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Get Agrippa: A Comment on Chris Miles's "Occult Retraction"

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Comment and Response

Get Agrippa: A Comment on Chris Miles's "Occult Retraction" by Joshua Gunn, Morgan Reitmeyer, David Blakesley, & William A. Covino

When I was thirteen years of age we all went on a party of pleasure to the bath near Thonon; the inclemency of the weather obliged us to remain a day confined to the Inn. In this house I chanced to find a volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa. I opened it with apathy; the theory he attempts to demonstrate and the wonderful facts which he relates soon changed this feeling into enthusiasm.

—Victor Frankenstein (Shelley)

Musing on the origins of his interest in science, the protagonist of Mary Shelley's famed novel *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* identified the occult philosophy of the sixteenth-century magician Henry Cornelius Agrippa as his earliest inspiration. When the young Frankenstein shared his enthusiasm for magic with his father, however, the elder responded "My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash" (Shelley). Eventually, confesses junior, his interest in the modern sciences would eclipse his passion for occultism, thereby better enabling him to penetrate the "secrets of nature" and become something of a secular god. Of course, we know how *that* story ends.

After reading Chris Miles's recent essay, "Occult Retraction: Cornelius Agrippa and the Paradox of Magical Language," we could not help but recall Frankenstein's early interest in Agrippa ("Occult Retraction"). More importantly, however, Shelley's spiel also helps us to summarize by analogy Miles's critique of recent work in rhetorical studies on magic and the occult. In a spirit homologous to the hegemony of science and atrophy of faith in *Frankenstein*, Miles argues Kenneth Burke, William A. Covino, Joshua Gunn, and Brian Vickers have misapplied a contemporary understanding of language to pre-modern magical texts. The consequence is a misreading of the rhetoric of the Western magical tradition. In this rejoinder we argue that Miles is unnecessarily polemical and has misread—or did not read entirely—the

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work he critiques. Although there are certainly exceptions in the scholarship Miles indicts, we argue there is more in common between his approach to occult discourse and recent work among rhetorical scholars than he permits. In short, we argue that Miles has staged a fight over the corpus of Agrippa when none is warranted.

Reduced to its most basic structure, Miles's argument is as follows: (1) The shared linguistic assumptions of Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers (with Foucault) fail to account for Agrippa's contradictory and paradoxical rhetorical strategies; (2) Agrippa was the most influential and widely read Renaissance magus; therefore, (3) Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers's work on magic and rhetoric is fundamentally flawed. Presumably, Miles advances this argument in order to suggest Agrippa's understanding of language was far ahead of its time, and, hence, that the Renaissance magus requires due consideration for any rhetorical theory of the occultism. We address each claim in what follows.

According to Miles, the dominant understanding of occult rhetoric relies on a flawed distinction between "fluid" and "fixed" views of language. Because Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers address occultism as representing a "fixed" discourse, magical language has become a "stereotyped caricature" (Miles "Occult Retraction" 435). A close reading of Agrippa's work, however, reveals a "slyly occulted theory of language" (439) that can account for "a great deal of paradoxical and ambiguous play" (438, emphasis in original) in Agrippa's prose: human language cannot impart ultimate (spiritual) truths. Miles argues that Agrippa's occult rhetoric "is *instructional* in the sense that it marks language itself as untrustworthy and unreliable" by its own example (438, emphasis added). For this reason, Agrippa's discourse cannot be characterized as harboring a *correspondent* theory of magical language. Consequently, Miles concludes, contemporary scholarship on occult rhetoric is "simple" and "misleading" and based on "illusory assumptions."

We have no major dispute with Miles's reading of Agrippa's work, nor with the suggestion that Agrippa's rhetoric is instructive and intentionally paradoxical.¹ Indeed, in a book-length treatment of magic and rhetoric that Miles unfortunately overlooked, Covino pre-empts a number of Miles's observations about Agrippa's contradictory prose (Covino). "Repeatedly," writes Covino, Agrippa "insists that because human language is susceptible to multiple interpretations, it becomes matter for strategic contentions instead of truth. . . ." For Covino, Agrippa's "contradictions inform the magician's truth, a truth located in the motion of the imagination. . ." (55). Covino's and Miles's readings are consistent with Gunn's argument that the Western magical tradition is fundamentally Platonic in character because it stresses the inability of human language to communicate

¹There are quibbles, however, as there are ample passages in Agrippa's work to suggest that words let us "hack" reality, as it were, when we understand they are symbolic articulations of the virtues/essences of things. For example, see Agrippa 208–213. For a more nuanced, book-length reading of Agrippa's understanding of language, see Lehrich.

spiritual truth (Gunn 56). Insofar as Agrippa was well versed in Neo-Platonic thought, it makes sense that his rhetoric of paradox and contradiction formally resembles the function of Platonic dialectic, as both are designed to catapult the spiritual aspirant into “perfect transparency by supra-linguistic communication with God,” principally by using language against itself (Lehrich 208).

Where Miles seems to misstep, however, is by uncharitably decontextualizing the work he criticizes. For example, his construction of the distinction between “fixed” and “fluid” views of language is a straw person. Throughout his polemic Miles assumes that the fixed view of language is a theory of *correspondence*, or something like iconicity,² which is only one of many forms that this view might take.³ Perhaps another way to frame differing views on the relationship between language, meaning, and the world is by recourse to a television show that trucked in the occult, *The X-Files*. The motto of this cult favorite, “the truth is out there,” is an oblique but catchy summation of the fixed view: something external to the human mind—some presence—guarantees meaning or truth, putting an end to the cycling of signifiers (e.g., the “transcendental signified,” God, brute reality, and so forth).⁴ To say that a magician adheres to a fixed view of language is simply shorthand for saying that he or she believes there is a kind of “anchor” external to language that stabilizes meaning, an anchor that is productive of spiritual insight or truth, and so on. Such a belief could lead one to assume magical words vibrate at the same frequency of the material objects they signify and, thus, are closer to the “truth” than other words. Such a belief could also set one in pursuit of correspondent vocabulary or “pure language” that better communicates the truth than extant vocabularies, the kind of “alphabet of nature” pursued by Giovanni Pico, the Kabbalists, and the Theosophists just to name a few (Covino 51; Gunn 70–76). Conviction in a spiritual anchor, however, can also accompany a belief that it is *inaccessible* to human language, as was the case with Plato and Agrippa. Unfortunately, it seems that Miles reduces the fixed view of language to a simple correspondent or “identity” theory for the convenience of summary dismissal.

²See Leff and Sachs.

³It is instructive to underscore how Vickers opens the essay that Miles argues outlines the “assumptions” Burke, Covino, and Gunn apparently also share: “It is my contention that the occult and the experimental scientific traditions can be differentiated in several ways: in terms of goals, methods, and assumptions. I do not maintain that they were exclusive opposites or that a Renaissance scientist’s allegiance can be settled on an either/or, or yes/no, basis. Rather, in many instances, especially the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a spectrum of beliefs and attitudes can be distinguished, a continuum from, say, absolutely magical to absolutely mechanistic poles, along which thinkers place themselves at various points. . . .” (Vickers 95). Such remarks are hardly an index of a vulgar, “binary opposition” that Miles argues is common to all the authors he critiques. Owing to the fact that each author critiques different eras of the occult tradition toward very different ends, it also seems to us rather uncharitable to assert Vickers’s “assumptions” are channeling Burke, Covino, and Gunn (Miles, “Occult Retraction” 449).

⁴The critique, of course, is Derrida’s. See especially pages 1–73.

Of course, subject to deconstruction, we would agree that the so-called fluid view turns out to be “fixed” in the end—that *all* language is inescapably logocentric.⁵ Such a conclusion does not obviate, however, the utility of speaking in continuum or degree, or even of speaking in terms of useful shorthand binaries. It is practical, in other words, to characterize those who subscribe to the fixed view as hankering toward realism, or deity, or so on, while those who gravitate toward the fluid view as embracing Derridian deconstruction, Rorty’s pragmatic linguistics, or even a melancholic atheism. Such labels do not commit anyone, however, to an intractable, vulgar binarism. Nor do they license the impetuous lumping of Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers together in the service of a polemic.

Even if the theories of Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers put them into some kind of nascent confederacy, we would resist the view that these thinkers’ theories break down into a discrimination between the primitive and postmodern, as Miles suggests. Such a crude analytical tendency may be more common in the wider scholarly community—among Medieval and Renaissance scholars, for example—but we submit this is much less typical of scholars who are trained to attend to the complexities and nuances of language and its use. Rhetoricians should not be held responsible for the wider, reductive analytic habits of the academy as a whole vis-à-vis occultism.

Moving to Miles’s second and third claims: for the sake of argument, even if we grant that Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers’s understanding of magical rhetoric was reducible to correspondence—the pursuit of iconicity, a pure language, and so on—does this mean that their work is therefore fundamentally flawed? Miles reasons:

Agrippa is the most influential of all Renaissance magicians, and yet his understanding of magic and its relationship to language (and rhetorical practice) cannot be characterized [as fixed] And if Agrippa’s understanding cannot be characterized in such a way, why should the understanding of those who follow him or build on him? (“Occult Retraction” 453–454)

Presumably, “those who follow him or build on him” include every magician in the Western occult tradition subsequent to Agrippa, a rather sweeping claim. In light of numerous counterexamples before and after the Renaissance magus made his mark (e.g., alchemists, Kabbalists, some famous modern Wiccans), Miles is advancing a classic exception fallacy.⁶ Insofar as Agrippa believes in God, we are not convinced his rhetoric is particularly exceptional. And in light of Covino’s

⁵This is a common reading of Derrida’s view. See, for example, Howells (128). Derrida says “as much” — or if you prefer, “as little” (18–26). Covino and Gunn’s books begin and conclude with similar observations, respectively. See Covino (9) and Gunn (229).

⁶Miles has argued similarly elsewhere. In *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, Gunn argues that the rhetorical dynamics of occultism changed dramatically in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a consequence of mass media technologies. In a book review, however, Miles indicts Gunn for failing to examine Agrippa’s philosophy—a system developed three centuries before Gunn’s period of study. See Miles, “Rev. of.”

work on Agrippa over a decade ago, we are not so sure Miles's criticism is exceptionally novel, either.⁷

If Agrippa's occult philosophy is consistent with a "fixed" view of language ("truth is out there"), and if the reasoning that links Miles's claims together is specious, then we are tempted to conclude his argument is perhaps motivated by an offended antiquarian sensibility. Such a conclusion would be further supported by the fact that Miles advances no affirmative theory of magical rhetoric, but rather seems content to work within Agrippa's texts or to amend concepts developed by Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers.⁸ Tellingly, as Miles arrives at a conclusion he stops short of showing readers what, exactly, his positive contribution might be: After suggesting his reading of Agrippa "dovetails" with Lehrich's, Miles concludes that "ineffability is the end point" of Agrippa's playful and contradictory rhetoric "rather than its beginning. The significance of this distinction for rhetoric is, I would argue, important" ("Occult Retraction" 452). Such a statement begs the question: What *is* the "significance of this distinction?" Is the issue that Agrippa has been misunderstood? What or where does an attention to Agrippa's particular philosophy get us? Do magical theory and practice in the Renaissance have something to tell us about the history of rhetoric? Does Agrippa's philosophy help us discern something about contemporary understandings of language use? Unfortunately, Miles never provides an answer to these or similar questions.

Regardless, we will not give in to the temptation to conclude that Miles's scholarship is merely a sensational philippic, for implicit in his polemic is a deeper warrant that is shared by similar appraisals of "disinterested approaches" to spiritual topics: as another kind of police once sang, rhetoricians have ignored the fact that "we are spirits in the material world."⁹ In other words, Miles seems to suggest that Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers's secularist or agnostic fidelities blind them to a more nuanced and complex understanding of magic and rhetoric. Miles's invocation of Burke in the introduction of his essay makes this implied reasoning easier to notice:

Much recent investigation into the relationship between rhetoric and magic has been premised on the assumption that magic is, in one way or another, linguistically mistaken. So, for example, Kenneth Burke, in attempting to stake out the territory of rhetoric, concludes that magic, although apparently related to

⁷Miles's conclusion, for example, first appears in Lehrich's study in the context of a discussion of Derrida's philosophy: "... it is not intrinsically odd that the sixteenth century philosophical movement which was almost entirely destroyed by modern philosophy and science—I refer of course to magic—still haunts the margins of philosophical memory. . . . It is worth considering the periodic surfacing of magical thought in philosophy after Descartes . . . , which might provoke us to wonder whether magic has always played the role of modernism's ghostly other" (Lehrich 222).

⁸For example, Miles argues that Agrippa's rhetoric is better characterized as employing "instructional paradox" rather than Gunn's discussion of a "generative paradox" (which do not seem mutually exclusive), and he concludes drawing on Burke's discussion of paradox.

⁹See Stark.

rhetoric in its use of language to try to effect change, fundamentally “gets the whole subject backwards” . . . due to its “mistaken transference” of the rhetorical model to attempt to “induce motion in things” rather than people. What Burke calls “word magic” . . . is thus both “erroneous” and “derived” . . . (“Occult Retraction” 433)

Miles’s reading of Burke here seems unintentionally ironic. First, Burke is lamenting the same magic/science binary that Miles decries, arguing that rhetoric must be understood as an art, rooted in language, that requires its own categorization independent of that binary. Second, Burke is suggesting that those who discuss rhetoric *as magic* get it “backwards” because what “primitives” termed magic was better described as *rhetoric*. His point is not to suggest that magic is “linguistically mistaken” or barbarous in respect to a “denotative fallacy” or because of some “identity between signifier and signified,” as Miles implies (“Occult Retraction” 434). Rather, Burke is arguing that what we think of as magic today is derived from rhetoric, “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (*Rhetoric of Motives* 41). Burke is saying that putting spells on people with words came before putting spells on things with rituals.

Why is this clarification of Burke on the primacy of rhetoric important? The answer is decidedly (and admittedly) secular: in *A Rhetoric of Motives* Burke argued against describing persuasion in magical terms because he conceived of rhetoric as an inherently humanistic enterprise (we stress “magic” takes many different forms in the works of Burke, however). Rhetoric’s effects are real and continually born anew (*Rhetoric of Motives* 43). For an avowed agnostic like Burke, rhetoric requires no supernatural explanation, even if one is interested in discourse concerning the supernatural.¹⁰ Disbelief in the one does not require an abandonment of the other. Much like attending to a Freudian slip, an attention to Miles’s (mis)reading here helps us to uncover his own occulted argument: Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers are mistaken because they do not believe in magic. Or alternately stated, these authors’ apparent scientific commitments must assuredly blind them to alternative understandings of occult discourse that lay beyond facile binaries and contemporary schemes of intelligibility. With perhaps the exception of Vickers, the irony of such a suggestion is that these authors have common cause with Miles in arguing against any scientific view dismissive of “magic,” broadly construed.

Indeed, one of the reasons contemporary scholars have been interested in studying magical beliefs and practices is because these beliefs and practices confound common (or at least hegemonic) assumptions about the world and human reality. We think Miles makes a *good* case that Agrippa’s occult philosophy is complex and resistant to settled worldviews, both in his time and in ours. Yet, we take umbrage with Miles’s argument that the work of Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Vickers is

¹⁰As Burke clearly was. See Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*.

misleading and simplistic because it contrasts a “‘primitive,’ magical understanding of the relationship between the signifier and the signified with a more sophisticated ‘scientific’ or ‘postmodern’ appreciation of the fluidity of language” (“Occult Retraction” 453). A closer examination of the work of each of these authors demonstrates the distinction between “fluid” and “fixed” is simply not the vulgar binary Miles supposes it to be. Hence, the “postmodern” or “scientific” agenda Miles finds lurking in contemporary work on occult rhetoric is a paper tiger.

Indeed, to suggest that Burke, Covino, and Gunn have written book-length monographs on magical, occult, and religious topics only to dismiss them as an “‘Other’ with which to define their own discipline” is not only unfair or uncharitable; it is simply wrong (Miles, “Occult Retraction” 453–454). Burke does not urge the study of spiritual and religious rhetoric only to dismiss it or reify the “naturalistic” view of language. Burke introduces *The Rhetoric of Religion* by suggesting “whether or not there is a realm of the ‘supernatural,’ there are *words* for it,” and these words are deserving of study to arrive at a “truer understanding of language,” or better, an understanding of “language as motive” (7, 10). In his *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy*, Covino sets out to “construct a suggestive framework for appreciating the magic of the composing imagination,” and this by attempting to “cast out prohibitive distinctions between the magical and nonmagical . . .” (9). Similarly, in his *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, Gunn compares the contemporary discourse of the theoretical humanities to the popular, occult rhetoric of the twentieth century, not to dismiss them, but to show how both operate in respect to a discriminating, social logic of secrecy rooted in all language games. While we readily acknowledge differences of purpose and focus, these authors wander *with* Miles in the scholarly quest. Considered as rambling together, Burke, Covino, Gunn, and Miles are suggesting that the supposed Other of the occult, just like Frankenstein’s monster, is us.¹¹

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¹¹For a recent, exemplary work investigating the occult stranger within, see Lehrich, 2009.

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Response: A Quick Game of Rho-Sham-Bo with the Four Horsemen of the Apophasis by Chris Miles

One of the principal charges that appears to be leveled by Gunn et al. against my *RSQ* article is that it demonstrates that I have "misread" or perhaps "not read entirely" the work of Kenneth Burke (1969, 1970), William Covino (1992), Joshua Gunn (2005), and Brian Vickers (2003). I will deal with each of these authors in reverse alphabetical order and then conclude with some remarks concerning novelty and grand, unified theories.

Brian Vickers clearly makes my four disputants rather uncomfortable. They object to the "impetuous lumping of Burke, Covino, Gunn and Vickers together," but then happily advance their own lumping of Burke, Covino, and Gunn, pointedly exorcised of Vickers, as displaying "common cause" with myself "in arguing against any 'scientistic' view dismissive of 'magic.'" Furthermore, in their 3rd footnote, Gunn et al. complain that it is "rather uncharitable to assert Vickers's 'assumptions' are channeling Burke, Covino, and Gunn." In my article I wrote

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