



## Plotinus and Magic

Philip Merlan

*Isis*, Vol. 44, No. 4. (Dec., 1953), pp. 341-348.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-1753%28195312%2944%3A4%3C341%3APAM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

*Isis* is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Plotinus and Magic

BY PHILIP MERLAN \*

THE question whether Plotinus was a practicing magician (or to use a term with a slightly different, more noble connotation, whether he practiced theurgy) is still open. The affirmative answer has only recently been criticized by Dodds.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to defend it. At the same time, the meaning of Plotinus' assertions concerning the limitations of the efficacy of magic will be discussed.<sup>2</sup>

The starting point must be an interpretation of three incidents in the life of Plotinus told by Porphyry in the tenth chapter of his *Plotinusvita*.

Olympius, a fellow-philosopher envious of Plotinus' intellectual superiority, tried to harm him by magic spells. He did so by directing star-rays against him. But he had soon to give up, because he found that the soul of Plotinus was powerful enough not only to resist these spells but even to turn them back on his enemy so that they were harming him.<sup>3</sup>

A weird story. And as if he wanted to prove that it was not only a kind of legend about Plotinus, Porphyry adds: Plotinus knew very well when Olympius was making his attempts. He used to tell that in such moments his intestines were violently contracting.<sup>4</sup>

Before proceeding any further, we have to be certain how to interpret the words "Plotinus used to tell that in such moments, his intestines were violently contracting." As we notice, the English text is ambiguous and so is the Greek original.<sup>5</sup> Of whose intestines did Plotinus speak? His own? or those of Olympius?

With one exception all standard translations<sup>6</sup> take "his" to refer to Olympius. But we should side with that lonely exception, the German translation by Harder.<sup>7</sup> It does not make sense for Plotinus to say something like this: "I know that in this moment my enemy tries to cast a spell on me and in this moment his intestines are contracting." On the contrary it makes very good sense for him to say: "In this moment my enemy tries to cast a spell on me and I know it because my intestines are contracting."

Two additional observations will help to understand the symptoms of Plotinus and his interpretation of them.

First, quite independently from any stories related to magic and obviously without suspecting any connection, Porphyry gave us some information about the health of Plotinus. Plotinus frequently suffered from a disease which Porphyry designated as either *koiliakê* or *kolikê* (the manuscripts disagree and it is impossible to decide which

\*Scripps College and Claremont Graduate School.

<sup>1</sup>E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951) 283-311; cf. *idem*, "Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism," *Journal of Roman Studies* 37, 55-69.

<sup>2</sup>For all questions related to magic in antiquity see T. Hopfner, art. *Mageia* in *RE* I 14/1 (1928) and art. *Theurgie*, *ibid.* II 6/1 (1936); L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 2nd ed., v. I (New York, 1929). Hopfner belongs to the scholars who unhesitatingly describe Plotinus as a theurgist (see esp. his art. *Theurgie*, l.c. 267); cf. also Thorndike, *op. cit.* 299-307; J. Roehr, *Der okkulte Kraftbegriff im Altertum*, *Philologus Suppl.* 17 (Leip-

zig, 1923) 24; 44-47; 50 f.; 91; 122; 132. For other literature see Dodds, "Theurgy," (see preceding note) 57 f.; *idem*, *The Greeks* (see preceding note) 286.

<sup>3</sup>*Vita Plotini*, ch. 10, 1-9 Br. As the Henry-Schwyzler edition of Plotinus is not yet completed, it seemed preferable to refer uniformly to that of Bréhier (6 vv. in 7, Paris, 1924-1938).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 9-12 Br.

<sup>5</sup>See the *autôti* occurring in line 10 and again in line 11 Br.

<sup>6</sup>Bréhier, Cilento, MacKenna, Mueller.

<sup>7</sup>His translation agrees with the interpretation of E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen*, III/2, 4th ed. (Leipzig, 1903) 524 note 1.

version is correct).<sup>8</sup> It is obvious that this is the disease any layman would designate as colic, with its symptomatic intestinal or abdominal pains. This is fully confirmed when we hear that Plotinus refused to be treated either by an enema (this is nothing for a grown-up,<sup>9</sup> he said) or by a theriac, in this connection theriac obviously meaning not an antidote to poison but simply some stomach medicine, perhaps a laxative<sup>10</sup> (a theriac, said Plotinus, is nothing for me who even refuse to eat the flesh of domesticated animals). In other words, Plotinus suffered from some disorder of the intestines. What he described as the effects of Olympius' incantations was only another set of symptoms of the same disorder.<sup>11</sup> We should simply call them spasms or cramps.

But why should he have interpreted what was simply the result of sickness as the sign of being exposed to spells?

Here the second observation will guide us. Whoever is ready to accept the interpretation of "his" as referring to Plotinus, on the one hand, and on the other hand is familiar with some symptoms characteristic of the delusion of persecution of schizoids or schizophrenics, is almost forcibly reminded of these symptoms on reading Porphyry. Any textbook of psychiatry will tell us of patients who are absolutely positive that they feel some kind of electric, or cosmic, or X-ray waves hurting them and have no doubts that these waves result from the infernal plotting of some persecutor trying to destroy them. It is not even necessary to look up psychiatric textbooks. It is sufficient and more rewarding to read the autobiographical novel *Inferno* by that genial schizophrenic Strindberg;<sup>12</sup> together with the psychiatric comments by Jaspers,<sup>13</sup> if we so desire, but self-explanatory also without them. In this novel, Strindberg reports how Przybyszewski,<sup>14</sup> a fellow-writer jealous of him (though it is sexual jealousy this time), attempts to destroy him and how he knows when Przybyszewski starts his machinations, because he feels some kind of electric current or fluid penetrating his body and threatening to undo him. It is impossible to read these pages of Strindberg without becoming completely convinced that Strindberg must very distinctly have felt some physical symptoms and that he, with absolute sincerity, believed them to be caused by some magic tricks of Przybyszewski. The similarity between Plotinus and Strindberg is striking. Both are obviously suffering from some kind of physical disturbances. Both are liable to the delusion of persecution, though in Strindberg's case it is obviously full schizophrenia, whereas from what we know about Plotinus we are not entitled to assume more than just a schizoid personality.<sup>14a</sup> Both interpret the causes of their pain in terms of some mysterious forces directed at them by their enemies. They name these forces in terms appropriate to their times — electricity in the 19th century; star-rays (*astrobolai*) in the 3rd. All this makes a consistent pattern, securing the reference of "his" to Plotinus and clarifying some aspects of the Plotinus-Olympius relationship.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Vita Plotini*, ch. II, 1-2 Br. See the word *kôlikêi* and the apparatus in the P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer edition (*Plotini Opera*, 3 vv., Brussels and Paris, v. I [1951]).

<sup>9</sup> *Ho presbytês* in this context means hardly more than "a man no longer a boy," — *senior* rather than *senex*.

<sup>10</sup> On theriac in Galenus see e.g. Thorndike, *op. cit.* 171 f.

<sup>11</sup> Though he described them quoting perhaps from the speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* (190 E).

<sup>12</sup> Particularly ch. 5 and 6 in the English translation by C. Field (London, Rider, 1912) or ch. 6-8 in the German translation by E. Schering (Muenchen, Mueller, 4th ed., 1914).

<sup>13</sup> K. Jaspers, *Strindberg und van Gogh* (Berlin, 1949).

<sup>14</sup> Strindberg calls him Popoffsky.

<sup>14a</sup> Cf. also O. Gillet, *Plotin au point de vue*

*médical et psychologique* (Paris, Le François, 1934), 41.

<sup>15</sup> But it must be admitted: scholars who refer *autô* to Olympius have one argument in their favor. The sentence in which Plotinus speaks of spasms (9-12 Br) is preceded by another (5-9 Br) in which Olympius is reported to have realized that his attacks were turning against himself and to have therefore said that the soul of Plotinus was so powerful that it turned back attempts on their perpetrators; and it is followed by another (12-13 Br) in which Olympius is said to have desisted from his attempts upon Plotinus, after he found that these were harming himself rather than inflicting anything on Plotinus. Thus, Porphyry reports in both of these two sentences preceding and following the one in which Plotinus speaks, of some ill-effects which Olympius experienced on himself as a result of his magic. It is these

We can now resume our discussion. We see Plotinus clearly recognizing the efficacy of magic. But perhaps this is just an incident in his life, without any connection with his philosophical opinions? We cannot assert this. In one of his writings Plotinus says: The truly good man, *ho spoudaios*, the sage, is liable to incantations as far as the lower parts of his nature (*to alogon*) are concerned and this includes the possibility of inflicting sickness or death on him — but it is not necessary for him to be afraid of this, because precisely by virtue of his superiority he will be able to ward off spells by appropriate counterspells.<sup>16</sup>

This passage immediately proves two things. First, Plotinus fully recognized the efficacy of magic in his philosophy no less than in his life, so that there is no reason to doubt the correctness of Porphyry's report on the Olympius incident. Second, he finds it entirely compatible with the capacity of a sage, to practise magic. Indeed, the passage reads almost like a commentary on the Olympius incident. No, it reads almost like a boast that he, Plotinus, knew how to defend himself from spells by counterspells.<sup>17</sup> True, all that Porphyry says is that Olympius found that Plotinus' nature was so powerful that it reflected the spells back to their originator.<sup>18</sup> But it is difficult to imagine that when the man who in his writings taught that a sage will be able to counteract a spell by another spell, that such a man, when he felt by the contraction of his intestines that his enemy was attempting to injure him, limited himself to passive resistance. Read side by side, Porphyry's report on the Olympius incident and Plotinus' theory add up to a strong suggestion that Plotinus did practice magic.<sup>19</sup>

We are now prepared to discuss Porphyry's next story.

An Egyptian priest once came to Rome and invited Plotinus to attend a performance of his art. He promised that he would conjure the tutelary (familiar) spirit (*oikeios daimôn* — the German *Hausgeist* is a good rendition) of Plotinus. Plotinus gladly accepted the invitation. The evocation (*klêsis*) succeeded indeed. The spirit appeared. But it was a surprise. Instead of being an ordinary spirit, a daimon, as was expected, he turned out to be a god. The priest congratulated Plotinus. "Blessed you are," he said, "to have a god for your tutelary spirit rather than one of the

effects, so do those scholars maintain, which Plotinus describes; the spasms are Olympius'.

But be it repeated: it is impossible to assume that Plotinus not only was aware — we do not know by what token — of Olympius' attempts, but by some clairvoyance felt the kind of pains experienced by Olympius with such distinctness that he was able to describe Olympius' condition as that resembling *sympasta balantia* ("mein Leib schnuert sich zusammen" a German would say, to describe his cramps). In addition, this interpretation overlooks that the sentence in which Porphyry describes Plotinus' reaction, is set off by a *mentoi* from the preceding sentence and the subsequent sentence is in turn set off by a *de* — all this indicating that the passage 9-12 Br constitutes a separate paragraph devoted entirely to Plotinus and his feelings.

<sup>16</sup>*Enn.* IV 4, ch. 43, 7-9 Br. "Just as the irrational part [of his own nature] will be affected by incantations, so he himself will by counter-incantations undo those forces. But [even the sage] might suffer death and all kinds of physical conditions from them."

<sup>17</sup>"Comme Plotin lui-même passait aux yeux de son biographe Porphyre pour avoir le pouvoir de le faire," says Bréhier a.l. (Plotin, *Ennéades* . . . par E. Bréhier, 6 vv. in 7, Paris, 1924-1938, v. IV [1927] 150 note 1). But why only in Porphyry's eyes? Why not in his own?

<sup>18</sup>*Vita Plotini*, ch. 10, 5-9 Br.

<sup>19</sup>One thing remains unexplained. According to Porphyry, Olympius felt some ill-effects of his machinations. How is this possible? All we can say seems to be that in periods of general belief in the efficacy of magic all kinds of delusions and autosuggestions are possible. However, it may be appropriate to ask: on what authority did Porphyry base his report regarding the feelings of Olympius and his decision, first to try and then to give up his attempts to cast a spell on Plotinus? It seems that the whole incident could have taken place in Alexandria rather than in Rome, because it is related to the rivalry between two students of Ammonius. Even if this rivalry continued after Plotinus left Alexandria, it is hardly possible to assume that the event is supposed to have taken place after Porphyry's arrival in Rome — full twenty years after Plotinus left Alexandria. This means that it is entirely possible that the only authority of Porphyry were Plotinus or those around him and not Olympius or any of Olympius' friends. It is not even quite out of the question that everything concerning Olympius with the exception of Plotinus' spasms, took place entirely in Plotinus' imagination. In any case, what Porphyry says about Plotinus, is more dependable than his report on Olympius.

inferior daimons." Those who participated in the séance would have liked to ask the apparition some questions or at least look at him closer. They could not do so however, because one of those present, either from fear or from envy, choked the hens which he had in keeping. This action caused the apparition to vanish.<sup>20</sup>

This is the end of Porphyry's second story.

No doubt is possible, we are in the thick of black magic at its blackest, and in the midst of the grossest magical practices. And we see Plotinus participating in them. Again it is out of the question to assume that Porphyry invented the story or even that Plotinus went to the séance out of sheer curiosity without committing himself to any belief in it. For, as an obvious reaction to his experience (*apo toiautês aítias*) with the Egyptian priest<sup>21</sup> Plotinus wrote an essay in which he explains the doctrine of tutelary spirits, the essay entitled "Concerning the Daimon who Has Chosen Us."<sup>22</sup> From one point of view, the essay is simply a commentary on some texts by Plato, in which the latter speaks of daimons assisting man. But what is myth in Plato becomes literal truth in Plotinus. Not only does he assert that the good man (*ho spoudaios*) is either himself a daimon or has as his guardian daimon a god,<sup>23</sup> but he also says, and in full earnestness: "What shall we say about souls which became incarnated in beasts? Do they have a tutelary daimon? They do, but it is an evil daimon. How about disembodied souls? As long as they did not leave the sensible world completely and live on some star, they have this star or perhaps even some power superior to it as their god and daimon."<sup>24</sup>

What else is this theory if not a full confirmation of Porphyry's report? Plotinus not only *bona fide* accepted the apparition and the priest's recognition of his superior nature, but he provided a theory to explain the situation.

This reminds us that indeed Plotinus' universe is a magic universe and that he explains it by means of a fully elaborated system of magic.<sup>25</sup> It is obvious for him that because of the principle of universal sympathy (a heritage of the Stoa, of course) every part of the universe is in rapport with some other part.<sup>26</sup> It is for this reason that the stars and their powers can influence us — not only our bodies but also our

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 10, 15–28 Br. There is no completely convincing explanation of the bird incident. Neither do we know why their presence at the séance was necessary nor why their killing caused the apparition to disappear. But the explanation becomes at least a little easier if we assume that the *orneis* in our passage mean "hens" rather than just "birds." Perhaps they were used as bearers of mana and their killing had the effect of a diminished amount of mana at the sorcerer's disposal, so that he no longer could compel the apparition to stay. The magic qualities of hens (and cocks) are universally recognized in magic rites. For other explanations see e.g. Thorndike, *op. cit.*, 301.

<sup>21</sup> The sentence in which Porphyry says that essay III 4 was written *apo toiautês aítias* (30–33 Br) is preceded by another (28–30 Br), in which he says that Plotinus indeed tried to live up to the fact that his tutelary spirit was of divine rank. Thus, the reference of the phrase *apo toiautês aítias* is not immediately clear. But there can hardly be much doubt that the reference is to the incident with the Egyptian priest (15–28 Br). It does not make sense to say: Because Plotinus tried to live up to the fact of being guided by a divine spirit, he wrote an essay on the different ranks of spirits. And it makes perfect sense to say: Having been instructed that his tutelary spirit was of divine rank, whereas other people have a spirit of in-

ferior rank, the incident by which he found this out became his reason (*apo toiautês aítias*) for writing an essay explaining the differences among tutelary spirits. In other words, the sentence (28–30 Br) separating the explanation of the origin of essay III 4 from the narrative concerning the seance (15–28 Br) is a kind of footnote or parenthesis; the narrative (15–28 Br) connects with the notice concerning the origin of essay III 4 (30–33 Br). It is perhaps also worth noting that essay III 4 belongs among the twenty-one written by Plotinus before Porphyry's arrival in Rome. Thus, the whole incident concerning the Egyptian priest was known to Porphyry only from reports of Plotinus or his pupils. If Porphyry was "credulous," he was no exception in the circle of Plotinus.

<sup>22</sup> *Enn. III 4; Vita Plotini*, ch. 10, 30–33 Br.

<sup>23</sup> *Enn. III 4*, ch. 6, 3–4 Br.

<sup>24</sup> *Enn. III 4*, ch. 6, 18–31 Br. Cf. Andres, art. Daimon in *RE*, Suppl. III (1918), esp. 311–314.

<sup>25</sup> *Enn. IV 4*, ch. 40–44. These chapters dealing with *goêteia* are in turn part of the section *Enn. IV 4*, ch. 30–45, which are an exposition of Plotinus' magic universe, full of occult powers (ch. 35, 69–70 Br; ch. 36) and non-physical actions.

<sup>26</sup> *Enn. IV 4*, ch. 32, 13–14 Br: *sympathes . . . pan touto to hen*. Cf. ch. 35, 8–10 Br; ch. 38, 17–18 Br.

personalities and destinies.<sup>27</sup> And precisely for the same reason we can influence them — or for that matter any of the occult powers permeating the universe. It must, however, be understood clearly that this mutual influence does not take place by virtue of some physical qualities like warmth or cold.<sup>28</sup> Nor does this mutual influence take place by virtue of anything like persuasion, and it must not be assumed that the magician convinces the stars or any deity when he succeeds in deflecting their powers on the object of his choice. Neither the star nor the deity reacts to the incantations of the magician in a voluntary way, based on a decision. Both these possibilities are rejected by Plotinus.<sup>29</sup> The second, i.e. that a deity cooperates with the magician, Plotinus explicitly declares as absurd. Such an assumption would involve the deity as an accomplice in all the evil deeds perpetrated by magic.<sup>30</sup> Rather, this mutual influence must be explained as a sympathetic co-vibration, according to which for each change in one part of the universe there is a corresponding change in some other part.<sup>31</sup> What the magician does by assuming a certain posture or by some arrangement of things is to start a change in the universe to which there is immediate response.<sup>32</sup> But let it be repeated, this response is by no means conscious or voluntary, even if it is the response of beings endowed with consciousness and will. Nor is this response a link in the chain of mechanical causes and effects. It is strictly an action at a distance, without any medium interposed to convey by its change the action of the changer to the thing changed. The two examples given by Plotinus are the fascination of a man by a serpent<sup>33</sup> and the string that starts vibrating when another distant string that is in tune with it, emits a sound.<sup>34</sup> In all such phenomena Plotinus explicitly excludes the existence of any medium. The phrase to describe the effect is *eis to porrô drômenon*, precisely action-at-a-distance.<sup>35</sup> It is a famous concept. It was haunting physics down to the most recent times. Long controversies regarding Newton's concept of a force of gravity centered on the problem of the possibility of an action-at-a-distance. Before the time of Faraday electric forces were also conceived as acting at a distance and instantaneously at that. It is only the general theory of relativity, which proposes a theory of gravitational and electromagnetic phenomena without the assumption of any action-at-a-distance. It seems that it is in Plotinus that the concept and the term appear for the first time.<sup>36</sup>

Prayers, too, are interpreted by Plotinus as being magic formulas. Thus, prayers can be efficacious, but if they are granted it is not because the god to whom they were directed listened to them and responded by an act of his will. The god *must* respond according to the rules of universal sympathy.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 31, 24–27 Br; *ibid.*, 42–45 Br.

<sup>28</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 31, 46 Br; ch. 32, 1 Br; ch. 35, 4–5 Br.

<sup>29</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 31, 48–50 Br: *proairesis*, *logos*, *gnômê* are out of the question for an explanation of the influence of stars. Cf. ch. 32, 1–2 Br; ch. 35, 6–8 Br; ch. 37, 11–26 Br; ch. 39, 18–28 Br; ch. 40, 24–25 Br and 27–29 Br.

<sup>30</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 31, 50–57 Br; ch. 35, 5–8 Br.

<sup>31</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 41, 1–8 Br.

<sup>32</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 40, 14–17 Br.

<sup>33</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 40, 29–30 Br.

<sup>34</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 41, 3–6 Br.

<sup>35</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 32, 15–20 Br: "though the medium is discontinuous (*dialeipontos tou metaxy*) and remains unaffected, that which is not near was affected. Action from that which is non-adjacent (*to para tou mê parakeimenou drômenon*) must arrive to that which is distant (*eis to porrô*), not because the similar things are contiguous, but rather because, though separated by other things, they are, in virtue of their similarity, co-affected (*sympaschontôn*; in sympathy with each other)." This is a per-

fectly clear exposition of the action-at-a-distance doctrine. Cf. also *Enn.* IV 9, ch. 3, 1–9 Br. There is nothing on this in E. Hoppe, *Zur Geschichte der Fernwirkung* (Hamburg, 1901).

<sup>36</sup> On this problem see e.g. A. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science* (New York, 1927), 182 f.; 264–280.

In Plotinus any action-at-a-distance should by the same token be instantaneous action. Therefore Plotinus had considerable difficulties in explaining delayed reaction. And yet it was necessary for him to explain it, because he wanted to disprove the assertion that this delay proved that stars and gods listen to and remember incantations and act later in virtue of their memory. See *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 30; ch. 42; ch. 43, 11–12 Br — all asserting but not explaining the possibility of delayed reaction without memory; also *ibid.*, 12–14 Br, according to perception and memory to demons.

<sup>37</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 26, 1–4, Br; ch. 39, 20–22 Br; ch. 40, 27–28 Br; ch. 41, 1–5 Br; ch. 38, 1–5 Br. It is difficult to see why J. Katz, *Plotinus' Search for the Good* (New York, 1950),

Along the same lines Plotinus explains the presence of deities in some statues. Sages of old knew how to build such statues (obviously with regard to both shape and material) so that they would irresistibly attract certain deities.<sup>38</sup>

A magic universe indeed. It is within this context that the evocation incident and Plotinus' comment on it come to life. If, then, the efficacy of magic is fully admitted by Plotinus, if we see him participating in magic practices, what reason do we have to assume that he himself did not practice an art which he considered a perfectly natural and respectable one?

We now are ready to discuss the third and last incident reported by Porphyry. Amelius, so Porphyry tells us, was a diligent and fervent participant in religious ceremonies. One day he urged Plotinus to accompany him to one of them. But Plotinus answered: "It is not up to me to go to the gods — it is up to them to come to me." And Porphyry concludes: "What was on his mind when he made so bold a statement we could not make out nor did we dare ask him."<sup>39</sup>

Porphyry's innuendo is rather clear. He took the words of Plotinus to indicate that he had some secret power by which he could compel the gods to come to him. We almost can hear Marlowe's "a sound magician is a mighty god."<sup>40</sup>

Now, it is extremely interesting to observe the reaction to this passage of most of the modern interpreters. They know much better than Porphyry what Plotinus meant to say. It was this. It does not matter where you worship gods, because ultimately the gods can be worshipped in spirit only. If you worship them the right way, they will be with you, wherever you worship.<sup>41</sup>

A fine interpretation — but perhaps it is too fine to be true. Of course, it is very tempting to blame Porphyry for his credulity and superstition and assume that his master was above them. But is there really anything to support a "spiritual" interpretation except the preconceived notion that a great philosopher simply could not have been so credulous and superstitious? And if we think of Plotinus' explanation of prayer in particular and his magic universe in general, isn't there on the contrary everything to support Porphyry's interpretation? Is it not natural to assume that the man who had developed a full theory of magic, including the possibility of magic action toward the gods, was also a practicing magician when it came to his own relations with the gods?

True, this is not the last word concerning our topic. On the contrary, when we follow Plotinus, we suddenly face an unexpected turn. Concluding his presentation of a magic universe Plotinus says: In a sense, everything that is not completely self-contained is under the spell of everything that affects it. Only what is completely self-centered and self-contained remains unbewitched. To the extent to which we are not our own, we can be bewitched. But we can be bewitched only to that extent. Who, then, is completely self-centered and self-contained? Who is not liable to any magic spells? It is he who lives a life of contemplation, or to use a term taken from Christian theology, he who experiences the beatific vision, and has become one with the object of his contemplation. He is above any witchcraft. *To pros auto agoêteuton*.<sup>42</sup>

By this turn Plotinus succeeds in surrounding his whole discussion with an aura of sublimity. In the very same moment when he seems to be completely the child of his superstitious age, he suddenly transcends it. There is a realm exempt from magic — there is something like the complete invulnerability of the sage, this time

should say that Plotinus rejects the efficacy of prayer or that according to Plotinus gods cannot be coerced by magic (65; 100 f. note 12).

<sup>38</sup> *Enn.* IV 3, ch. 11, 1-6 Br. Thus, though the technical term *empsycha agalmata*, used by later Neoplatonists to distinguish images in which a deity was actually present from others, does not seem to occur in Plotinus, the concept

is present.

<sup>39</sup> *Vita Plotini*, ch. 10, 33-38 Br.

<sup>40</sup> Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, act I, scene 1.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen* III/2, 4th ed. (Leipzig, 1903) 524 note 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Enn.* IV 4, ch. 44, 1-3 Br; ch. 43, 16-18 Br. 1-7 Br; ch. 34, 1-7 Br.

resulting not from his superior skill as a magician, but because he has surpassed the kind of life within which magic and countermagic work. Nothing can touch him any longer in any essential sense of the word, though he obviously is still liable to sickness and death by magic. He has become his own center of existence and lives a life free from any enchantment.

It is, of course, this passage which speaks in favor of those who would like to absolve Plotinus from the guilt of being a magician. But sublime as it is, all that it expresses is Plotinus' conviction that he is more than a magician and that there are limits to the art of magic. If we admit that Plotinus did not always live on the highest level of life, we shall find nothing in the passage to contradict the evidence that he was a practicing magician.

This dual aspect of magic in Plotinus' theory — efficacious but limited — of course involves a challenge to his readers to transcend the realm to which the efficacy of magic is confined. This challenge of Plotinus' calls to mind the life pattern of two famous magicians in modern literature. One is Shakespeare's Prospero. Having accomplished his purpose by means of his magic, Prospero buries his magic wand and renounces his magic art.<sup>43</sup> The other magician is Goethe's Faust. Approaching the end of his life, he expresses his desire to unlearn magic and face nature without its help — a mere man.<sup>44</sup> Both Prospero and Faust in the end prefer a life without the help of magic; but neither of them denies its efficacy. In this they resemble Plotinus. But this similarity serves only to bring out the dissimilarity with full force. When Prospero and Faust speak of giving up magic, they consider this as the way of resuming their proper place in the universe, that of man. It is different with Plotinus. We can see this best when we remember that in Plotinus' universe the gods themselves are subject to the power of magic. But gods who can be charmed (and as was said, prayers are nothing but such charms) are obviously not completely self-contained; the formula *to pros auto agoêteuton* cannot be applied to them. This being so, Plotinus' transcendence of magic is quite obviously not a call to resume one's station as man. It is on the contrary a call to become more than man, to become more than even the gods. Prospero and Faust are willing to accept the limitations befitting man's nature. Plotinus expects man to surpass the gods.

There is nothing surprising in this, of course, either from the point of view of Greek philosophy in general, or from that of the philosophy of Plotinus in particular. A Pindar might well have preached the sermon of man's limitations often enough and warned him not to try to become a god.<sup>45</sup> As far as philosophy is concerned, Pindar more than once found deaf ears. Proudly Aristotle declared that the maxim "man should think in ways befitting man" was false — that it befitted man to immortalize himself.<sup>46</sup> Even Plato, the same Plato who in the *Laws* said that the best we can say of man is that he is a plaything, a puppet of the gods,<sup>47</sup> nevertheless coined in the *Theaetetus* the formula that the aim of the philosopher is to become godlike.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act V, scene 1.

<sup>44</sup> Goethe, *Faust II*, act V, vv. 11404-7.

<sup>45</sup> Pindar, *5th Olympian*, v. 53; *4th Isthmian*, v. 13.

<sup>46</sup> Aristoteles, *Nicomachean Ethics* K 7, 1177b30; cf. Iamblichus, *Protrepticus*, ch. 8, p. 48, 9-21 Pistelli (Aristotle, fr. 61 Rose; fr. 10c

Walzer).

<sup>47</sup> *Laws* I 13,644 D; VII 10,804 B.

<sup>48</sup> *Theaetetus* 176 B. On the survival of this formula in Greek philosophy see Ueberweg-Praechter *Grundriss*, 12th ed. (1926) 5 and K. Praechter's papers there quoted (*Goettinger gelehrte Anzeigen* 1906, p. 904; 1909, p. 542 f.).

Stoics and Epicureans alike assured their followers that their philosophy would elevate them above the ranks of man — make them mortal gods.<sup>49</sup> And Plotinus not only discusses and accepts the *Theaetetus* formula. He outdoes it by declaring: What matters is not to be without fault; it is to be god.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the assurance that the true philosopher who lives a life of pure contemplation is not subject to magic is a corollary to the doctrine that he is a godlike being. Like god — but which god? Ultimately, in the universe of Plotinus, there is only one principle of which it can truly be said that it remains unbewitched because it is not linked to anything and cannot be influenced. It is the One, the ineffable. Plotinus' challenge to transcend the realm of magic is equivalent to his challenge to enter into complete communion with the One. In Prospero and Faust the giving up of magic was conceived as an act of humility. In Plotinus the conviction that the true philosopher cannot be bound by magic is the expression of supreme pride.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> On the Stoic ideal see, e.g., E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen* III/1, 4th ed. (Leipzig, 1909) 252 notes 5 and 6. On the Epicurean ideal see P. Merlan, "Epicurus and Horace," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 10 (1949) 445-451.

<sup>50</sup> *Enn.* I 2, ch. 6, 2-3 Br: "The quest is not for being past failing [*exō hamartias*]; it is difficult to resist the temptation to translate "sinless"

or "holy"], the quest is for being God."

<sup>51</sup> The body of this paper, read at the meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Philological Association in Santa Barbara on 28 November 1952, has had the benefit of criticism from Prof. Paul Friedlaender, which proved that the argument must be made more explicit; this was done in notes 15 and 21.

## LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 1 -



*You have printed the following article:*

### **Plotinus and Magic**

Philip Merlan

*Isis*, Vol. 44, No. 4. (Dec., 1953), pp. 341-348.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-1753%28195312%2944%3A4%3C341%3APAM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

---

*This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.*

### **[Footnotes]**

#### <sup>1</sup> **Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism**

E. R. Dodds

*The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 37, Parts 1 and 2. (1947), pp. 55-69.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0075-4358%281947%2937%3C55%3ATAIRTN%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y>

#### <sup>49</sup> **Epicureanism and Horace**

Philip Merlan

*Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 10, No. 3. (Jun., 1949), pp. 445-451.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-5037%28194906%2910%3A3%3C445%3AEA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>