

Magic as Power: The Influence of Marsilio Ficino on Early Modern Conceptions of the Occult

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Given the immense scholarship yielded, *inter alia*, by theological, anthropological, cultural, linguistic and literary studies, it is now widely recognised that Renaissance magic was accepted as an eclectic, though respected, philosophical science, painstakingly considered and practised by the most eminent scholars of the time.¹ Indeed, until the advent of modern European rationalism, magic and other occult practices were deemed to have a distinguished intellectual, even sacred, pedigree, and were treated as valid elements in the histories of religion, epistemology and science.² Thus Keith Thomas can rightfully claim that ‘For much of the period . . . magical inquiry possessed some intellectual respectability. . . . Small wonder that for the populace learning still meant magic.’³ This understanding of medieval and Renaissance magic is endorsed by Richard Kieckhefer in his trenchant observation that magic

¹ In his seminal study, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), Keith Thomas traces the historical context in which occult beliefs and practices co-existed and intersected with religious and scholarly orthodoxies of the medieval and early modern periods. See especially his chapter on ‘The Magic of the Medieval Church’, and the three chapters under the heading ‘Magic’.

² Although ancient Egyptian and Chinese authorities are principally discernible in the early modern European conceptions of the occult, there are also significant Greek, Persian, Hebrew and Arabic influences.

³ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 268–9.

‘is a point of intersection between religion and science’, and furthermore, ‘an area where popular culture meets with learned culture.’⁴

Thus the early modern philosopher-magus, Henry Cornelius Agrippa, could write that ‘Magic . . . was accounted by all ancient philosophers to be the chiefest science, and by the ancient wise men and priests was always held in great veneration.’⁵ Even Francis Bacon – considered by many to be an icon of the scientific revolution – tempers his critique of occult practices with a fair acknowledgement of their worth: ‘The sciences themselves, which have had better intelligence and confederacy with the imagination of man than with his reason, are three in number; astrology, natural magic, and alchemy; of which sciences nevertheless the ends are noble.’⁶

Bacon’s rather conservative catalogue of contemporary occult traditions is expanded by John Baptista Porta, in his work on *Natural Magick*, where he assimilates an all-embracing collection of disciplines, including philosophy, astrology, alchemy, mathematics, and optics amongst others. He goes on to advise that ‘These are the sciences which Magick takes to her self for servants and helpers; and he that knows not these, is unworthy to be named a Magician’. He also delineates the character, knowledge and skills required of those striving to attain to the position of magus:

It behoveth a Magician and one who aspires to the dignity of that profession, to be an exact and perfect Philosopher. . . . Then also he must be a skilful Physician. . . . Moreoever, it is required of him, that he be an Herbalist. . . . He must be as well seen also in

⁴ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1. Kieckhefer provides an insightful study of the porous boundaries which existed between magic and religion and magic and science, and argues that the overlaps among these disciplines rendered clear cut distinctions unreasonable. See especially the first two chapters.

⁵ Agrippa, Henry Cornelius [of Nettesheim], *Occult Philosophy or Magic* (1651), ed. Willis F. Whitehead (London: The Aquarian Press, 1971), p. 28.

⁶ Sir Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. W. Aldiss Wright, 5th edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), Bk I, iv.11, pp. 35–6.

the nature of Metals, Minerals, Gems and Stones. Furthermore, what cunning he must have in the art of Distillation. . . . He must also know the Mathematical Sciences, and especially Astrology. . . . Moreover, he must be skilful in the Opticks, that he may know how the sight may be deceived.⁷

One who comes close to fulfilling these rigorous standards, and who could claim a pre-eminent place amongst the most esteemed continental minds of the time, is Marsilio Ficino. In fact, as one of the most learned and influential forces of the Italian Renaissance, Ficino epitomises the ideal of the rounded, integrated scholar. Although he considered his priesthood to be his noblest office, he was renowned as the founder and leading light of the Florentine Academy at Careggi, as a medical doctor, a talented musician, a prolific author, a linguist and a scribe. He translated the whole of Plato and other classical writings from the Greek, but is probably best known for his translation of the body of esoteric writings known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. These occult texts were brought to Florence from Macedonia by a monk named Leonardo da Pistoia who presented the anthology to Cosimo de Medici, who in turn commissioned Ficino to translate it into Latin, a task which he completed in 1471. Although his interpretations and application of Platonism were much more influential, even revolutionary, on the Continent, Ficino's work did gain significant purchase in England through the sheer bulk of his own output and the expanding productivity of the printing press in circulating continental ideas. John G. Burke points out that sixteen editions of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were published between 1471 and 1500, an affirmation of its wide dissemination and popular appeal.⁸

Given the apparent blockbuster status of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Ficino is considered by many cultural historians to be the founder of

⁷ John Baptista Porta, *Natural Magick* (London: T. Young and S. Speed, 1658), p. 3.

⁸ John G. Burke, 'Hermetism as a Renaissance World View', in *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance: Beyond the Fields of Reason*, ed. Robert S. Kinsman (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1974), 95–117, p. 99.

Renaissance hermeticism. Indeed, Wayne Shumaker goes as far as to assert that it was by Ficino, 'more than by any other single person, [that] the astonishing vogue of Renaissance magic was initiated.' Ficino's distinction as a Medici favourite and as brilliant scholar in his own right lent weight to the authority of these hermetic texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, which made a significant impact on the understanding and reception of occult ideas during this period.⁹ Trismegistus, who, during the early modern period, was believed to have been an ancient Egyptian priest living around the time of the Hebrew prophet Moses, epitomised the true magus, apparently devoted to God and *au fait* with the arcane powers of both the macrocosm and the microcosm.¹⁰ Robert Fludd, himself a key figure in the early modern occult movement, eulogises Trismegistus, purging his pagan heritage and appropriating him for Renaissance Christianity:

The excellent Philosopher *Hermes*, otherwise termed *Mercurius Trismegistus*, expresseth plainly, that he was not only acquainted with *Moses* his books, but also was made partaker of his mysticall and secret practise, as by his Sermons, which he calleth *Pymander*, a man may plainly discern, where he doth mention three Persons in Trinity, and sheweth the manner of the worlds creation, with the elements thereof, the Word.¹¹

⁹ Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 4. Shumaker acknowledges the significant influence of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, arguing that because of it, 'the foundation was laid for an intellectual movement which was to have a profound, if intermittent, influence in the European Renaissance' (p. 201).

¹⁰ See Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 145. Referring to a mosaic of Trismegistus in the pavement of Siena Cathedral, Kieckhefer points out that this 'mythic figure [was] taken as a kind of patron saint for this movement [of humanist occultism] ... depicted here not as a magician but as a supposed prophet of Christianity, though his connections with magic, astrology and alchemy could hardly be put out of mind or distinguished altogether from his prophetic powers'.

¹¹ Robert Fludd, *Mosaicall Philosophy: Grounded upon the Essential Truth or Eternal Sapience* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1659), p. 42.

Notwithstanding this high praise, the veneration with which the *Corpus Hermeticum* was received was based on a false premise, for it was proved that the works were not actually from the Mosaic era, but were compiled in the fourth or fifth century of the common era. William J. Bouwsma clarifies that the writings 'in fact reflected Hellenistic gnosticism and later Jewish materials . . . [and] their actual origin was only demonstrated by Casaubon in 1614'.¹² This, however, does not detract from the fact that the works were highly regarded and remained one of the main driving forces behind the renewed respectability of the occult during the Renaissance.

For Ficino, translator and chief champion of the works, the *Hermetica* were nothing short of being supernaturally inspired. This is especially significant when we consider Angela Voss's point that 'As a Christian priest, [Ficino's] vocation was to unite philosophy and religion in a total wisdom of being, and to this end he also advocated the use of ritual magical practices'.¹³ Alfonso Ingegno offers further insight on this point, for he observes, 'The weight of magic in [Ficino's] work shows that the metaphysical structure of the real, with its secret web of hidden links, revealed to the sage the splendour of the divine life itself, although not in its purest form, within the perceptible world'.¹⁴

This may suggest that magic offered an allegorical pattern for human transformation and perfectibility. In keeping with this idea, John S. Mebane avers that 'Ficino himself was concerned with purifying the soul; he was fascinated by the idea that the human personality could regain its

¹² William J. Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance: 1550–1640* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 128.

¹³ Angela Voss, 'The Natural Magic of Marsilio Ficino', *Historical Dance* 3.1 (1992): 25–30, p. 25.

¹⁴ Alfonso Ingegno, 'The New Philosophy of Nature', *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles Schmidt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 238–63, p. 238.

lost magical powers'.¹⁵ In a treatise popularly associated with Ficino, 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', the author declares, 'I have made the choice of this stone of the philosophers familiar to me; and I very often call it the only Minerva, and the greatest pearl of all occult philosophy, or of magic, not indeed of the superstitious, but of the natural . . . which is decreed and ordained by the divine will'.¹⁶ The end of this magic, for Ficino, is the ultimate transformation of man, that is, personal union with God. Therefore he asserts in *The Christian Religion* (1473):

Let him revere himself as an image of the Divine God. Let him hope to ascend again to God, as soon as the Divine Majesty deigns in some way to descend to him. Let him love God with all his heart, so as to transform himself into Him, who through singular love wonderfully transformed Himself into Man.¹⁷

Ficino may then be seen to be firmly positioned within the tradition of occult philosophers, who directed their efforts towards the contemplation and conceptualisation of the metaphysical principles –

¹⁵ John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 18.

¹⁶ 'Ego hanc lapidis Philosophorum imaginem mihi familiarem selegi, eamque saepius apello, totius Philosophiae occultae, aut Magiae (haud quidem superstitiosae sed naturalis) Minervam unicam, atque Margaritam praecipuam . . . quod a voluntate divina decretum est & constitutum', 'Marsilii Ficini Floremini Liber de Arte Chimica' (1518), in *Bibliotheca chemica curiosa, seu Rerum ad alchemiam pertinentium Thesaurus instructissimus*, ed. J.J. Manget, 2 vols (Geneva, 1702), 2: 172–83, p. 174. The anonymous English translation is from 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', BL MS Sloane 3638, item 7, transcribed by Justin von Budjoss. available url: <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/ficino.html>, p. 6. The title of the English translation reads: 'An unknown concerning the Chymicall Art. But Lucerna Salis affirms him to be Marsilius Ficinus, an Italian of the Dukedom of Florence or Tuscany, in the year 1518'. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are taken from the transcription of this text by Justin von Budjoss. Ficino's authorship is uncertain, but the ideas developed in the treatise are compatible with his general philosophical stance. The author of the treatise will be referred to as pseudo-Ficino.

¹⁷ *Opera Omnia*, pp. 22–23, cit. in biographical introduction to *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. members of Language Department, School of Economic Science, 7 vols (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975–), 1: 4.

or spirit – which they believed permeated all of nature and which held the secrets of transformation.¹⁸ The end to which these occult philosophers were resolved was the '[p]urification of the spirit [which] should lead to the transcendence of earthly materiality through transforming and refining it', according to Angela Voss.¹⁹ Many a devout magus considered alchemy the highest transformative Art, that which most closely resembles God's creative power. Hiram Haydn provides clarification of this class of occult practitioner:

For the magicians seek to learn the *secrets* of nature largely through illumination, revelation and initiation into a body of ancient esoteric knowledge. . . . [The magician], holding that nature is full of the *symbols* of God, believes that it may be understood only through esoteric lore and experiment, the formulas and equations and hieroglyphs of the Pythagoreans and the Cabala, alchemy and astrology – through the correct interpretation of a body of long-established secret knowledge.²⁰

While these esoteric scholars also spent time in observation and investigation of material nature, their objective was much less immediately utilitarian or economic than that of the chemists, apothecaries, and

¹⁸ Angela Voss explains that 'The notion of the occult or secret properties of matter, that is, those influential qualities beyond sense perception but nevertheless profoundly affecting our own psychological balance through their effect on the *spiritus* – the airy substance which links body and soul – is central to Ficino's magic. These qualities may be hidden, but they are natural, and as such the Magus who perceives them is a natural philosopher and not a conjuror' ('The Natural Magic of Marsilio Ficino', p. 25). In the section of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* entitled 'Conjuring and the magical tradition', Keith Thomas also draws attention to the contemporary belief in a sentient world: 'Instead of being regarded as an inanimate mass, the Earth itself was deemed to be alive. . . . The cosmos was an organic unity in which every part bore a sympathetic relationship to the rest. . . . The investigation of such phenomena was the primary task of the natural philosopher, and their employment for his own purposes was the distinguishing mark of the magician' (p. 265).

¹⁹ Voss, 'The Natural Magic of Marsilio Ficino', p. 27.

²⁰ Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), pp. 176–7.

bellows-blowers or ‘puffers.’²¹ While the ‘Ficino’ treatise acknowledges the worth of this latter class of scholarly practitioner, the highest praise is reserved for those who pursue natural philosophy:

There are two sorts of Philosophers. Some only searching into Nature by herself, have in the monuments of their writings delivered the virtue and power which sublunary things have, as well from the elemental qualities, as from heaven and the stars; as the physicians are. And some others who have described the natures of animals, trees, herbs, metals, and precious stones. But others truly are more glorious, penetrating most sagaciously and sharply not only into Nature, but finally into the Arcanum itself of Nature, and into her more inward recesses, have by a truer title assumed to themselves the name of Philosopher.²²

It seems then that one could argue that the true alchemist-philosopher was aiming for a power that transcends mere financial, material or political gain, for all would be subsumed under the absolute supremacy of the Philosopher’s Stone. The superlative, self-generating character of the Philosopher’s Stone is thus described:

The stone which the philosophers do seek is an invisible and impalpable spirit; it is a tincture and a tinging spirit. . . . It is the bond of the elements, the medium and the chain, which has made

²¹ Shumaker draws a useful distinction between the two trajectories of alchemical lore: ‘One . . . was ambitiously, and often rather indiscriminately, experimental, the other philosophical or meditative. . . . [The latter] was a kind of poetical alchemy which had nothing to do with laboratory operations but was rather an imaginative equivalent concerned really with the purification of the soul’ (*Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, p. 170).

²² ‘Duo sunt Philosophorum genera. Quidam naturam dumtaxat per se investigantes, virtutem ac potentiam quam habent res sublimares, tum ab elementariis qualitibus, tum a caelo & stellis, literarum monumentis tradidere, ut sunt Medici: Et quidam, alii, qui animantium naturas, arborum, herbarum, metallorum & lapidem preciosorum descripserunt. Alteri longe quidem splendidiore, non solum naturam, sed ipsum denique naturae Arcanum, ejusque penitoria adyta, sagacissime ac argutissime penetrantes, veriori vocabulo Philosophi nomen sibi usurparunt’ (pseudo-Ficino, ‘De Arte Chymica’, p. 172, translation in ‘Concerning the Chymicall Art’, pp. 1–2).

the elements of God agree. . . . The Philosophers do therefore inquire after the generative Nature, which may be able to generate metals, that they cleanse it, and make it a hundred thousand times more potent in tincture than it was at first in Nature.²³

For the esoteric alchemists, then, the practical, physical aspects of chemical transformation were secondary to the invisible internal transformation from human subject to godlike agent, and were meant to provide a means of objectifying and understanding this mysterious process. One could then argue that esoteric alchemy became a type of objective correlative for the hopes and endeavours of alchemical philosophers towards spiritual transmutation and perfection.

John Read thus explains that alchemy was 'a philosophical system which was concerned alike with the formation of inanimate substances and the still more formidable mysteries of life.'²⁴ One of the most formidable mysteries that occupied many Renaissance intellectuals was the relationship among human beings, the material order and the divine, although not necessarily the *fact* of this relationship but rather its character and purpose. Many scholars, like Ficino, found an entrance into this mystery through the occult in general and alchemy in particular, for this latter art takes for granted an obscured though undeniable symbiosis between God and man which, if recognised and orchestrated correctly, would unleash untold power to order nature for the benefit of all.

Mebane can therefore assert that 'philosophical occultism carried to its logical extreme the humanists' affirmation of the power of human

²³ 'Quem Philosophi lapidem quaerunt, est spiritus invisibilis & impalpabilis, est tincture & spiritus tingens. . . . Est ligamentum elementorum, medium atque vinculum, quod elementa auri fecit esse Concordia. . . . Petunt ergo Philosophi naturam eam generativam quae metalla generare poterit, ut eam mundificent, & in tinctura reddant potentiorem centies milles, magis quam prius in natura sua fuerit. . . .' (pseudo-Ficino 'De Arte Chimica', p. 177, translation in 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', p. 12).

²⁴ John Read, *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Art* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1947), p. 1.

beings to control both their own personalities and the world around them.²⁵ We can once again appeal to Haydn for support of this view, for he states that ‘the occult philosophers and magical scientists had all cherished the legend of the “Philosopher’s Stone” – had envisioned the discovery of a single formula which would reduce man’s search for knowledge to a principle of unity leading to the mastery of Nature.’²⁶

It seems then that esoteric alchemy was much more than an abstract, quasi-religious philosophy. Thus Angela Voss argues that ‘The aim is to render oneself more receptive, to refine perception and sensibility and, most importantly, to bring the *physical* dimension into harmony with the purified mind.’²⁷ Although this may at first seem to contradict the earlier point concerning the supremacy of *metaphysical* contemplation, reference to the ‘Ficino’ treatise goes some way towards explaining the paradox which informs the relationship between the material and the spiritual, between flesh and the divine:

And because we have said above that heaven ought to be joined with earth, there arises this question: whether heaven ought to descend to the earth, or the earth ought to ascend up to heaven? It is most certain that the earth cannot ascend, unless heaven first descends, but the earth is said to be sublimed up to heaven, when being dissolved in its own spirit, it is at length made one thing with it. I will satisfy you with this similitude: the Son of God descending into the virgin, and there flesh, a formed man is born, who when he had for our salvation shown us the way of truth, having suffered and died for us, after the resurrection returneth into the heavens. Where earth, that is, humanity, was exalted above all the circles of the world, and placed in the intellectual heaven of the most Holy Trinity.²⁸

²⁵ Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age*, p. 3.

²⁶ Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance*, p. 185.

²⁷ Voss, ‘The Natural Magic of Marsilio Ficino’, p. 27.

It is only as the heavenly takes on the baseness of flesh, and as the physical is absorbed into the spirit, that man can be said to have attained true transformation. While the contradiction may seem to render the hypothesis impossibly abstruse, if not absurd, Ficino and other learned occultists of the time believed that this transcendent union of 'above' and 'below', of 'higher' and 'lower', was possible, although not uncomplicated. While pseudo-Ficino warns that 'such a tie cannot be easily had', he concedes that 'Sometimes the spirit is the life of the soul, sometime the soul is the life of the spirit. Again those two are the life of the body. The spirit is also the tie of the soul and the body, and as it were the ethereal chariot or vehicle of the soul, which spreads abroad the virtue of the soul through the whole body'.²⁹ So, the spirit without a body is superfluous, while a body without a soul is nothing more than an effigy. The union of God and man, on the other hand, is the informing power behind all of nature, and indeed the universe. While difficult and elusive, this was the tie or union sought by all sincere adepts. Yet, it was not enough merely to cerebrated about it. It was only in 'doing' and 'acting' that the power of nature could be harnessed. Taking man beyond merely recognising and accepting the cosmic bond between himself and deity, the knowledge of the microcosm-macrocosm operation of the world had to translate into practical wisdom, touching

²⁸ 'Et quoniam supra coelum cum terra debere conjungi diximus, oritur haec quaestio: An coelum descendere debeat terram, vel terra ascendere debeat ad coelum? Certum est terram non posse ascendere, nisi prius coelum descenderit: terra autem in coelum sublimari dicitur, quando spiritu proprio solute tandem cum eo una res efficitur. Hac similitudine tibi satisfaciam: Filius Dei delapsus in virginem, ibique caro figuratus, homo nascitur: qui cum nobis propter nostram salutem veritatis viam demonstrasset, pro nobis passus & mortuus, post resurrectionem in coelos remeat. Ubi terra, hoc est humanitas exaltata est super omnes circulos Mundi, & in coelo intellectuali sanctissimae Trinitatis est collocata' (pseudo-Ficino, 'De Arte Chimica', p. 179, translation in 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', p. 17).

²⁹ 'Modo spiritus est vita animae: anima vita est spiritus: Rursus illa duo vita sunt corporis. Etiam spiritus nodus est animae & corporis, & tanquam aethereus animae currus vehiculumque, quod virtutem animae per totum corpus disseminet. . . . Tale autem ligamentum not potest facile haberi' (pseudo-Ficino, 'De Arte Chimica', p. 177, translation in 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', pp. 12–13).

on man's place and purpose within the world, thus contributing to the overall symmetry of creation.

Renaissance occult humanists believed that by imitating God, one's soul could be regenerated and restored to the pristine condition God initially intended for it. But even more than this, they held that this revitalisation of the soul – what Stanton Linden refers to as 'an internal, salvationist process'³⁰ – should produce a positive transformation of the external world. Thus, 'To realize our divine potential we must, like God, exercise our powers in creative acts through which we reproduce in the external world the perfection we have come to see in our own minds.'³¹ The potential of which Mebane speaks here is relevant to the occultist humanists' optimism about man's innate capacity to attain the power towards self-perfection, and their belief that self-fashioning was but one of the creative acts by which we not only imitate God, but also restore the divine image – and the power which attends it – that was expunged from human nature when Adam ceded authority to Satan. This idea of self-fashioning presupposes (1) that a human being is to some extent a work-in-progress, or what pseudo-Ficino termed 'in rough draughts, as I may say, as yet unformed';³² and (2) that man has the godlike capacity to create himself, and is, in fact, a co-creator with God of his own being and destiny.³³ In light of this, pseudo-Ficino's seemingly inscrutable pronouncements take on an important significance:

I do certainly know that only a human soul is divine light, created according to the image of the word, the cause of causes, and the first pattern; marked with the substance of the seal of God: and

³⁰ Stanton Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), p. 8.

³¹ Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age*, p. 11.

³² Pseudo-Ficino, 'De Arte Chimica', p. 174, translation in 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', p. 6 ('crudis, ut ita dixerim, lineamentis, adhuc ineffigiatam').

whose impression is the eternal word. . . . Yet the omnipotent God out of his ineffable bounty, would have second causes to preside over this worldly fabric, that whosoever does move themselves, does also give to others the power of moving.³⁴

Ficino and many others like him welcomed the optimism with which man was imaged in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, especially the assumed promise of power that was latent in nature and available to those who achieved access to it. Indeed, the writings of 'Hermes Trismegistus' gave impetus to the rapidly proliferating idea of Man-as-Magus. Occult philosophers adhered firmly to the notion that the true magician would be endowed with supernatural ability to accomplish the restoration of man to his prelapsarian power. In other words, if the magician co-operates with the omnipotent deity, he will be able to appropriate to himself the insight and the power to re-establish the 'links' which existed – though latently – between things terrestrial and things divine.

The intervention of the magus thus allows for the integration of the lower spheres of temporal and spatial materiality with the higher realms of principal Ideas. This integration in turn activates the full potential of

³³ Referring to God, pseudo-Ficino explains that 'others have asserted [that He is] an intellectual and fiery ispirit, having no form but transforming itself [sic] into so ever it would and co-equalizing to all things universally. Who in a manifold way is as it were joined to his creatures. Again going forth from that his infinity, eternity and omnipotence, he by a fervent love, sincere faith and solid hope may be imbosomed in the purified minds of men' ('Quem alii spiritum intellectualem asseruere & igneum, non habentem formam, sed transformantem se in quaecunqve voluerit & coaequantem se universis. Qui ratione multiplici quodammodo creaturis suis annectitur. Rursus eas sua infinita aeternitate ac omnipotentia excedens fervido amore, sincera fide, & spe solida, mentibus hominum expiatis insinuari possit'; pseudo-Ficino, 'De Arte Chimica', p. 175, translation in 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', p. 7).

³⁴ 'Ego certe scio tantum animam humanam lucem esse divinam ad imaginem verbi, causae causarum primi exemplaris, creatam, substantia sigilloque Dei figuratam: cujus character est verbum aeternum. . . . Voluit tamen omnipotens Deus ex ineffabili bonitate sua huic mundanae fabricae secundas causas praeesse, ut quaecunqve se ipso moveat, dent etiam caeteris movendi potentiam' (pseudo-Ficino, 'De Arte Chimica', p. 176, translation in 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', p. 11).

the physical world. Accordingly, 'to perform magic is nothing other than to marry the world'.³⁵ Thus Ficino writes in one of his letters that man has the power to 'create the heavens and what is in them himself, if he could obtain the tools and the heavenly material'.³⁶ The true magus is concerned with the organisation and interaction of cosmic correspondences, which, if correctly employed, will result in the experiential knowledge which translates into power over nature. However, the prerequisite of this kind of magic is a pure and altruistic intention on the part of the practitioner. Thus Kurt Seligmann argues that:

True alchemy was infinitely superior to a craft or science, for transmutation could not be produced by ability alone; neither was knowledge by itself adequate to attain mastery. Moral virtues were required, and only when he had attained the sublime state of perfection could man utilize the wonders of nature.³⁷

He goes on to quote from Albertus Magnus' *On Alchemy* to substantiate this point, illustrating the austere existence expected of those who claimed to be true adepts:

The alchemist must be silent and discreet. To no one should he reveal the results of his operations. He shall live in loneliness, remote from men. His house should have two or three rooms consecrated entirely to the work. He shall choose the right hour for his operations. He must be patient and possess perseverance. He will operate according to the rules: the trituration, the

³⁵ Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age*, p. 46. Cesare Vasoli, 'The Renaissance Concept of Philosophy', in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Schmidt and Skinner, pp. 256-92, points out that Ficino regarded 'the entire universe – the heavens, the elements, plants, animals and man himself – as subject to cosmic influences acting through sympathies and antipathies' (p. 68).

³⁶ Cit. in biographical introduction to *Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 1: 6.

³⁷ Kurt Seligmann, *The History of Magic* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), p. 130.

sublimation, the fixation, the calcinations, the solution, the distillation and the coagulation. He will use only glass vessels or glazed pottery. He must be rich enough to afford the expense which such works demand. And finally, he will avoid all contact with princes and rulers.³⁸

The last two points of this directive underscore the importance of freedom from obligation and compulsion. The alchemist was to be answerable only to the Work and to God. Thus the most rigorous self-discipline, even self-denial, was a pre-requisite to the successful exercise of this art. As Thomas points out, 'Alchemy was a difficult spiritual quest, since transmutation could not be accomplished until the adept had purged himself of all vices, particularly of covetousness; that is to say, he could not make gold until he had ceased to want to do so.'³⁹ Ficino himself adhered to the strictures of asceticism: 'To Ficino, discipline was essential to the spiritual life. Following the example of Pythagoras, he was a vegetarian who encouraged his followers not to eat cooked food, and throughout the year to rise with the sun, or an hour or two earlier. He led a life of abstinence and chastity.'⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210. Although Ben Jonson uses the same kind of alchemical jargon in his city satire, *The Alchemist*, to lampoon the idiocy and gullibility of both the con-men and the dupes, it would be a mistake to assume any similar levity to Albertus Magnus' work, which was an accepted and respected scholarly treatise.

³⁹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 768. This understanding of the virtue of the true magus is dramatised by Ben Jonson in *The Alchemist*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (London: A & C Black Publishers, 1991), II. iii.97–104:

SURLY: Why, I have heard, he must be a *homo frugi*,
 A pious, holy, and religious man,
 One free from mortal sin, a very virgin.
 MAMMON: . . . He, honest wretch,
 A notable, superstitious, good soul,
 Has worn his knees bare, and his slippers bald,
 With prayer, and fasting for it [the Stone] . . .

⁴⁰ Biographical introduction to *Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 1: 5.

Like many alchemical adepts, Ficino believed that as the supreme Creator-Alchemist, God was believed to sanction and empower only those who strived to imitate him. Burke explains that:

The true sage, the magus, cleansed of evil, has knowledge of God and of the truth; and in regaining his original divinity, he reacquires an intimate knowledge of nature and an ability to employ the powers of nature for beneficial purposes. This ability to control nature was the goal of the serious Renaissance magus.⁴¹

Especially among alchemical adepts, it was understood that the power of nature and the ability to control that power was to be to the good of all humanity.⁴² In co-operation with God and nature, the alchemist as magus was seen as facilitating the process towards the perfection of the world as initially intended before the Fall interrupted this progression. Thus Charles Webster maintains that for the early modern thinker, ‘The true end of knowledge . . . is a restoration and re-investing (in great part) of man to the sovereignty and power . . . which he had in his first state of creation’.⁴³

In keeping with the belief that God was the primary alchemist, it was held that Adam as God’s initial successor, was ‘the first and most knowledgeable alchemical adept’, and that he was endowed with extraordinary wisdom prior to the Fall.⁴⁴ Ever since that cataclysmic reduction, which frustrated God’s plan, alchemists had attempted to recapture the wisdom which Adam had forfeited to pride and an inappropriate hunger for power, and to reinstate the divine blueprint. As heirs of the tradition inaugurated by the prelapsarian Adam, alchemists

⁴¹ Burke, ‘Hermetism as a Renaissance World View’, p. 101.

⁴² Seligmann argues in favour of this view of the occult practitioner: ‘We think of the magus as the possessor of occult secrets, a master of esoteric wisdom, who makes use of this knowledge for his own good as well as for that of his fellow men’ (*History of Magic*, p. 307).

⁴³ Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform 1626–1660* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 17.

believed that they were working towards the redemption of the fallen world, obeying God in evoking the Golden Age of perfect and pure knowledge. In turn, this knowledge would effect the power necessary to control nature and even destiny.

Renaissance occultists were confident that they would attain to the power to transform themselves after the pattern of their divine exemplar. This power would then extend to restore a fallen and degenerate world to its prelapsarian harmony and perfection. In other words, these adepts had as their objective the re-creation of a Golden Age of perfect knowledge and power, in which humans once again took their rightful place alongside God in ruling the universe. For the early modern alchemist-mage, this goal was as elusive as the Philosopher's Stone. Various factors reticulated to dim the dream and, eventually, stifle it: the advancement of scepticism, which argued that one cannot know the world as it really is; the Scientific Revolution phenomenon of empiricism, which limited speculation and *a priori* knowledge in favour of observed analysis; and the displacement of traditional, holistic lore by the distinctions among physics, chemistry and biology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁵

In his discussion of Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Mebane explains:

Prelapsarian humanity possessed godlike creative powers and was closely akin to the Son of God, the Logos who created the visible world. . . . [The] effects of [the] Fall can be overcome in a

⁴⁴ Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Ideas and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London: British Library, 1994), p. 13. Shumaker explains that 'Accounts [of the history of alchemy] claim that the secrets were revealed to Adam by God and were passed down to Adam's son, Seth, to the patriarchs' (*Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, p. 166). Reference to Thomas reinforces this point: 'even Newton subscribed to the hermetic notion that the true knowledge of the universe had been earlier revealed by God to the ancients, the *prisci theology*' (*Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 268).

⁴⁵ Keith Thomas provides a detailed discussion of the causes for the decline in the popularity of magic and its various trajectories in the seventeenth century in his final chapter on 'The Decline of Magic' (*Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 767–800).

regenerative experience which restores divine knowledge and power. . . . Hermes Trismegistus proclaims that the power of human beings to perform magic is a sign of this inherent divinity.⁴⁶

Ingegno can thus argue that Ficino held to the belief that man has the ability 'under certain conditions, to attain supracosmic levels, to command the elements and to prophesy. The process of ascent was complementary to magic; the two were interwoven and restricted to the initiated'.⁴⁷ Through the true magic of alchemy, then, the world would be transmuted from dross to the splendour and superiority of alchemical gold, as pseudo-Ficino asserts towards the end of his treatise on alchemy:

[They] say and speak the greatest truth, that all the secret of Nature lies hid in the Venus of the physical Gold. . . . And I say unto you by God the creator of heaven, it is one of the greatest secrets. Furthermore, the very knowledge of the stone is no other thing than the purification of the earth, or of Nature. . . . And this comprehends the whole art in short, if you have understood Nature. You may of yourself by divine grace discover many things like unto these. Praise God for all ages of ages.⁴⁸

Although many would claim that alchemy has ultimately failed in both its quest for the universal elixir and as a sustainable philosophical system, many others would argue that the goal of alchemy has been realised: physically, in the ability of nuclear physics to transform one substance into another; and, metaphorically, in the upsurge of New Age movements

⁴⁶ Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Ingegno, 'The New Philosophy of Nature', p. 238.

⁴⁸ 'In Venere auri Philosophici totum naturae arcanum inquit delitescere, & dicunt verissimum. . . . Et dico tibi per Deum Creatorem coeli, quod est unum de secretis maximum. Amplius ipsa Lapidis scientia nihil est aliud, quam terrae aut naturae purificatio. . . . Et hoc totam artem brevibus complectitur, si naturam intellexeris. Plura his similia per te ipsum divina gratia poteris deprehendere. Lauda Deum per omnia saecula saeculorum' (pseudo-Ficino, 'De Arte Chimica', p. 183, translation in 'Concerning the Chymicall Art', p. 24).

which give hope for holistic well-being in relationship with Nature. Oblivious of these future developments, early modern alchemists were adamant, in their own era, about their perceived task. Their attempts at developing a system of knowledge that was both practical and philosophical would, they believed, give them the power to transform not only the metaphysical realm, but also the physical. Perhaps their dream was only deferred.