

A critical review of the treatment of the Moon in Plutarch's *Concerning the Face Which Appears in the Orb of the Moon*, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*.

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By comparing and contrasting three astrological primary sources, namely Plutarch's *Concerning the Face Which Appears in the Orb of the Moon* (*De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet*), Blavatsky's 'The Secret Doctrine, the Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy', and Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* ('*De occulta philosophia libri III*'), this paper explores the treatment of the Moon by the authors of these primary sources. Some common themes that emerge in this exploration of the treatment of the Moon in these three primary sources are the scientific and alternative investigation of the Moon, the role of the Moon in the myths of ancient and modern cultures, and the mysterious, dark, or negative aspect and influence of the Moon. The result is that the authors of all three primary sources treat the Moon as an object of importance worthy of exploration.

Introduction

This essay will compare and contrast the treatment of the Moon in three primary sources and through the lens of three core themes, namely; 1.) Science and the Laws of Nature; 2.) Myth and the Moon; and, 3.) The Dark Side of the Moon. The first primary source is *Concerning the Face Which Appears in the Orb of the Moon* (*De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet*). It was written by Plutarch (Plutarchus) (ca. 45–120 CE) who was born at Chaeronea in Boeotia in central Greece and became a scholar of Platonic philosophy at Athens. It was written in ca. 100 CE and appears in Plutarch's larger treatise entitled *Moralia* which contains a collection of essays and speeches on various subject matters which influenced later European Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophy. It was originally written in Greek and then Latin and translated into English by Harold Cherniss and W. C. Helmbold and published by Loeb Classical Library as

Moralia Vol. XII in 1957. This is the edition I will be referring to for the purposes of this essay.¹

The second primary source is *The Secret Doctrine, the Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*. It was written by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (Helena Petrovna von Hahn) (1831-1891 CE) who was born in the then Russian Empire (now Ukraine) and who became a well-known 19th- 20th century occultist, medium, author and founder of the esoteric organisation, the Theosophical Society, in 1875. It was written in English in 1888 and was originally composed of two volumes; the first volume entitled *Cosmogogenesis*, the second volume entitled *Anthropogenesis*. It is an example of 'revealed' literature which contained a synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophical and spiritual thought and resulted in reviving interest in esoteric and occult study in modern times. The edition that I will be using for this essay is the Theosophical University Press Online Edition which contains both volumes.²

The third and final primary source is *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (*De occulta philosophia libri III*). It is a composite collection of three books written by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535 CE) between 1509-1510. Book I is entitled *Natural Magic*, Book II *Celestial Magic* and Book III *Ceremonial Magic*. Agrippa was a Renaissance scholar influenced by Hermetic and Neoplatonic philosophy and his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* became an invaluable source of Western ritual and astrological magic. All three volumes were printed together for the first time in Cologne in 1533. They were originally written in Latin and were translated into English by one J.F. and were published by Gregory Moule in London in 1651. The translation that I am using for the purposes of this essay is that of Joseph H. Patterson made in 2000 from the transcription of the Moule version, and which is available as a digital edition.³ It is to be noted that a Book IV entitled 'Of Magical Ceremonies' was later discovered and attributed to Agrippa, although its provenance remains

¹ Plutarch, *Moralia* Vol. XII, trans. by Harold Cherniss and W. C. Helmbold (Harvard University: Loeb Classical Library, 1957).

² Helena Petrovna, Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine, the Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 2014): <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd-hp.htm>, accessed on 5th June 2017.

³ Heinrich Cornelius, Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. by Joseph H. Patterson, 2000: <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agrippa1.htm> accessed on 5th June 2017.

spurious. I have therefore confined my analysis to the original three books for the purpose of this essay.

Science and the Laws of Nature

A common theme appearing in these three primary texts is the authors' treatment of the Moon from a scientific standpoint as a natural phenomenon requiring investigation. Plutarch's *De facie* begins by stating that standard scientific theories and scholarship do not answer or explain what the figure visible on the face on the Moon is and so 'when the ordinary and reputable and customary accounts are not persuasive, it is necessary to try those that are more out of the way [...]'⁴. Therefore, the Moon in this regard is viewed by Plutarch as a kind of scientific anomaly that requires alternative investigation. Various alternative theories for the existence of the apparent face on the Moon are then discussed in the text, including ideas of optical effects, geometry, mirrored reflections, and layers of shadow, air, fire, water creating shapes.⁵ However, a more concrete understanding of the Moon is given later on in the text when scientific details are discussed regarding the motion of the Earth 'revolving along the ecliptic and at the same time [...] rotating about its own axis' and the fact that 'the earth is a great deal larger than the moon', as well as in-depth reference to transits and lunar and solar eclipses and how they occur.⁶ This shows, according to scholars such as Karamanolis, that, in *De facie*, 'Plutarch shows quite some interest in the explanation of natural phenomena [...]'⁷.

Agrippa similarly emphasises an exploration of nature and the natural world in his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, to the extent of dedicating the whole of Book I of this treatise to natural magic, which according to Yates, 'teaches how to arrange substances in accordance with the occult sympathies between them, so as to effect operations in natural magic.'⁸ Agrippa acknowledges the influence of the Moon on Earth as well as there being a line of communication between the two based on their close connection in

⁴ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Line 920C, p. 35.

⁵ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Line 920C – 923, pp. 35-55.

⁶ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Line 923 p.55-59.

⁷ George, Karamanolis, "Plutarch", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/plutarch/> accessed on 10th June 2017.

⁸ Frances, Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2010), p. 53.

space.⁹ The Moon also features in Agrippa's discussion of the number seven where he outlines the natural process of the changing phases of the moon based upon four sets of seven days.¹⁰ This is as scientific or technical as Agrippa gets in his treatment of the Moon. For the most part of the remaining coverage of the Moon by him, he refers to it in the context of natural laws, sympathies and correspondences, which is very much illustrative of the Hermetic and Neoplatonic influences present in his work through his referencing of numerous Hermetic and Neoplatonic scholars throughout the text. Yates puts it very aptly in stating that Agrippa's aim is to provide 'the technical procedures for acquiring the more powerful and "wonder-working" philosophy, [...] a philosophy ostensibly Neoplatonic but including a magical Hermetic-Cabalist core.'¹¹ In this regard, he establishes "enmities" and "friendships" between the Moon and each of the other planets¹² which can be employed in magic and astrology, as well as listing a number of creatures and features of the natural world, such as plants, trees, stones, animals, and indeed certain humans, which are lunar in nature.¹³ Despite the strong use of symbolic connections and natural laws as opposed to hard science, Agrippa incorporates an intellectual and scholarly methodology in his treatment of the Moon and other planets, leading Yates to describe *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* as 'a matter-of-fact text-book'.¹⁴

Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* also approaches the Moon from an alternative scientific standpoint, similar to Plutarch's "alternative theories" approach in *De facie*. Blavatsky considers that the Moon is the Earth's satellite only in its function of physically revolving around the Earth. However, 'in every other respect it is the Earth which is the satellite of the Moon [...]. Startling as the statement may seem it is not without confirmation from scientific

⁹ Agrippa, 'Chapter (viii) How the Elements are in the Heavens, in Stars, in Divels [devils], in Angels, and lastly in God himself', Book I *Natural Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*: <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agrippa1.htm#chap8> accessed 5th June 2017.

¹⁰ Agrippa, 'Chapter (x) Of the Number Seaven', and the Scale thereof, Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*: <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agrippa2.htm#chap10> accessed 5th June 2017.

¹¹ Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p. 55.

¹² Agrippa, 'Chapter (xvii) How by enmity and friendship the vertues of things are to be tryed, and found out',

Book I *Natural Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agrippa1.htm#chap17> accessed 5th June 2017.

¹³ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xxiv) What things are Lunary, or under the power of the Moon', Book I *Natural Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp1b.htm#chap24> accessed 5th June 2017.

¹⁴ Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p.55.

knowledge. It is evidenced by the tides, by the cyclic changes in many forms of disease which coincide with the lunar phases; it can be traced in the growth of plants, and is very marked in the phenomena of human gestation and conception.' She also states that '[...] so far as Science knows, the Earth's action on the Moon is confined to the physical attraction, which causes her to circle in her orbit.'¹⁵ It appears therefore that Blavatsky considers herself to have debunked the standard scientific view of the relationship between the Moon and Earth and instead treats the Moon as being the dominant player in the relationship between it and the Earth, the Moon being a kind of magnetic force that exerts a constant influence on the Earth, akin to a mother exerting authority over its child. However, William Quan Judge, a contemporary theosophist of Blavatsky, seems to take a more positive attitude towards the role of science and its exploration and understanding of the Moon, where he says that '[m]odern and ancient science alike unite in watching the night's great light as she performs her journey round us.'¹⁶ On balance, all three texts do acknowledge the scientific nature of investigation required of the Moon, however, for the most part, it appears that the authors' believe that scientific laws do not fully explain the true nature of the Moon.

Myth and the Moon

Another shared feature of each of the three primary texts is their treatment of the Moon's role in the context of myth. In Plutarch's *De facie*, the role of myth is central to the title and overall theme of the text, namely an explanation for the apparent visibility of a man-like figure in the moon. This myth of "a man in the moon" has saturated the imagination of many cultures since time immemorial. According to Brunner, '[...] there is not one moon but many, each particular to a different culture.'¹⁷ Each culture therefore interprets what the moon is to them and it follows that '[o]nly a small step [is] required for stories to evolve from these images.'¹⁸ The interconnection between the Moon and the development of myth is even evident in the name for the study of the moon,

¹⁵ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 180.

¹⁶ William Quan Judge, 'Moon's Mystery and Fate', *William Q. Judge Theosophical Articles, Vol. I*: <http://www.blavatsky.net/index.php/moon-s-mystery-and-fate> accessed on 8th June, 2017.

¹⁷ Bernd, Brunner, *Moon: A Brief History*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 25.

¹⁸ Brunner, *Moon: A Brief History*, p. 27.

“selenology”, which comes from the name the Greek goddess of the Moon, Selene, a prominent figure in Greek mythology.¹⁹

The influence of myth is evident in *De facie* in the discussion on humanity’s fear that the Moon is unsupported in the sky and is liable to fall, whereas the Earth is supported by ‘Atlas, [who] stands, staying on his back the prop of earth [...]’ or alternatively that the Earth is supported by ‘steel-shod pillars’²⁰. However, probably the greatest influence of myth in *De facie* in the context of the Moon is in what Karamanolis calls ‘the eschatological myths [...] [which] integrate cosmological, psychological, and ethical considerations’, particularly ‘the role of the moon in the world and its role in the life of souls [...]’²¹ Plutarch describes the Moon’s mythical role as being a storehouse and conveyer of souls from one world to the next.²² Hamilton also alludes to the express references to myth in Plutarch’s text which relate to the nature of the soul and argues that such references are influenced by the story of Atlantis in Plato’s *Timeus*.²³

Agrippa describes a number of images of the Moon which can be created for particular magical petitions.²⁴ These images make use of mythological symbolism taken from ancient cultures, such as dragon and serpent symbolism. A specific image of the head and tail of the Dragon of the Moon is illustrated where Agrippa states that the Egyptians and Phoenicians ‘do extol this creature [the image of a serpent] above all others, and say it is a divine creature and hath a divine nature [...]’²⁵ He also presents the Moon’s mythological association with the sacred feminine by outlining that the Moon is associated with numerous mythological goddesses.²⁶

¹⁹ Brunner, *Moon: A Brief History*, p. 32.

²⁰ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Line 923C p. 59.

²¹ George, Karamanolis, “Plutarch”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/plutarch/> accessed on 10th June 2017.

²² Plutarch, *Moralia*, Line 943 p. 207-209.

²³ W., Hamilton, ‘The Myth in Plutarch’s De Facie (940F-945D)’, *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Jan., 1934), pp. 24-30.

²⁴ Agrippa, ‘Chapter (xliv) Of the Images of the Moon’, Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*: <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp2c.htm#chap44> accessed on 5th June 2017.

²⁵ Agrippa, ‘Chapter (xlv) Of the Images of the head and taylor of the Dragon of the Moon’, Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*: <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp2c.htm#chap45> accessed on 5th June 2017.

²⁶ Agrippa, ‘Chapter (lix) Of the seven governors of the world, the Planets, and of their various names serving to Magically speeches’, Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult*

Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* is also a strong advocate for the power of myth over science in the context of the Moon. She states that ‘[f]rom the archaic aeons and the later times of the witches of Thessaly, down to some of the present tantrikas of Bengal, her [the Moon’s] nature and properties were known to every Occultist, but have remained a closed book for physicists.’²⁷ She appears to be implying here that science has not been able to break through the threshold of mythical knowledge that exists in relation to the Moon. She also espouses the power of religion in culture over that of science where she says ‘[t]he importance of the Moon and its influence on the Earth were recognized in every ancient religion [...] and have been remarked by many observers of psychical and physical phenomena.’²⁸ It may be argued here that she considers the Moon as having more of a connection to occultists and those studying myth and occult science than to exoteric scientists, and that the former category are more able to penetrate the myths and mysteries of the Moon to attain a true understanding of it. Overall, all three texts provide a strong and positive approach towards the Moon’s role in myth.

The Dark Side of the Moon

Finally, all three texts directly express the theme of the Moon being of a mysterious, even insidious nature. In common with his earlier inference of the Moon being a kind of scientific mutation requiring alternative investigation, Plutarch’s *De facie* goes on to negatively describe the Moon as: ‘[...] misshapen, ugly, and a disgrace to the noble title, if it is true that of all the host in heaven she alone goes about in need of alien light [...]’.²⁹ He also states that ‘[t]he sun imparts to the moon her brilliance [and the Moon] often has concealed and obliterated him [the Sun]’.³⁰ These references appear to imply that the Moon is kind of parasite attaching itself to the Sun, constantly feeding off the Sun’s light in order to emit light itself.

Philosophy: <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp2d.htm#chap59> accessed on 5th June 2017.

²⁷ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 156.

²⁸ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 180.

²⁹ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Line 929, p.99-101.

³⁰ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Line 929, p.99-101.

Agrippa takes on a more positive handling of the Moon than Plutarch by constantly conveying the importance of the Moon in magical workings³¹ and disseminating copious amounts of information and lunar correspondences for such magical working, such as figures of divine letters or characters of the Moon³², the Moon's positive influence over divination and dreams³³, the seal, table, divine names, intelligences and spirits of the Moon³⁴, names of ancient cult centres associated with Moon deity worship³⁵, and the angel of the Moon and angels of the twenty-eight Mansions of the Moon³⁶. Agrippa lays emphasis on the importance of the Moon and urges the reader to acknowledge and respect the Moon in its role as conveyor of magical power: '[...] for thou shalt do nothing without the assistance of the Moon [...] thou shalt take the Moon [and its patterns, aspects and conjunctions] for that I conceive must in no wise be omitted.'³⁷ According to Yates, 'Agrippa's occult philosophy is intended to be

³¹ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xxx) When Planets are of most powerful influence', Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp2c.htm#chap30> accessed on 5th June 2017.

³² Agrippa, 'Chapter (xxxiii) Of the Seals, and Characters of Naturall things', Book I *Natural Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp1b.htm#chap33> accessed on 5th June 2017.

³³ Agrippa, 'Chapter (lix) Of Divination by Dreams', Book I *Natural Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*: <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp1c.htm#chap59> accessed on 5th June 2017.

³⁴ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xxii) Of the tables of the Planets, their vertues, forms, and what Divine names, Intelligencies, and Spirits are set over them', Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp2b.htm#chap22> accessed on 5th June 2017.

³⁵ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xiv) Of the Gods of the gentiles, and souls of the Celestiall bodies, and what places were consecrated in times past, and to what Deities', Book III *Ceremonial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agrippa3.htm#chap14> accessed on 5th June 2017.

³⁶ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xxiv) Of the names of Spirits, and their various imposition; and of the Spirits that are set over the Stars, Signs, Corners of the Heaven, and the Elements', Book III *Ceremonial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp3b.htm#chap24> accessed on 5th June 2017.

³⁷ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xxix) Of the Observation of Celestiall, necessary in every Magical Work', Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp2c.htm#chap29> accessed on 5th June 2017.

a very white magic.³⁸ However, despite the corresponding lunar connections, he does acknowledge that the Moon's influence is changeable like a fitful mistress: 'the Moon changeth her nature according to the variety of the Signe which it is found in'.³⁹ He also describes that '[...] the Moon by vertue of the Sun is the mistress of generation, increase, or decrease'⁴⁰, which is a subtle allusion to the symbiotic relationship between these two luminaries which Plutarch regards as parasitic. There is also a reference to the more negative '[...] Lunatick passions which proceed from the combustion of the Moon.'⁴¹

Comparable to Plutarch's consideration of the parasitic nature of the Moon towards the Sun, Blavatsky envisions a similar understanding of the Moon with regard to its relationship with and influence on the Earth. In *The Secret Doctrine*, the Moon is treated as a dead planet having an unhealthy influence over our living planet Earth and this is extremely evident in Blavatsky's use of potent language in this regard: 'The Moon is now the cold residual quantity, the shadow dragged after the new body [...] doomed for long ages to be ever pursuing the Earth, to be attracted by and to attract her progeny. Constantly vampirised by her child, she revenges herself on it by soaking it through and through with the nefarious, invisible, and poisoned influence which emanates from the occult side of her nature. For she is a dead, yet a living body. The particles of her decaying corpse are full of active and destructive life, although the body which they had formed is soulless and lifeless. [...]'.⁴² Blavatsky gives concrete albeit grim examples of this influence in the physical world in the fact that grass growth thrives on the graves of the dead and that 'the moon is the friend of the sorcerers and the foe of the unwary'⁴³. C.W.

³⁸ Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p. 55.

³⁹ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xvii) How by enmity and friendship the vertues of things are to be tryed, and found out',

Book I *Natural Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agrippa1.htm#chap17> accessed on 5th June 2017.

⁴⁰ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xxxii) Of the Sun, and Moon, and their Magicall considerations', Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp2c.htm#chap32> accessed on 5th June 2017.

⁴¹ Agrippa, 'Chapter (xli) Of the Images of the Sun', Book II *Celestial Magic, Three Books of Occult Philosophy*:

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp2c.htm#chap41> accessed on 5th June 2017.

⁴² Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 156.

⁴³ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 156.

Leadbeater, a contemporary theosophist of Blavatsky, equally approaches the Moon in an abysmal manner, stating that ‘it is a “dead end,” a place where only refuse gathers, and it is a kind of a dust-heap or waste-paper-basket to the system - a kind of astral cesspool into which are thrown decaying fragments of various sorts, such as the lost personality which has torn itself away from the ego [...].’⁴⁴ Overall, Plutarch’s parasitic view of the Moon and Blavatsky’s treatment of the Moon as an insidious, blood-sucking being conjures up a far from alluring, admirable and magical image of the Moon that we see in Agrippa’s *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*.

Conclusion

Taking everything into consideration, it is evident that all three texts regard the Moon as an object of significance. Concerning science and natural laws, all three texts acknowledge the role of science in investigating the Moon. However, for the most part, all three authors convey the need for any investigation of the Moon to go beyond ordinary scientific methodologies, advocating for the Moon to be explored magically through natural laws and occult studies. Regarding the role of myth, all three texts positively convey the role of the Moon in the myths of different cultures, both ancient and modern. Finally, all three texts acknowledge to varying degrees the Moon’s negative side and influence, Agrippa at the lesser end of that scale in flagging only the Moon’s changeable, “lunatic” nature but Plutarch and Blavatsky at the upper end of that scale imparting the parasitic, vampiric and insidious nature of the Moon.

⁴⁴ Charles Webster Leadbeater, *The Inner Life Vol. II*, (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Press, 1942), p. 184.

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