

Magic, Witchcraft and Morality

Some moral guidance is needed to avoid corrupted forms of witchcraft, to defend against misdirected abuse by ignorant accusers, and to outline some of the more important ethical rules for the positive practice of magic.

Of the five definitions I have used for 'witch', largely driven by phases in the history of the witchcraft phenomenon, only the most ancient could be described as morally neutral. The second category of 'wise woman' or 'cunning man' practicing not only magic but also various forms of medicine and helpful activity is plainly kindly and beneficial; as is the last and fifth category of neo-pagan 'Wiccan' who subscribes to a naturalistic and ecological ethic, and a moral directive 'do no harm'.

Condemnations of witchcraft have almost entirely centred on the third and fourth types, namely those we might term 'Satanists' who practice deviant and perverted forms of 'Goetia' or 'black magic'; and involuntary witches who are possessed by an evil entity, and combine psychosis with associated behaviours that are sociopathic, psychopathic or otherwise morally deviant. Many of the accusers focus on these two forms as if they were exclusive, ignoring the other three types.

In another article, I have argued that the only morally permissible form of magic is miracle which involves Qabalistic pathworking or direct invocation, in either case working with devas or supernatural entities who are themselves beneficent. This is because 'miracle' is infrequent, least disturbs the equilibrium and fabric of the universe, and uses rituals that do not inflate or pervert the ego. The parsimonious or sparing use of magic does the least ecological or spiritual harm, and in miracle places its centre of action outside a weak human frame.

I have also suggested that the seven great religions of the world have each developed their own safe (moral), powerful, and experimentally demonstrated methods for achieving magic of this kind. This was the huge discovery of the early adepts of the Golden Dawn just before it splintered at the beginning of last century. Of the systems identified, the first 'Shamanism' provides the sacred alphabet of magical correspondences and lucid dreaming techniques that must be used by any of the Seven; whilst the seventh 'Christianity' is a cornerstone that provides a moral compass and supreme cosmology. It also has its own set of techniques, particularly the Christian 'agape', the sacrament of bread and wine.

Most of these findings were hidden from me when I first began writing a literary and (somewhat frivolous) philosophical entertainment on the subject of magic and witchcraft. Since then I have discovered, in some cases by regrettable first-hand experience, the pitfalls and sometimes horrors of occult dabbling. Readers should realise that many of my tastes and opinions have drastically altered. They must also be warned not to exercise any techniques without first applying moral tests of decency and parsimony, as well as the explicit rules of 'Magia' and miracle.

The test of decency is a subjective guide. It depends on a universal human sense of goodness affirmed or outraged, what used to be termed 'moral sensibility'. The only other useful approach is simply a refined aesthetic, whereby ugly practices are rejected, but this requires rare talent and years of training.

'Parsimony' is an important principle of occult practice. It means that the normal healthy harmonies of psyche and world are maintained by cautious, infrequent and abstemious use of magic, restricted to genuine need or necessity, and where ordinary responses to important issues are not possible or available. Magic is only permissible 'when one should or must, never because one simply may'.

[There is an exception to this rule, namely that on major Feast Days and Esbats magical practices of a trivial nature are permitted for delight or entertainment].

Explicit rules of Magia or 'white magic' traditionally include, (1) the 'do no harm' imperative [fr. the Wiccan Rede]; (2) that magic is not done principally for personal material gain and never out of greed; (3) that 'freewill' is respected and preferably never compromised; (4) that the normal balance of space-time is not disturbed, and that the greater currents of 'history' or the 'Fates' are allowed to take their course; (5) that the common moral precepts of humanity and Canon Law are obeyed, which restricts magic to indirect 'miracle' executed by beneficent devas, superior orders of being, or the Divine Anima; (6) that magical practice is rare, mostly used as a last resort, and in the context of a life of balance and harmony; and finally, (7) that the sacred and divine are paramount, demanding humility, piety and virtue [particularly wisdom], magicians being 'forbidden to match power with power, or to seek to dominate' (Tolkien, 1954: 388).

[Exceptions to these rules for our Order will be found set out under 'Laws of Magia' in the introductory section of the Manual, p. IV].

WITCHCRAFT AND THE INKLINGS

Some comment must here be made on the positions held by the Oxford-based philosophical and religious group known as The Inklings who met in the inter-war' years (mainly 1930's) to share their common interest in magical literature. Much of my work grew out of their ideas and speculations about the magical, yet for the most part they disapproved of frankly magical technology in our real world.

Some of this was guided by the prevailing climate of fear of the supernatural, some from traditional Aristotelian philosophical perspectives, but a good deal of antipathy came from the legacy of hundreds of years of popular stigma. C.S. Lewis disapproved of witches from a folk memory perspective, because witchcraft flouted the doctrine of the 'five-stringed lyre' whereby human encroachment of supernatural power was taboo, and because of a misconception that the practice of magic is indistinguishable from devilry except in fantasy literature.

J.R.R. Tolkien held similar views, reinforced by the Catholic teaching that witchcraft included obstinately atheistic, perverted (twisted) and arrogantly held false beliefs amounting to heresy. His thinking about magic was highly developed however in the course of working out his fantasy world of Middle Earth. Magic used for domination or power was entirely corrupting, and its main lawful use was to oppose this, particularly by sub-angelic orders of beings more elevated than humankind. And as a Catholic, Tolkien also believed in at least one form of magic, namely 'miracle'.

Charles Williams, perhaps writing partly from a sense of guilt and shame, since he alone of The Inklings had paradoxically belonged to a magical order, denounced all witchcraft as 'perversion of the soul'. He based his assessment largely on accounts of Roman, renaissance and early modern practices that fitted with the third and fourth of my definitions, that is with 'devilry' of one kind or another. This generalisation is based on a narrow and out-dated definition of a witch.

His polemical tarnishing of ancient, classical and primitive witchcraft, deriving from selective accounts, is unjustified if one were to include the wider evidence of indigenous shamanism and Homeric fantasy. Those practices may be intemperate, but they are not simply aligned with malevolence or harm to others. The primal or archetypal witch, existing in the dream landscape of the human psyche, is entirely ambivalent, and may lend its activities to either good or bad ends.

In this regard one only has to think of Gandalf the magician, or of Galadriel the elf-queen in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, to appreciate a wider perspective.

CW entirely ignores the activities of the traditional witch of medieval times, often a paramedic and midwife who studied natural science and took an active interest in the psychic wellbeing of other villagers.

Finally, of the last type of witch, the modern neo-pagan 'spiritual ecologist' committed to helping not only others but our planet, Williams was innocently unaware since he passed away before it was established. He died in 1945, the U.K. Witchcraft Act (1736) was repealed in 1951, and the Aquarian or New Age of the neo-pagan movement was not held to have begun until 1962. Even then spiritual ecology did not develop until well after the Gaia hypothesis of 1972. This had to be not only joined to the idealism of the Anima proposed by psychologist Carl Jung, but also enriched by the concepts of epiphenomenal evolution and spiritual resonance developed by Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin.

CW continued to practice occasional magic himself, under the morally safer auspices of Christian miracle, in particular extolling the virtues of miraculous 'substitution and exchange'. This suggests that I should propose a further sixth category of 'Christian witch', a term originally half-derogatory and half-amused invented by Tolkien to describe his fellow Inklings, where the term 'witch' aptly and simply means an instigator or conduit of supernatural technology.