12 signs of the Zodiac.
- *Spiritus* = divine breath; divine wind. Transmits *intellect* into matter.
- Magic consists in capturing and guiding the influx of *spiritus* into *materia*.

Talismanic Magic: How spiritus is captured in matter

- Talisman consist of
 - *Material object (amulet, necklace, etc.)*
 - *Image inscribed on object.*



- Both image and material are identified with a particular celestial being (decan, planet, etc.)
- Purpose: practical goals (long life, medicinal, business success, love, etc.)



- Bulk of *Picatrix* consists of
 - *Lists of correspondences between materials and gods.*
 - *Lists of correspondences between images and gods.*
 - *Lists of rites required in construction of talismans.*



- Characteristics of talismanic magic in *Picatrix*:
 - *Sympathetic*: seeks to re-establish correspondences.
 - *Pneumatic*: *spiritus/pneuma* as mediator.
 - *Supernatural*: draws down higher powers of intelligences (decans).

2. Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499)

- Italian philosopher, priest, physician.
 - Concern: Reconciling Christian doctrine with Neoplatonism.
 - Problem: How to avoid the Augustinian Prohibition?



Libre de Vita ("Book on Life") (1489)

- Text on medicine and health.
- Book I, "On a Healthy Life": aimed at students who study too much and suffer from *melancholia*.

Saturn

- abstract study & contemplation
- melancholy, temperament
- against life and youth

Sol, Venus, Jupiter

- "three graces"
- fortune, life, cheerfulness



- Prescription: Surround yourself with objects associated with Sol, Venus, and Jupiter (gold, green plants); avoid objects associated with Saturn.

- Book I: *passive astrological medicine* (heavenly powers act on patient).
- Book III: *active astral magic* (draws down and manipulates heavenly powers).

Book III: "On obtaining life from the heavens" (*De vita coelitus comparanda*)

- Ficino views Book III as a commentary on Plotinus.

Metaphysics

One

Intellect

(Mens)

Soul of World

(Anima mundi)

Spirit of World

(Spiritus mundi)

Body of World

(Corpus mundi)

- Soul contains seminal reasons (reflections of Forms in Intellect).
- Soul uses seminal reasons to create forms of physical things, both heavenly (planets, stars), and earthly.
- Forms of heavenly bodies and "figures" they enter into (constellations, houses of Zodiac) mediate creation of lower forms.

Disease is due to disalignment of individual souls with World Soul.

- Goal of physician: Reunite patient with seminal reasons *via* mediation of *spiritus mundi*.

- How?

- (i) Passive astrological medicine

- (ii) Active astral magic




Talismans!


- Arrangements of stones, minerals, herbs, animals, etc., associated with relevant heavenly object.
- Use of relevant perfumes and scents.
- Music evocative of heavenly object.

Theoretical Basis for Talismans

- Distinction between *manifest* (observable) and *occult* (hidden) properties.


Occult properties of an object are either:
- natural (not supernatural) properties that are not explicitly manifest, or
- properties of the object's substantial form.

- Substantial form of an object = the "individual" form of the object that is unique to it.


Concept of substantial form:
- Implicit in Aristotle
- Explicit in Galen (2nd cent) and Thomas Aquinas (13th cent.)

- Aquinas: Substantial forms appear in a *natural* causal chain initiated by God and passing down through celestial bodies to terrestrial bodies.



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"What is done by the power of celestial bodies is a natural effect, for the forms that are caused in lower bodies by the power of celestial bodies are natural."

(*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, Chap. 104.)

- But: They *alone* cannot explain the statue animation in the *Asclepius*:

"Now, the power of self-movement is subsequent to the possession of a soul, for it is proper to animated beings for them to move themselves. So, it is impossible for something inanimate to be made able to move itself by the power of celestial bodies. But it is said that this can be done by the arts of magic; that a statue, for instance, can move itself, or even speak. So, it is not possible for the effect of the arts of magic to be done by celestial power... The position of Hermes is disposed of by these considerations..."

(*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, Chap. 104.)



- Moreover: Magic requires an appeal to *intelligences* (i.e., demons).



"Again, in the practices of this art they use certain symbols and specially shaped figures... Now, we do not use signs except in regard to other intelligent beings. Therefore, the arts of magic get their efficacy from another intelligent being to whom the speech of the magician is addressed."
(*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, Chap. 105.)

- Ficino's Concern: To develop a framework for talismanic magic that gets around the Augustinian and Thomistic Prohibitions.

There are three types of properties of a talisman:

1. The *manifest* properties of the material.
2. The *occult* properties of the substantial form.
3. The *occult* properties of the image.



- Require all three types to establish correspondences (not just (2) alone).
- Require images to be of planets only (not decans, or abstract symbols).
- Result: *Natural* talismanic magic with no appeals to intelligences (decans, demons, etc.).

- Ficino hedging his bet:



"[I]f you do not approve of astronomical images, albeit invented for the health of mortals - which even I do not so much approve of as report - dismiss them with my complete permission and even, if you will, by my advice."

"Someone... will say: What does a Christian have to do with magic or images?... Marsilio is not approving magic and images but recounting them in the course of an interpretation of Plotinus. And my writings make this quite clear, if they are read impartially. Nor do I affirm here a single word about profane magic which depends upon the worship of daemons, but I mention natural magic, which, by natural things, seeks to obtain the services of the celestials for the prosperous health of our bodies."



"Lastly, there are two kinds of magic. The first is practiced by those who unite themselves to daemons by a specific religious rite, and, relying on their help, often contrive portents. This, however, was thoroughly rejected when the Prince of this World was cast out. But the other kind of magic is practiced by those who seasonably subject natural materials to natural causes to be formed in a wondrous way."