

# THE NEW STATESMAN AND NATION

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### MAGIC AND DISILLUSION

**Ritual Magic.** By E. M. Butler. *Cambridge University Press.*  
25s.

This is the second volume of the trilogy that Professor Butler has undertaken to write on the sources and significance of the Faust legend. *The Myth of the Magus* traced that ambiguous figure, the magician, from the sacrificial priest-kings of antiquity to the bogus yet spellbinding figures of Cagliostro, Rasputin, and Madame Blavatsky. The present volume treats, with scholarly thoroughness and a charm of style rare in the annals of works on magic, of the rituals of conjuration that have been used by European magicians.

A study of the documents of ceremonial magic is disenchanting, not so much because one is left in doubt as to whether the conjurations work,—Professor Butler leaves that question unasked—but because of the laughable, not to say tragic, discrepancy between the elaborate and pretentious means, and the all too human ends. The magician, in his robe of white linen woven by a virgin, girded with lion skin and plastered with pentacles, is an essentially undignified figure, his motives base rather than diabolical, his illiterate learning and his trashy marvels calculated to impress only the ignorant. Means so pretentious, serving ends so petty, can surely only be equaled by the applications found in our own day, for the powerful forces that scientific discovery has put in the hands of fools. Marlowe's Faustus planned a Siegfried Line, air transport, fruit out of season, and television just as we have them to-day. Only in the atomic bomb, perhaps, have we outdone the medieval magicians in blasphemous folly.

But human beings, so Professor Butler wisely observes, are more prone to folly than to deliberate wickedness. The evidence for a cult of Satanism is inconsiderable. The imaginations of novelists like A. E. W. Mason and Charles Williams, and vulgar pretensions of the late **Aleister Crowley**, and the propaganda department of the Roman Church have built up a legend of black masses and devil worship that is not borne out by the documents. The truth is more deplorable, but less sensational.

The art of the magician is the constraint of spirits, both evil and elemental, often in the name of God, to obey his command. Prospero who compels Ariel to obey him is not necessarily a Satanist. The more sordid truth is that when the foundations of the earth were shaken and spirits raised from Acheron, the motive was usually money—love seems to have been a very bad second indeed. One knows the frame of mind, of course, and many a pious prayer has followed much the same lines as one quoted in which the Trinity is called upon to prove its omnipotence “here and now” by compelling the devil to hand over the cash—and not fairy gold, that will turn into coal or anything of that sort, but good currency! Here of course we must not forget that the gold of the alchemists had a symbolic as well as a literal meaning, and so it must have had for some, if not all, magicians. Magic may have been, in its esoteric sense, a Freudian catharsis, as against the Jungian sublimation of alchemy. The fiends raised would then be repressed complexes, the purpose of the magician, as of the psychoanalyst, to release while yet controlling them. One is reminded of the howling sojourners in Blake’s “furnaces,” a hell that the poet understood psychologically. Such questions as these Professor Butler does not raise, and certainly not all magicians would have understood their art symbolically. The magical texts she quotes strike one as deriving only at many removed from the subtle and profound symbolism of the Kabbala. Magic, like other symbolic systems borrowed from the East, took on the stamp of European materialism. And Professor Butler is less concerned with the ultimate nature of magic than with its social manifestations in Europe.

There is latent in magical ceremonies, Professor Butler maintains, the seed of drama, and its ritual seems always about to give birth to some situation comparable to the ancient tragedies that developed from the rites of ancient religions; but the child is still-born, the tragic situation was never developed among the magicians themselves. Actual pacts with the devil were usually unilateral, and the philosophy of the magician was optimistic. Devils, like electricity, could be controlled perfectly well if the apparatus were properly prepared. Curiously enough, the magician becomes a tragic hero in legend alone, when the myth of Satanism, and the selling of his soul to the devil for a term of power, sets him against the somber background of eternal damnation envisaged by Christian orthodoxy. It would seem therefore that it was not the magicians themselves, but the Christian church, that created the legendary fig-

ure of Faust, and gave him his grandeur as a man irrevocably damned. This legend spread in sixteenth-century Europe like wildfire, because it was felt to state a great poetic truth.

Poetry, curiously enough, is precisely what magic documents most conspicuously lack. Only in the Greek texts, and the English, do we find that wild, elemental poetry of Jonson and Shakespeare's witches. In the underworld of Christendom it survived as a foul guilty thing, divided from religion and philosophy which in the ancient world lent it dignity and beauty. There is a world of difference between the priest who works to ensure the fertility of the land and the tribe and the magician who conjures in order to locate buried treasure or make a love philtre. The mediumistic piffle obtained by the learned Dr. Dee is all too familiar. The magician is, in any case, an applied scientist. The purists—Gnostics, Kabbalists, alchemists, Rosicrucians—were not the men to value the display of marvels. Even on being asked why, if he could work magic, he was not a rich man, very sensibly replied that any man wise enough to understand the principles underlying magical powers would be wise enough to desire better things.

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