

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04430-1 - Occult Sciences: The Philosophy of Magic, Prodigies and Apparent Miracles: Volume 1

Edited by Anthony Todd Thomson

Excerpt

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THE PHILOSOPHY
OF
MAGIC, PRODIGIES,
AND
APPARENT MIRACLES.

CHAPTER I.

Man is credulous because he is naturally sincere—Men of superior intellect have reduced their fellow-men to submission by acting upon their passions through their credulity—The recitals of marvels which conduced to this end are not wholly inventive—It is useful as well as curious to study the facts contained in these narrations, and their causes.

MAN is credulous from the cradle to the grave; yet this disposition, the consequences of which plunge him into many errors and misfortunes, proceeds from an honourable principle. Naturally sincere, he is desirous of making his words as correct an expression of his feelings, thoughts, and recollections, as his tears and exclamations of grief, and of joy, and, above all, his looks, and the changes of his countenance, are of his sufferings, his fears, or his pleasures. Speech is more frequently deceptive than silent gesticulations; since it has a greater affinity to art than nature: yet, such

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is the strength of that inclination which attracts us to truth, that the man the most habituated to deceit is the most disposed to believe that others respect truth ; and, before refusing his credit to the statements of others, he must detect something in them which does not accord with his previous knowledge ; or he must have some cause to suspect a design formed to deceive him.

Novelty and the difficulty of reconciling anomalies with experience, will never startle the faith of an uneducated man. There are, moreover, some impressions which all men are inclined to adopt without investigation ; and the very singularity of these is perhaps a charm which causes them to be received with more delight. Is this taste we may inquire natural ; or is it the result of that education which for so many ages the human race has received from its founders? This is a vast and an unexplored field of inquiry ; but it forms no part of our subject. It is sufficient to observe that the love of the marvellous, and the preference ever given to the extraordinary over the natural, have been the cause why facts have been not only too much disregarded but sometimes altogether set aside. There are instances, nevertheless, and we shall bring forward several, where the simple truth has escaped the power of oblivion.

The man of a confiding disposition may be frequently deceived : still his credulity will not be found an instrument sufficiently powerful to govern his whole existence. The marvellous excites but a transient admiration. In 1798, our countrymen observed with surprise how little the sight of balloons affected the

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indolent Egyptians. Savages behold Europeans execute feats of skill, and perform physical experiments that they are neither able nor desirous to explain: the exhibition amuses without exciting them, and without invading their tranquil independence.

Man is governed by his passions, and above all by Hope and Fear. What is better able to create, maintain, and exalt these feelings than unrestrained credulity? Reason is perplexed, and the imagination filled with wonders. It is easy to believe in supernatural events; we are apt to discern benefits and punishments in them; and to read in them also the mandates and threats of all-powerful beings, whose direful hands hold the destinies of frail mortals.

From the most ancient times, men of superior intellect, desirous of enthralling the human mind, have adduced miracles and prodigies as the certain proof of their missions, and as the inimitable works of the divinities whom they revered. Seized with terror, the multitude have bent beneath the yoke of superstition; and the proudest man has touched the steps of the altar with his humbled brow.

Ages have passed away, consoled and terrified by turns: sometimes governed by just laws, more frequently subject to capricious and ferocious tyrants, the human race has believed and obeyed. The history of every country and of all ages is encumbered with marvellous tales: but, in the present day, we reject them with a disdain not very philosophical. Do not the convictions which have exercised so powerful an influence on the human race merit a high interest? Shall

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we forget that supreme power of Providence, visible we believe in prodigies and miracles, has been almost always the most powerful means of civilization: that the wisest men have doubted whether it were possible for laws, or for durable institutions to exist without the guarantee of an intervention so universally respected?*

If we consider these facts in connection with their causes, the contempt for them has still less foundation: and the origin of fables which we often deem revolting, merits, perhaps, an honourable place in the History of Mankind. Statements, however incredible they may seem, cannot all be falsehood and illusion. Credulity and invention have alike their limits. Let us study man, not from deceitful traditions, but in his ordinary habits of life, and we shall see that it would be difficult for an imposture to become established if, in our feelings and recollections, we find nothing to second its pretensions—nothing to support them. We recur again to our inquiry. Man is credulous because he is naturally sincere. A falsehood can more easily deny, disguise, and set aside truth than imitate it.†

Invention, even in trifles, costs some effort of which the inventor is not always capable. An inventive genius, also, when exercised for our pleasure or for our instruction, yields at every step to the desire of approaching reality;

* J. J. Rousseau, *du Contrat social*, liv. iv. c. 8.

† It is with difficulty we can imagine anything full of improbability: and we say “a fact of this nature is rarely forged.”—*St. Croix, Examen critique des historiens d'Alexandre.*—Paris, 1804. p. 29.

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of mingling truth with its creations; convinced that without this artifice, falsehood would find little place in the human mind. With still more reason does the man who has some great interest in practising upon our credulity, rarely revert to a fable which has not for its foundation some fact, or the possibility of which is not at least probable. This skilful attempt appears in referring to distant ages and countries, and to those repetitions with which the histories of prodigies abound, and which so imperfectly disguise the alteration of some of the details. This will be obvious if we can convince our readers, that the greater part of marvellous facts may be explained by a small number of causes more or less easy to discern and to develop.

An inquiry into these causes has not for its object merely the gratification of idle curiosity. Prodigies connected with natural phenomena, inventions, impostures, the sorcery of *thaumaturgy** can, for the most part, be explained by physical science. Viewed in this light, the history of science, its progress, and its variations may furnish valuable ideas respecting the antiquity, the changes, and vicissitudes of civilization; and we may thence draw some curious evidence regarding the sources of part of our knowledge hitherto unsuspected.

Finally, another advantage will reward our researches: history will be presented to us in a new light. We shall restore to it facts; give back to historians a character for veracity, without which the whole of the past would be lost to the annals of civilized man: for, convicted of

* From two Greek words signifying a worker of wonders.

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falsehood and ignorance in their narrations, and of a constant repetition of marvellous events, what credit would they merit in their accounts even of the most probable occurrences? Justly denounced as an amalgamation of truth and error, and devoid of interest moral or political. History would be regarded only as an admitted fiction: and has it not been so designated by the learned? But a man who has described and studied the manners of his species, is not reduced to the degradation of preserving only the fables in those records which are supposed to give an insight into past ages. Far from presenting merely a collection of falsehoods and folly, the most marvellous or incredible pages of history open to us the archives of a learned and mysterious policy, which some wise men in every age have employed to govern the human race; to lead it to misfortune, or to happiness; to greatness, or to degradation; to slavery, or to freedom.

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CHAPTER II.

Difference between Miracles and Prodigies—Circumstances that render marvellous Histories credible—1st. The number and agreement of the narrations, and the confidence which the observers and witnesses of them merit.—2nd. The possibility of tracing out some one or other of the principal causes that may have given a miraculous colouring to a natural event.

THE dominion of the marvellous may be divided into two parts: that of prodigies, and that of magical works.

Independent of all human action, prodigies are singular events that nature produces, apparently deviating from those laws which invariably regulate her operations.

Every thing is a prodigy in the eyes of the ignorant man, who sees the universe only in the narrow circle of his existence. The philosopher beholds no prodigies: he knows that a monstrous birth, or the sudden crumbling of the hardest rock, result from causes as natural as the alternate return of night and day.*

* Our author's assertion in this paragraph is too general. Prodigies are, undoubtedly, traceable to natural causes; but not to these in their regular and ordinary operation: on the contrary, they are truly attributable to decided deviations from it. In a

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Those prodigies, once so powerfully acting upon the fears, desires, and resolutions of mankind, awaken in the present day only incredulity, and excite the investigation of the learned. In the infancy of society, men possessed themselves of rare facts, and of all real or apparent wonders, in order to hold them up to the eyes of the vulgar, as signs of the anger, the threats, promises, or the benevolence of the Gods.

Miracles and marvellous events, equally in connection with supernatural influence, are often wonders worked by men, whether they pretend that a benevolent or a terrible Divinity employs them as instruments; or whether, by the study of the *transcendental sciences*, they assume that they have subjected to their empire, spirits endowed with some power over the phenomena of the visible world.

Every miracle impresses a religious man with a sense of veneration; at the same time he bestows this name on those supernatural operations only that are consecrated by his belief. We shall, therefore, apply the name *magic* to the *art* of working wonders; and in so doing we shall digress from received opinions, and recal the ancient ideas of faith.

monstrous birth, the same organic force and formative power are exerted in the development of the germ as in ordinary cases; but, in the progress of the development, something occurs to interrupt the action of the organizing principle, and a monster is the result. The formative power is a creative faculty, stamped upon organic matter by the Deity, which modifies it, but operates “blindly and unconsciously, according to the laws of adaptation.”^a—ED.

^a *Müller's Physiology. trans. vol. i. p. 25.*

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CREDIBILITY OF THE MARVELLOUS.

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In the absence of religious revelation to regulate the thoughts, what proof of credibility, we may inquire, would be sufficient to make the thinking mind admit the existence of prodigies and marvellous events?

The calculation of the probabilities will serve as a guide.

It appears to a superficial view much more probable that a man should be deceived by appearances more or less specious, or, that having some interest to deceive, he should himself endeavour to impose, than that there should be perfect agreement in a relation which involves something miraculous. But, if in different times and places many men should have seen the same thing; and if their recitals agree among themselves, then the case is altered.

That which seemed incredible to the wise, and miraculous to the vulgar, becomes a curious but undeniable fact: the vulgar are amused by it; the learned study it, and endeavour to develop its cause.

A single question remains then to be resolved in order to form a just estimate of the past. Must we admit that men have imprudently uttered and recorded falsehoods, and have found other men, in all times, ready to believe absurdities? Is it not more rational to conclude that those recitals, in appearance marvellous, are founded on reality, particularly when they can be explained sometimes by the human passions, occasionally by the state of science in former times?

I shall fearlessly cite those witnesses hitherto regarded with suspicion; although they have narrated events that have been reputed impossible. The discredit into which

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they have fallen makes part of our argument which goes to show that discredit cannot be justly opposed to their narrations.

Is it credible, I may ask, that, in the year A.D. 197, a shower of quicksilver could have fallen in the Forum of Augustus at Rome?

Dion Cassius,* who relates the event, did not see it fall, but he observed it immediately after its descent: he collected some of the drops, and rubbed them upon a piece of copper in order to give to it the appearance of silver, which he affirms it preserved for three entire days.† Glycas also speaks of a shower of quicksilver, which fell in the reign of Aurelian.‡ But the authority of this annalist is weak, and there is reason to believe, that he has only disfigured the account of Dion by an anachronism, The rarity and value of mercury at

* Dion Cassius Cocceianus, the son of Cassius Apronianus, a Roman Senator, was born at Nicæa in Bithynia, A.D. 155. Although he was on his mother's side of Greek descent, and wrote in the language of his native province, yet he was truly a Roman; and enjoyed the rank of a Senator under Commodus. He also held several important official situations under Alexander Severus. His History of Rome, from the period of Augustus to his own age, is justly esteemed.—ED.

† “*Cælo sereno pluvia rori simillima, colorisque argentei, in forum Augusti defluxit, quam ego, et si non vidi cum caderet, tamen ut ceciderat, inveni; eaque, ita ut si esset argentum, oblivi monetam exære, mansitque is color tres dies; quarto vero die quidquid oblitum fuerat evanuit.*”—Xiphilinus, in Severo.

‡ “*Aureliano imperante argenti guttas decidisse sunt qui tradant.*” (Glycas. *Annal.* lib. III.) Little is known about this author. He wrote a Chronicle of events from the Creation to the year A.D. 1118. It has been valued on account of its Biblical references.—ED.