

## INTRODUCTION

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#### (a) *The Ritual Hero*

The great gift made to the humanities in this super-scientific age is the flood-lighting of the twin-citadel religion and art by archaeological research and anthropological discoveries. The structural features of this towering edifice are at least dimly discernible now beneath the profusion of tangled customs and beliefs which all but obliterated them before; and certain traditional religious and aesthetic forms have assumed a more vital significance. Bewilderment is slowly yielding to comprehension of the origins and development of man's spiritual life. The keynote is certainly not simplicity, and yet uniformity is present. To survey the religions of the world is to wander through a vast banyan forest, whose mythological parent stem, rooted in ritual, will not easily be discovered in the prehistoric jungle whence it sprang—the breeding ground of all our riotous religious and poetical imaginings. The result is overwhelming in its complexity; roots, stems and branches are inextricably intertwined and indistinguishable from each other in their upwards and downwards, sideways, earthwards and skywards thrusts. But the process behind all this profuse and fantastic fertility remains essentially the same. The superabundant vitality, the incredible luxuriance, the infinite number of variations and aberrations from the norm, all spring, as in the banyan forest, from an unchanging and unending impulse, a rhythmical *perpetuum mobile*: rising and falling and rising again in nature through birth, life, death and resurrection; imitating this cycle in ritual and art.

The penetrating if flickering light shed upon this aspect of human behaviour by the pioneers of yesterday who have inspired the scholars of to-day now covers a field coterminous with the surface of the earth. And among other phenomena which such researches have rendered both more interesting and more comprehensible is that of magic, which a contemporary anthropologist has rightly declared to be 'the most powerful influence on human conduct the

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world has ever seen'.<sup>1</sup> This, rather than any hard-and-fast definitions, some of which would restrict it to 'pseudo-science' or 'pretended art' or 'debased religion', is the attitude I have found most fruitful to adopt in the following study. It was begun with the aim of placing the sixteenth-century Faust in the main stream of the magical tradition; and it has led me far afield. For I had not progressed beyond the fringes of the investigation before I realised that all Faust's predecessors and successors as well as Faust himself were essentially one and the same person under many different guises and bearing as many different names. Founders and teachers of religion; sacrificed saviour-gods; rebels and martyrs; sinners and saints; mystery-men and occultists; conjurers, charlatans and quacks; they all behaved in a similar manner and their lives went according to the same plan. It needed no Solomon in the post-Frazerian era to deduce a ritual origin in such circumstances; and the facts would seem to show that the legendary magician derives from that dim and distant hero, who, as king, god or priest, died to be reborn in kingship or seasonal rites; and that, although he gradually became a creature sealed and set apart in the magic circle, he was originally one of the countless dying gods whose distribution is world-wide. Indeed, an analysis of the magus-legend puts this beyond all reasonable doubt. In its most highly developed form it has ten stock features; and, although these are not all invariably present or equally important, all of them are interesting.

(1) *Supernatural or mysterious origin of the hero.* This might be divine, as with the half-gods or heroes of Greek mythology; or royal, which originally meant the same thing. It was sometimes represented as diabolic; often, too, as strange or mysterious.

(2) *Portents at birth,* vouching for the supernatural nature of the hero. A late instance of this is the legend of the happenings which occurred when Mahomet saw the light of day; heaven and earth were shaken, and (amongst many other marvels) all the idols of the world fell down.

(3) *Perils menacing his infancy,* from evil-wishers or the powers of evil. The story of Krishna's rescue from the wicked schemes of his maternal uncle Kansa is one instance amongst many of the dangers supposed to beset wonder-workers and sages at their birth.

These three features are epic in their nature rather than ritualistic. Their obvious purpose is to emphasise the divine nature of the hero, which the ritual assumed.

<sup>1</sup> Lord Raglan, *Jocasta's Crime*, Thinker's Library, London 1940, p. 73.

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(4) *Some kind of initiation* is nearly always described. This may be into the mysteries of the cult about to be proclaimed, or into occult or diabolic wisdom. It is a period of preparation and is modelled upon initiation ceremonies. Austerities and often, too, temptations occur during this period which is either preceded, accompanied, or followed by

(5) *Far distant wanderings*. Sometimes to seek for wisdom; sometimes to spread it. The voyage may be supernatural and include a descent into the underworld and an ascent into heaven. This may occur either in the middle or at the end of the hero's life. It sometimes figures in both places. The legends of the Tartar shamans are full of accounts of these journeys into the heavens and into the underworld.

(6) *A magical contest*. This is an outstanding and constant feature in the lives of all magicians, whether legendary or real. Deriving from ritual, it is also rooted in reality, and is the confluent point where life and legend meet, mingle and enrich each other. Such contests are very common in Brahmanical writings. Indeed they are everywhere to be found. A telling instance of the ritual origin is the dramatic defeat of the prophets of Baal by Elisha.

(7) *A trial or persecution*. This may develop from the contest and reverse the position. The hero wins the magical contest, but is nearly always vanquished at the trial, which generally brings about his doom.

(8) *A last scene*, of a set nature, is frequently, though by no means invariably, present. It may be sacrificial or sacramental. It may embody a solemn and prophetic farewell. It may take the form of confession and repentance. It is feebly represented in antiquity; but came into prominence in medieval times in consequence of the Last Supper.

(9) *A violent or mysterious death*. The tearing to pieces of Orpheus is an instance of the first type which derives from the ritual of the dying god. What might be called the myth of the teaching god favoured a mysterious disappearance and conflicting accounts of the actual end, as in the legends about Empedocles. Very few outstanding magicians have died a natural death in legend or in life. Their departure may be followed by the descent into Hades mentioned under (5); and is almost invariably succeeded by

(10) *A resurrection and/or ascension*. The latter, rather rarer, is represented by the ascension of Elijah in Hebrew literature and of Oedipus in Greek drama. Both have survived in a modified form into our own times.

Such, in skeleton form, is the myth of the magus. It will be seen that it is an elaboration of the kingship ritual, the basis of which, according to Hocart, is the death of the hero and his rebirth as a god. It also runs parallel to the stock features discerned by Gilbert Murray in Greek tragedy; the *pathos* of the year-daimon, which comprised an *agon* or contest, a *pathos* or violent sacrificial death, and

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a *theophany*, resurrection or apotheosis. Much the same course was run in kingship rites in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Palestine, according to Hooke:

This pattern consisted of a dramatic ritual representing the death and resurrection of the king, who was also the god, performed by priests and members of the royal family. It comprised a sacred combat, in which was enacted the victory of the god over his enemies, a triumphant procession in which the neighbouring gods took part, an enthronement, a ceremony by which the destinies of the state for the coming year were determined, and a sacred marriage.<sup>1</sup>

Hocart also mentions the sacred marriage in coronation ceremonies; but this feature has left only faint and sporadic traces on the myth of the magus, which is a specialised version of the heroic myth deriving from royal ritual. Women are not totally absent from the legendary tales about magicians; but in general they play a small and atrophied part. The Eastern magi were supposed to be celibates, which may have affected the tradition; yet Zoroaster himself was married three times; Solomon had seven hundred wives; Simon Magus cohabited with Helena, and so did Johannes Faust. On the whole, however, love-interest plays no great part in the lives of magicians, who had more urgent things on their minds. However much embroidery of an epic and aesthetic nature was superimposed on the original pattern; whatever strange flights of fancy were undertaken, and whatever liberties of a romantic nature, love did not, except in one or two instances, make the magician's world go round.

(b) *The Professional Practitioner*

If the lifeline of the legendary magician followed ritual precedent, the feats he was said to perform derived from the functions of the medicine-man, witch-doctor or wizard, whose daily round and common task it was to perform for the benefit of the tribe or community by means of charms, spells, incantations and various other acts of sympathetic, imitative, propitiatory or coercive magic, those vital and seemingly miraculous operations whose life-giving power was symbolised and concentrated in the great periodic, seasonal and other rites. His office often entailed the performance of such ceremonies either in the character of hero or priest; but it also

<sup>1</sup> *The Labyrinth*, ed. Hooke, London 1935, p. v.

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embraced other activities; and where great communal rites were absent, consisted in semi-public or private performances. The feats attributed to his legendary successors fall into two categories. In the one group are to be found a series of marvels for which no practical origin suggests itself, being mere manifestations of power. Such are the levitation and flying feats, the assumption of animal forms or the bewitching of others into such shapes; and the cloak of invisibility. They all probably hail from ritual. Levitation and flying are often faded reminiscences of the ascension or apotheosis. Many initiation ceremonies symbolise the passing from one state to another by the assumption of animal masks or skins, especially where the totem system prevails; and according to Jane Harrison the same is true of invisibility:

Disappearance and reappearance is as common a rite in initiation as simulated killing and resurrection. . . . Both are rites of transition, of passing from one state to another.<sup>1</sup>

These ritualistic marvels, amongst the most sensational on the magician's list, have therefore been severed from the lifeline and used for purposes of display. But the majority of the miracles derive from the practical functions of the medicine-man or wizard, whose paramount duty has always consisted in ensuring the prosperity of the tribe, clan or society to which he belonged, or of the patrons to whom he was attached.

In order to fulfil such an onerous task successfully, a professional magician must first and foremost, as a basic requisite, possess no small degree of power over the minds of his fellow men. One would expect, and indeed one finds among the shamans of Siberia and the witch-doctors of Africa, a recognised superiority in such practitioners, whether intellectual, spiritual or personal. To use the term which has lately become fashionable, they have more *mana* than the general run of humanity. This innate power is much increased by widespread belief in its reality; but it can make itself felt by the incredulous, and sometimes commands belief by extraordinary manifestations. Granted this essential gift, the next one can hardly fail to be present. The medical powers of magicians are symbolised in the names of witch-doctor and medicine-man. These gifts of healing and hurting, the latter especially often from a distance, are implemented by

<sup>1</sup> Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, London 1918, p. 111.

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ceremonies aimed at the mind of the patient. These are sometimes, but not always, reinforced by specifics and antidotes in which sympathetic magic and medically effective drugs may be used separately and also combined. Remarkable cures and remarkable ills still result from such methods, especially when both doctor and patient or victim are firmly persuaded of their efficacy. The extension of the power of hurting to the power to kill by poisoning the mind or the body, or by a mixture of the two, is too obvious and too easy a development to call for comment. But the claim to be able to restore the dead to life will not be allowed so readily. It has, however, been repeatedly reported. Elijah raised the widow's son; Empedocles emphatically stated that he had this power; it was libellously said of Cagliostro that he attempted it in Russia, failed and fraudulently substituted a living for a dead child. So that the possibility of such a miracle was still credited in the eighteenth century; and present-day shamans and shamankas are believed to perform it frequently. The hardy tradition may be a reminiscence of the ritual resurrection of the hero-king; but whatever its origin, it is often to be met with among the feats performed by the legendary magician.

To wield power over life and death would ensure respect; but the control of nature was even more vital to the community as a whole. Joshua arresting the course of the sun and moon, and the witches declaring that they can raise the wind, reflect the primitive notion that the main function of the king, priest or magician was to ensure the food supply of the tribe by promoting fertility in man, beasts and crops. This was the chief aim of seasonal, kingship and creation rites. But it devolved upon the professional magician, especially in times of stress, to make the appropriate magic for the conditions desired. The dangers inherent in this office are vividly illustrated by the tragic end of the prophets of Baal after their signal failure in rain-making. How many other luckless kings and priests, one wonders, went the same way? Yet belief in the magic control of the weather has never quite died out. By the law of averages a fair percentage of successful ceremonies is ensured. Failure can also be attributed to the anger of the god, or blamed on the wickedness of the people, or explained by some error in the performance of the rite. Moreover, accumulated observation, handed down in the shape of traditional lore, could at least help the practitioner in determining

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the most likely times for floods and rains and the best times for sowing and reaping. One can hardly help supposing that his powers of observing natural phenomena must have been sharpened by the office he was called upon to fill.

Whether a more general awareness of external conditions and interrelations came to his aid when exercising his mantic powers and quickened his inspiration is problematical. But at least it seems likely that the gift of prophecy was developed at a less primitive level of society than that of rain-making. Once acquired, however, it became of paramount importance. Knowledge of future or distant events is undeniably useful. If I know that I am to die to-morrow, I can set my house in order. If I know that an enemy is marching against me, I can arm myself to withstand him. It is a short step from taking such precautionary measures to fulfilling a prophecy oneself, as can be seen in *Macbeth*. Belief that foreknowledge of the future includes the power to control it follows inevitably. For all these reasons and others of a less definable and more spiritual kind, the mantic art has undergone a process of development which, for variety, complexity, elaboration and often abstruseness, has not its equal among magical practices, and can hardly be paralleled in any other field of spiritual endeavour. It is beyond the scope of this study to enumerate, let alone describe, its manifold and perplexing branches; but, whatever method was and is employed, preliminary religious rites are rarely absent, ranging from full-dress ceremonials to professional patter. Even when the seer works by inspiration and not interpretation, formalism plays a part. From the priest at the altar scrutinising the entrails of the sacrificial victim, through modern interpreters of dreams and down to the fortune-teller at a village fair; from the most sublime of prophets to the most squalid of quacks, no one possessing or claiming the gift of divination will ever lack a following of some sort. Oneiromancy and astrology still flourish to-day, and they figure prominently in legend, too. Whilst necromancy, depending on the fifth main function of the magician, spirit control, is a constantly recurring feature.

The control of spirits probably arose in the first instance from attempts to communicate with the spirits of the dead, one of the forms of ancestor worship. This was linked with the ever-present desire for tribal prosperity. It was hoped to avert evil or to ensure benefits from the departed spirits by magical means; good harvests,



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fortune in war, the prevention of plagues and other disasters, and also to acquire knowledge of future or distant events. This latter reason was the main purpose of necromancy proper, divining by means of the dead the most sombre and sinister of magical rites, ominous in its very nature, as when the Witch of Endor summoned Samuel to foretell the issue of the impending battle to Saul. The method, whether propitiatory or minatory, was implemented by solemn and often terrifying ceremonies, still practised, though not very impressively, by spiritualists to-day. It seems more than likely that spirit control in the narrow sense, communication with supernatural beings, derived from necromancy; but, be that as it may, magicians who have practised this esoteric art have been innumerable; and, where contact has been claimed, they have generally ascribed their wonders and miracles and their divinatory powers to the spirits guiding them or at their command. These beings, like the shades of the dead, are invoked by means of sacrificial or other rites and propitiated by prayers. In black magic, the rites are for the most part of a threatening nature, generally preceded in the Christian variety by propitiatory prayers and ceremonies addressed to the Trinity in order to enlist divine aid before summoning elemental or evil spirits.

In the second group, the myths of Prometheus and of Deucalion and Pyrrha indicate another power, demonstrated in creation rites. This was possessed by some of the great gods and heroes, and therefore by magicians too. It did not bulk large in the equipment of the ancients; but it was one of the supreme ambitions of medieval sorcerers. This brings the functions of the practising magicians, on which the feats of their legendary representatives are based, to a close; for the procuring of treasure, like the bringing of victory in battle, falls under the general heading of the prosperity of the tribe.

It will readily be allowed that a real magician who could perform all these functions, or persuade the community that he was performing them, would play an outstanding part in any society: healing the sick, raising the dead, ensuring the food supply, promoting fertility in general, procuring success in hunting, fishing and wars; establishing smooth and profitable relations with the spirits of the dead, demons and deities, whose power was darkly felt; and, in addition, forecasting future events. The Hebrew priests and prophets can be observed fulfilling these various duties zestfully



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in the Old Testament; and Empedocles, in one of his *Fragments*, gave a comprehensive, if concentrated, account of the powers attributed to a wonder-working sage in his day:

By my instructions you shall learn medicines that are powerful to cure diseases, and re-animate old age; you shall be able to calm the savage winds which lay waste the labours of the husbandman, and when you will, send forth the tempest again; you shall cause the skies to be fair and serene, or once more shall draw down refreshing showers, re-animating the fruits of the earth; nay, you shall recall the strength of the dead man, when he has already become the victim of Pluto... I am revered by both men and women, enquiring the road to boundless wealth, seeking the gift of prophecy...<sup>1</sup>

Empedocles did not mention contact with or control over the spirit world. Believing himself to be one of the immortals, he probably took it for granted. Otherwise he covered the ground which the practising magician occupied. This passage contains a fairly broad hint that the magician who can bless crops can also blight them, and bring foul weather as well as fair. The danger emanating from these functionaries has always been recognised; the danger they are in themselves from vengeance, human, diabolic or divine, is illustrated again and yet again in history and in legend. If the hero of many a rite had to die for the sake of society, the flesh and blood magician was often put to death for a similar reason; and, unlike the sacrificed god, because he was thought to be guilty of a social crime or a spiritual sin. Evil intentions and magic practised for personal and private profit altered the hue of the practitioner; but they did not lessen his presumptive powers or the dread with which he was regarded. It is evident too that the white magician of one tribe would be the black magician of the next, supposing them to be hostile. Common sense also whispers in one's ear that absolute powers, such as they were thought to wield, must corrupt them; whilst any fraudulent pretence to possess these gifts would inevitably degrade them.

The extremely practical functions which the tribal magician was called upon to perform, generally with an eye on the food supply, are found scattered profusely through the legends, where they figure as miraculous feats or supernatural phenomena, often entirely

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* in the article 'Empedocles'.

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disconnected from their utilitarian origins. The aesthetic impulse is at work in such cases, describing marvels for their own sake, ignorant or forgetful of the prosaic basis on which it built, or merely indifferent to it. Other miracles were lavishly added, *disjecta membra* of the rites, torn from their original context; or, though much more rarely, flights of inventive fancy. The social importance of the professional practitioner began to be lost from view beneath a spate of sensational feats which were an object and an end in themselves. What is more, these feats assumed such dominance in the legends that they blurred the ritual design beneath them. Moreover, when myth began to mould the lives of great religious sages, their legendary deeds sprang up like tares among their sayings and deflected attention from morals to marvels. And yet, behind all the historical and mythical heroes of magic is the ghost of an actor-victim, performing or suffering a sacrificial act, and the shade of a real medicine-man calling down the rain.

The rise of this composite being to great heights and his subsequent downfall into degradation, followed by his later partial recovery; his always ambiguous position in society and the aura of strangeness, radiant and murky by turns, which puzzles the mind, is the theme illustrated by the lives and legends, or legendary lives of the twenty odd heroes of this book. In this slight and superficial contribution to the history of ideas, I have kept as far as possible on the legendary level, reproducing widespread conceptions and beliefs rather than historical data. I have not plumbed the depths of scholarship, nor scaled the heights of philosophy and religion. I have reserved for a future study the course of the mythopoeic process in literature, although literature has naturally been used for its evidential value in the present one. In view of this selectiveness and my own limitations and shortcomings, *The Myth of the Magus* is bound to appear shallow and crude to all the specialists in the various fields on which I have touched so lightly. I am not an orientalist, nor a Hebrew scholar; I am not a Classical scholar, nor yet a medievalist; I am not an archaeologist nor an anthropologist; neither a theologian nor a historian. I am not even a magician. Moreover, there is so much more to all the individual magi and magic-mongers than I have been able to indicate in considering the legends about them. Libraries have been written about some, volumes about others and books about nearly all. This at least goes