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# Magic: An Epistemology of the Restoration

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aileen Christensen is a doctoral student at New York University in French literature. She specializes in nineteenth-century and medieval literature, with seventeenth-century fairytales in between. In her dissertation, she studies fairies in Romantic novels that seem to come from early fairytales and medieval romances. She is interested in questions of femininity and fantasy and how magic resurfaces across the centuries in the literary imagination.

*"We began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously."* -Joseph Smith History 1:74

If as latter-day saints, we were forced under the critical gaze of either the *fact position*—as believers in things verifiable by a proof—or the *fairy position*—as "naive" believers in unverifiable things—we would have to choose the fairy position.[1] The contemporary French philosopher Bruno Latour uses the terms *fact position* and *fairy position* to describe the attitudes of theorists. The critical standpoint of the fairy position describes belief as a fetishist notion and an obvious fantasy, which goes against the sense of realism in spirituality that is necessary for people of faith. However, in the context of the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ, we cannot rely on facts and proofs for our sense of the real. Instead, we need something more fairy-like and magical to underpin our faith and give us access to revelatory knowledge—knowledge that isn't available through other positivist methods. This is what places us in the fairy position.

The word *magic* is rarely discussed in the Church: in fact, it never appears in our English scriptures. But the orientation required to be a person of faith is rather magical. Perhaps we don't use the word *magic* in order to avoid the denigrating gaze of the fairy position, even though religion and magic have not always been separated. In early Christianity, magic was the prerogative of the Church—at least white magic, as opposed to black magic or pagan magic. Likewise, especially in the early history of our Church, tales about magic and vocabulary related to magic were essential for explaining the strange and esoteric processes of divine revelation. Because of these rhetorical strategies, we can begin to reread the story of the Restoration as a magical tale. Ultimately, this tale construes magic as the method for restoring knowledge and announcing Joseph's calling as a prophet. This is not just magic as tricks and deception, or magic as a synonym for something wonderful or miraculous, but rather this is the very magic of fairies in the literary and folkloric world.

[1] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225–48.

Today, magic is usually regarded as antithetical to knowledge, just as fairies are opposed to facts in Latour's explanation of critical theory. Although the magical aspects of nineteenth-century thought and specifically the practices of those involved in the Restoration—from Joseph's use of seer stones and Oliver Cowdery's divining rods to the Smith family parchments—are fairly common knowledge,[2] twenty-first century positivism dismisses magic as part of a defunct way of thinking. Magic is contextualized as something potentially plausible two centuries ago, but something without bearing on our contemporary context. Certainly, magical vocabulary from literary and folk traditions was readily available to the early saints, but magic isn't only pertinent in this historical period. Rather than look at magic as a cultural relic with no connection to our current faith,[3] I suggest we change our definition of magic. If we go back to something more along the lines of the 1828 definition, the closest definition to what the early saints may have believed, we find that magic was more than a supernatural fantasy or an idle sense of delight. Magic was "[t]he art or science of putting into action the power of spirits."[4] Magic was an epistemological mode.

When we conceptualize magic as a spiritual art or science, it continues to have relevance for contemporary revelation. Magic is not simply something that was believable long ago and into the nineteenth century. In fact, even at that time, magic wasn't credible. As the 1828 dictionary definition clarifies, "this art or science is now discarded."[5] Magic was not a wholly acceptable concept for the early saints, and yet it is defined as a way of knowing. Perhaps for us, too, in the twenty-first century, magic is not believable, and yet it opens our minds to spiritual knowledge in ways that other arts or sciences fail to do. We wouldn't use the term *magic* for anything that is generally explicable in human terms. The concept of magic helps us go beyond a worldly understanding and toward greater revelation that wouldn't be possible to imagine otherwise. Magic is a way to understand and articulate the magnificent revelations given to prophets.

In my dissertation research, I study fairies and magic in nineteenth-century French literature. The attitudes toward magic at the time provide rich parallels for the religious experiences of Joseph Smith across the Atlantic. In France, magic was at once a fascinating preoccupation as well as something childish and unreal. The literature across the nineteenth century tracks these inclinations from the fascination with fairytales at the beginning of the century to the occultism of the end of the century. More fairytale collections were published in France in the nineteenth century than in both the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. These were mostly French fairytales written in the late seventeenth-century salons. Some of the most well-respected Romantic writers,

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[2] This is especially thanks to the work of D. Michael Quinn in *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1987).

[3] Michael Mackay and Nicholas Frederick suggest a similar move in their work on seer stones, saying that "Joseph experienced years of religious writing and published scriptural text which uncovered an ancient and sacred past of seer stone use that transformed local folklore in a new kind of religious epistemology," which they argue is still relevant today. (*Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2016), 136.)

[4] Noah Webster, s.v. "magic," *Webstersdictionary1828.com*.

[5] Webster, s.v. "magic," *Webstersdictionary1828.com*.

like Charles Nodier and Théophile Gautier, read fairytales with great interest,[6] but this was also the time when the French fairytales of Charles Perrault and Madame d'Aulnoy were marketed for children rather than their original audience of well-educated adults. Authors were interested in these older magical tales and then rewrote magic into their nineteenth-century works. Fantastic literature, or literature imbued with the supernatural, was very popular at the beginning of the century, and occult literature, centered on esoteric knowledge, grew out of the obsession with magic at the end of the century. People wanted to read about magic, escape into fantasies, and even become magical, like the author Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who became an occultist master.[7] Although magical stories were very popular, the appeal of magic was its strangeness and inaccessibility. Authors and readers don't usually believe in magic in the real world, as evidenced by inquests into folk beliefs in the countryside in nineteenth-century France.[8] But in fiction, readers and writers have the needed distance from the "real" to allow them to marvel and fantasize, without worrying about the folly of the fairy position.

In a climate where magic was everywhere in fiction, religious people could use magical vocabulary to describe their own experiences of sincere belief. Literary descriptions filter into folk experiences and vice versa. Most famously Bernadette Soubirous saw the Virgin Mary several times in a grotto in Lourdes, deep in the countryside in southern France. Bernadette describes the Virgin as bathed in a soft light, tiny as a young girl, and dressed in white.[9] Her account is interchangeable with the apparitions of fairies in fairytales such as "Prince Lutin" by Madame d'Aulnoy. In this story, the young Léandre entered his room and "perceived an extraordinary light that shone in one of the corners of the room."[10] In this magical light, he "was surprised by the presence of a lady whose noble and majestic air left no doubt as to the greatness of her birth."[11] She then introduces herself as the "Kind Fairy." Just as easily, she could have introduced herself as "The Immaculate Conception," with her noble birth, as did the Virgin to Bernadette in the grotto. The embodiment of the supernatural across fairytales and religious experience is often described as a "girl more brilliant than the sun," like the fairytale princess Florinne,[12] or "more beautiful than the sun and the moon" and "white as snow" like Finette Cendron.[13] Magical fairy figures, similar to angels, embody the otherworld of spirits, with their strange and fascinating powers and revelations.

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[6] See the introduction to Charles Perrault, *Contes*, ed. Tony Gheeraert (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012), 71.

[7] Alan W. Raitt, "Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et l'illusionnisme des Symbolistes," *Cahiers de l'AIEF* 12 (1960): 175–87.

[8] Vincent Robert, *La petite-fille de la sorcière: Enquête sur la culture magique des campagnes au temps de George Sand* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2015), 77.

[9] René Laurentin, *Vie de Bernadette* (Paris: Editions Desclee de Brouwer, 1978), 79.

[10] Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, baronne d' Aulnoy, "Le Prince Lutin," in *Contes des fées. Le cabinet des fées*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam and Paris: 1785), 130–31.

[11] Aulnoy, "Le Prince Lutin," 130–31.

[12] Aulnoy, "L'Oiseau bleu," in *Contes des fées. Le cabinet des fées*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam and Paris: 1785), 66.

[13] Aulnoy, "Finette Cendron," in *Contes des fées. Le cabinet des fées*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam and Paris: 1785), 494, 496.

Joseph Smith's experiences, although filtered through a different sort of folklore in the American countryside, reflect fairy apparitions. Joseph Smith's experiences in the Restoration form a narrative similar to Prince Lutin's. Joseph, too, saw the corner of his room brighten when the angel Moroni visited him at night and identified himself as a supernatural messenger. In "Prince Lutin," the story elements that surround the vision of the "Kind Fairy" are even stranger. She first appears to him as a snake, and before he can manage to kill her, "looking at him fixedly, she seemed to be asking him for mercy."[14] He spared her life, protected her, and visited her frequently until the day when she transformed into the womanly figure of a fairy. The snake served as a sign of the supernatural experiences that awaited him. The fairy introduced herself in this highly symbolic form, reminiscent of the Fall, and enticed Léandre with a new sort of knowledge. As a fairy, she offered to turn Léandre into a *lutin*, a kind of fairy creature, which would allow him to be invisible and go around the world in an instant, along with other powers.[15] This snake-fairy, the most magical presence in the story, transformed Léandre into a supernatural being. She changed his identity and endowed him with power.

Many of Joseph Smith's associates suspected a similar sort of magical transformation, also marked by the sign of the serpent. Lucy Harris accused Joseph of being a "grand imposter"[16] when she was searching for the plates on his property and, as she recounts, "a tremendous great black snake stuck up its head before me and commenced hissing at me."[17] Emma's cousins likewise decried Joseph as a "conjurer, a sorcerer,"[18] as well as "a practicing necromancer, a dealer in enchantments and bleeding ghosts."[19] Joseph underwent something like Léandre's experience in literature. Joseph was gaining magical powers to communicate with angels and translate the Book of Mormon. But most people who recognized the magical aspects did so to discredit him. These detractors saw magical signs as falsehoods and deceptions rather than understanding them as a more imaginative way of knowing. Joseph's experiences, like Bernadette's, are told with fairytale symbols and vocabulary. Although this would have been culturally interesting at the time, fairytale signs do not inspire belief when people hold to a positivist mentality. Instead, they signify fiction. And yet, fairytale-like stories are one of the most comprehensible ways to identify Joseph as a prophet and explain his translation work. As strange as it may seem, the very accusations of magic leveled by Joseph's contemporaries should have signaled to them that Joseph had a special role. Since it was clear to these detractors that Joseph had become some sort of magician, they recognized that, like the fairytale Prince Lutin, he had been called by a supernatural force and given strange powers. But unlike Lutin, who was called by a fairy, Joseph was called by God. Whether in the nineteenth or twenty-first centuries, humans are often uncomfortable with the fictitious connotations of magic, but God's mysterious ways nevertheless seem magical. Magical tales allow us to articulate the greater purposes of God. This has long been the case in the

[14] Aulnoy, "Le Prince Lutin," 126–27.
[15] Aulnoy, 131–32.
[16] *Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845*, Book 6, page 9. *The Joseph Smith Papers*. https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/77
[17] Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy Mack Smith History, 1844–1845*, Book 6, page 9. .
[18] Dan Vogel, ed., "Hiel Lewis Rejoinder, 4 June 1879," in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 308.
[19] Dan Vogel, ed., "Joseph Lewis Rejoinder, 11 June 1879," in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 311.

scriptures, even if magical vocabulary is not always obvious at first. If Joseph were in fact a "practicing necromancer," in other words a magician, at least in a rhetorical way, it would strengthen his claim as a prophet in the biblical tradition.

Both Joseph and Moses needed to go beyond their own education and rhetorical mastery in order to receive and communicate revelations. Rather than drill them in elocution or provide intellectual training, God presented a magical solution for both of these prophets. In Exodus 4, after the Lord appeared to Moses and told him to go back to Egypt, Moses doubts, saying, "they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice" (Exodus 4:1). In response, the Lord gives Moses no explanation, but simply presents him with magic: "the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand?" (Exodus 4:2). Moses responded that he was holding a rod and the Lord instructed him to throw it on the ground: "And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it" (Exodus 4:3). Moses finds himself very uncomfortable with magic, first because he doesn't think he can communicate his magical vision of God and then because he is shocked and afraid of the magic of the snake. The Lord uses an ancient sort of black magic on Moses, which frightens him, but which ultimately makes sense in the court of the Pharaoh as Moses goes head to head with the Egyptian magicians.

The Lord doesn't hesitate to use the very sort of magic that would make his prophet a "practicing necromancer," which is particularly strange since this initial snake magic doesn't do anything for Moses's cause. The Egyptian sorcerers can easily replicate it. Of course, the subsequent plagues overcome the Egyptians' taste for magic and bring them into submission. But the magic that the Lord shows Moses in Exodus 4 ends up being gratuitous—except for the way it molds Moses into a prophet that trusts in the magic of the Lord as much as in his other miracles. In this account, the Lord does not seem at all concerned about the discomfort of magic and the fairy position. In fact, he readily pushes his prophets into a magical narrative, even when He could avoid such blatant Egyptian sorcery or fairytale magic. The Lord gives prophets knowledge in a way that challenges secular reasoning. Magic requires faith in order to be used as an epistemological mode. Magic requires going beyond human understanding and mortal preoccupations. God changes his prophets into something more like himself, a being beyond human ways of knowing. He uses magic to reveal truth in a different way, a way that eludes other philosophies. Thus, magic opens a special conduit for revelation.

The magical aspects of Joseph and Moses's stories are critical to our understanding, as believers, of revelation and prophetic callings. Joseph used magical means most notably to translate the Book of Mormon, from the treasure-seeking stories that surround his discovery of the plates[20] to the use of the Urim and Thummim. The translation of the book itself, which would typically be an object of study, is given to him instead through the magic of seer stones. Moses likewise wanted to communicate the knowledge he gained from his revelation to the Egyptians,

[20] This was another magical aspect used to denigrate Joseph Smith. See the descriptions of finding the plates and keeping them secret in Michael Hubbard Mackay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2015); and Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling. A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

and the Lord abruptly gave him the magic to do so. Magic is truly "the art or science of putting into action the power of spirits,"[21] the art or science of revelation. Joseph and Moses struggled to reconcile this science with their own understanding and experience. But the Lord unselfconsciously uses magic with them as the first means of communication and the primary source of knowledge—the means to record his word, deliver his people, make his presence known, and restore his church. The Lord's magical work invites us to reconsider the meaning of magic and knowledge, and ultimately to reconsider the nature of God and his omniscience. What we identify as magical and therefore uncomfortable is perhaps integral to the thinking and reasoning of God. As long as God continues to reveal heavenly knowledge to our mortal minds, we will have to admit, in faith, that he is magical.

[21] Webster, s.v. "magic," *Webstersdictionary1828.com.*

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