



# On Character in Magic

Extracts from Henry Clay Trumbull's  
**Character-Shaping and Character-Showing**

with an introduction by  
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**„Alterius non sit, qui suus esse potest“**

*Let them not be another's [servant]  
who can be their own [master].*

– Paracelsus

# INTRODUCTION

## I. ON CHARACTER IN MAGIC

In the hypothetical situation that Henry Trumbull (1830-1903) and I spent a night out on a long walk under the moon, and a few hours in front of a fire with a whisky or two, it is likely we would have not seen eye to eye on many things. Quite certainly we would have disagreed on a broad array of topics, such as relating to lineage, loyalty and hierarchy, to nation-states and the military, to religious orthodoxy and evangelism, and most obviously on topics such as magic and the occult.

At the same time, I would have considered it a privilege sharing a toast with this man, and walking out under the moon with him.

This is a lesson it can take a while to come to appreciate: That people we consider peers or teachers, whether dead or alive, will never be flawless or perfect. Quite the opposite: In most cases we will discover as many admirable as well as regrettable character traits in them. Unfortunately, as it is true for all of us, wisdom has the tendency to appear in small doses. It tends to break through the clouds of our minds momentarily, only to withdraw again behind the dim light of our mundane minds.

This short pamphlet is not meant to be an introduction to Clay Trumbull's work, and neither to his biography. It rather is a homage in its simplest form: Trumbull's work have long gone out of copyright, and thus have never been as freely available as they are today. Unfortunately though open access does not automatically create application, and neither relevance. At least to my knowledge his thoughts have never been picked up and woven into a context of magical practice. Thus, as an appetiser to more in-depth study, we present short extractions from his work *Character-shaping and Character-showing* (Philadelphia: John D. Wattles, 1889).

Now you might ask what the subject of character-shaping has to do with applied magic?

Whether the latter is perceived as an art, a science or a craft – isn't it the precise privilege of a current, that was forced to remain underground for millennia, to be open to all heretics? Isn't the opportunistic focus on pure

impact and efficacy one of the most marked character traits of magic in the West? Isn't the deliberate neglect of moral boundaries and ethics, of ought, might, and should, the very reason that pushed magic into the social underground, and yet allowed it to resiliently survive and prosper there?

*Perhaps*, I would dare to answer. *Perhaps* that is true and we can disregard the following extracts of Trumbull's work. *Perhaps* what you'll find on the following pages is not only a distraction from your practical magical work, but a poison in spirit that might render it void?

Or *perhaps* it is time to return to an appreciation of ethics and morals not as topics of social, but equally of magical relevance? In this case the very terms require careful resetting: Here, *ethics* and *morals* would no longer relate to social dimensions, to Bourdieu's *habitus* and behavioural categories of reward, repentance, and retribution. Here we would utilise the terms through the lens of *animistic spirit practice*.

The collective they would need to be embedded into, or drawn out from, is no longer one of humans alone, but of spirits and humans. Ethics in this case would turn into a field of study in an inter-species setting. If there ever was such a novel faculty as inter-species ethics it would have to beg, borrow and steal insights from a vast range of existing faculties: From social science and psychology, from anthropology, intercultural study, comparative religious studies, as well as of course from biology and chemistry. Most essentially, however, it would need to be open to learn from the spirits.

Most 21st century ritual magicians seem to be comfortable with a staggering amount of cognitive dissonance: For all the right reasons, most of us have come to appreciate the vulnerability of the ecological balance in this world. Since the socio-ecological apocalypse that was the industrialisation of the 18th and 19th century, the field of human empathy slowly and gradually has expanded again to regain appreciation beyond one's closest family and self-interest. Today, for many of us it includes again large parts of the animal, the plant and now also the broader ecological realm. Still, judging from many recent publications<sup>1</sup>, it seems considerable parts of the Western Magical community's interest in spirits is strangely stuck in a consciousness of industrial exploitation and colonialism.

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1 A prominent example are the grimoire-related books published by Dr. Stephen Skinner.

Ironically, the modern-mechanistic worldview has prevailed in the very domain that once was understood as its precise opposite: the archaic and occult, the organic and ambiguous realm of telluric and celestial spirits.

By no means do we advocate for a naive or infantile attitude towards the spirit realm. Just take modern wildlife protection as a field of comparison: Despite its positive intent, its work can have grave negative consequences, unless it is undertaken from a foundation of deep respect for *Otherness*, of a thorough understanding of ecology, and most of all, of first-hand knowledge and study of the respective animal species. Magic, i.e. *the cultivation of our relationship with spirits*, should be studied, explored and practiced in the exact same vein.

With such an approach to magic *character* matters greatly. I suggested before that it is our character that spirits see first when we encounter them on the inner realm. Just like human-to-human interaction is greatly informed by physical presence, visual and tonal cues as well as nonverbal communication, so spirit-to-human communication is informed by the presence of our human spirit and the way it expresses itself through our character.

## II. A PERSONAL NOTE

I encountered Trumbull's work as part of the research for *Ingenium* (Scarlet Imprint, 2022), a book that will delve deeply into matters of occult ethics and how these might be utilised for practical purposes in magic. The sections I am quoting below resonated strongly with me, and I want to share some personal context of why that might be.

Of course, I was and remain fascinated by the conciseness and simplicity of Trumbull's voice - and how much his words require repeating 130 years after their first publication.

Additionally, Trumbull's words immediately wove themselves into the thought process of several subject I have written about recently: [The ecology of the spirit world according to Paracelsus](#), the idea of our own [Forestedness](#), the possibility of [reforging our alliance with spirits](#) through the lens of Rosicrucian Magic, the importance of wrestling with the thorny

idea(l) of [Authenticity in Magic](#), and equally the restoring of the idea of a tradition of [White Magic](#) from cliché and ridicule.

None of the above, even is a remote possibility without a strong foundation of knowing what shapes and shows our own character.

So, in reading the following extracts from the first three chapters of Trumbull's work, I invite you to participate in a small experiment:

As you come across sentences that strike a chord with you, take a moment to pause, and consider what their meaning is to you within the magical circle as well as in your mundane life? How does your character reveal itself today to the world around you - that is made up both of humans and spirits? Considering your magical practice, which implicit ethical choices have you already made? If you attempt to look at yourself as a magician through the lens of a spirit you have worked with: What would they say about your reputation, your conduct and eccentricities, and finally about your character?

In my own work, I recall at least three defining moments when I invited spirits to help me change my character, my conduct as well as ultimately my reputation. Neither of these works were undertaken with particularly high-standing ideals in mind, but rather to help me avert the demons I am trying to hold at bay inside.

Looking back at my own biography, I come from a place where ethics seemed a privilege of the safe and the protected; and for a long time I didn't consider myself in that camp.

Before I even got a conscious grasp of my own character or reputation, both had already deteriorated into tools of manipulation and self-protection. Like we all, I was a teenager at the time, discovering the magical and daunting powers of free will - and yet looking into the mirror of myself for the first time and seeing how much I had abused them already.

When I listen to Trumbull's words that ten year old within me is still listening in. I can feel the shame as well as the fascination he holds with this old man's perspective. I can sense him teetering on the threshold of leaning forward and following their call, or falling backwards and rejecting it all.



Luckily, fate allowed me to lean forward, and not fall back. Or at least not as hard as I could have.

Years ago now my magical and mundane life begun to blur into one. Either the ritual circle broke, or it expanded to entail all of life? Today, *character* to me – much more so than *sigils*, *wands*, *chalices* or *lamens* – is a word that holds great magical power.

Just like the Babylonian brick maker Trumbull references, it speaks of the stamp with which we mark each one of our actions, or each brick we lay in the house of our life. And it is this stamp that is seen and read by humans and spirits alike.

To me, aspiring to make this seal the most decent, perhaps even noble, under the inner and outer conditions I live by, is the mark of a good life.

LVX,

*Frater Acher*

*May the serpent bite its tail.*

**Note:** I resisted the urge to modernise the use of gender terms in Trumbull's original text. As unfortunately often the case with older texts, we need to make the effort to read either *wo/man* or *human* where the text says *man*.



extracts taken from from:

**Henry Clay Trumbull,**

**CHARACTER-SHAPING AND CHARACTER-SHOWING**

Philadelphia: John D. Wattles, 1889, pages 1-42

read the full [digital book here](#)

## WHAT IS CHARACTER?

Few terms are used more frequently and more vaguely in comments on life, and in counsels to the young, than the term “character”. We are told that this person has a strong character, and that that person has a weak character; that one has a great deal of character, and another has no character; that one has a good character, and another a bad character. Young people are told that character is everything to them, that their character is sure of disclosure, sure to assert itself; and they are enjoined to maintain a high character, to strive for a noble character, to cultivate a character worthy of admiration, to show real character.

What is meant by “character” in all these statements and admonitions? What is character, as distinct from reputation, disposition, peculiarities of taste, and habits of conduct? How many minds are clear on this point?

The term “character”, like most descriptive terms in common use, has more than one meaning; and the interchanging and overlapping of these different meanings are the cause of much confusion in its uses and applications. Primarily, “character” is the scratch, or stamp, or sign, by which an engraver, or other worker, marks his work as his own. Its use goes back to the days when every brick manufactured on the plains of Shinar, or by the banks of the Nile, received its graven stamp designating the ruler by whose orders that brick was made.

The root of the word itself appears in all the Aryan languages, with the same meaning and uses, down to the present day. It is applied to the letters of the alphabet, which were first cut, or graven, or stamped, in the clay, or on tablets of wax, or metal, or stone. It is another name for the signature, or monogram, or personal superscription, or trade- mark, of the potter, the painter, the sculptor, the writer, or any other artist or artisan, or inventor, as indicative of the personality of the maker, or of the distinctive individuality of the article marked. It is the visible token by which a thing is distinguished from every other thing with which it might otherwise be confounded.

As applied to a person, “character” primarily means personality or individuality; but in usage it means also a great deal more.

We speak of the various “characters” introduced into a drama; by which we mean no more than the different individuals appearing there. Again we speak of the particular character of each one of those characters by which we mean “the sum of qualities” which distinguishes one of those persons from any other one. With the “character” Hamlet, for example, every reader of Shakespeare is familiar. Over the character of Hamlet all the critics are in dispute interminably. One’s character, which is everything to one’s self, which is sure to disclose itself, and by which one will ultimately be estimated and judged, is one’s real self, one’s innermost distinctive personality of being, one’s qualities by which he is differentiated and distinguished from mankind as a mass.

[...]

Again there are persons of strong individuality; persons who are not only men and women of the common race of man, but who are themselves; they think for themselves, and act by themselves; they are more than a portion of mankind in general; they have their own convictions, their own purposes, their own personality. Such persons have character—good character or bad character, admirable character or detestable character, as the case may be; and the measure of their character is the measure of their worth and the measure of their power. Their characters settle their place among, or apart from, their fellows.

[...]

Eccentricity is not character. Being peculiar is not necessarily the exhibit of individuality. A man may be quite exceptional in his tastes and methods of conduct without having or disclosing real character.

[...]

Eccentricities are superficial. Peculiarities of taste and speech and manner are of the outer man. They do not come from, nor do they indicate, the inner nature. Character, on the contrary, is of the innermost being.

[...]

Conduct is not character; although character in large measure controls and directs conduct. A man whose character, so far as he has a character, is bad, will frequently shape his outward conduct after the pattern of the upright;

he will strive to appear and to do as if he had a good character. In the long run a man's conduct must conform to, and so will disclose, his character; but this does not by any means make character and conduct identical. Conduct is one of the means by which character is made known to others; but many things are to be considered when judging a man's character from his actions.

Nor, again, is it true that reputation is character, although the two terms are often used interchangeably, as when we speak of a man's character for integrity, for veracity, for courage, or for generosity. "Character lies in or pertains to the person, and is the mark of what he is; reputation depends upon others, and is what they think of him. A man may have a fair reputation, though his character is not really good." The only sure basis of a permanently good reputation is a good character; but many a man's reputation is for a time better than his character—if that were known—would warrant; and sometimes a man has a poorer reputation than his true character deserves. A man's character is what a man furnishes as the foundation of his reputation, or of his fame. A man's reputation, or fame, is what he gets from the world in return for his exhibit of character.

## II. EXCEPTIONAL CHARACTER THE MEASURE OF THE MAN

In the lower sense of common usage, a man's "character" is the sum of his qualities, whereby he is distinguished from other individuals. In the higher and more restricted sense, "character" is a pre-eminence of personality in the direction of one's better and nobler being. In either the one sense or the other, character is the measure of the man; for the sum of a man's qualities as an individual is the man's self; and the pre-eminence of a man's distinctive qualities marks the man's peculiar self. For all practical purposes, therefore, it is sufficient to say, that a man's superiority of personality in the direction of the right is the real measure of the man.

For example, a man who is six feet four inches in stature, is a man of mark wherever he goes. He towers above his fellows. He can see beyond them. It is quite impossible for him to avoid pre-eminence in any company. In a sense, this is because that man is six feet four inches high. In another sense, it is because that man is eight inches higher than the average man. Until he passed five feet eight inches, he had no prominence, he was of no special note. Every inch above the average, was, however, a move in the direction of pre-eminence; and his notable measurement was from that mark, upward. As in physical stature, so in mental acquirements and capabilities. It is what a man can do over and above the average man in any sphere of endeavor, that is his real measure of attainment; that is his measure of power in that direction.

[...]

The answer is that it requires character, exceptional character, to make one willing to be a man. Most men are afraid to be themselves. They shrink from being "distinguished". Their preference is to conform themselves to the common standard of their sphere; to be like others, rather than to be like themselves alone. Where this feeling prevails, heroism is an impossibility.

The first question commonly asked in the matter of dress is, What do others wear? What is the fashion? What is the prevailing style? An answer to that question commonly settles the asker's opinion in that sphere. The wish is, to be like others in this matter; not to be like one's own self. Character in dress

is never shown by following the fashion in dress ; it may be shown by setting the fashion, and again by wisely, and in good taste, deviating from the fashion. So, all the way up in the scale of thought and action: the common wish is, to do as others do; to be as others are; to speak and act in accordance with conventional — generally agreed upon — standards. Character cannot be shown in such conformity; it does not become character in its best sense until it rises above the average, and so departs from the conventional; then it is characteristic and distinguished.

[...]

In order to be the possessor of exceptional character, it is not necessary for one to be conscious of its possessing. To be one's self fearlessly, does not involve the knowledge or the feeling that one is unlike everybody else. Far less does it involve a show of consciousness in that possession. As a rule, the man of marked superiority in character is not inclined to claim pre-eminence.

[...]

In fact, to one who is himself, and who desires to be himself, it seems so natural to be just this and nothing different, that he is inclined to count his way of being and doing the way which would instinctively commend itself to everybody else, as well as to himself.

[...]

By experience of their contrast with others some come to realize their possession of exceptional character. And others again have characters of rare power which have never yet been called into action, and so into prominence. Those who are skilled in character reading may discern the pre-eminence of these persons, or some peculiar emergency may bring their superiority to general notice. But, in some instances, their remarkable strength of character fails of being known to the world, "just because", as Bushnell suggests, "the storm they were made for has not begun to blow." Character may be ready to assert itself, but wait long for its opportunity.

True manhood or true womanhood in a very high degree may, in fact, exist in a person who little thinks of his or her superiority in its possession; and who is as yet unrecognized by the world as its remarkable possessor. Such

a person needs only an occasion, to be known and admired of all, The rare treasure is there, even though the mine has never been opened to sight.

Confucius, who, from the breadth of his view and the practical nature of his teachings, might be called the Bacon of Chinese philosophy, designates, in all of his writings, the man of character as “the superior man”, in contrast with “the mean man”, or the average man. When asked, by one of his pupils, “what constituted the superior man”, Confucius answered: “He acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions.”

[...]

Most persons desire to be recognized as persons of real character. It is important, therefore, for all to understand that real character cannot be shown by conformity to the common standards of right, or of expediency, in one's sphere. To show character, one must consent to be distinguished from others generally. To be distinguished, one must decide for himself what to wear, what to eat or drink, how to bear himself among and before others, what to believe, what to refuse to use, what to refuse to do, and what to refuse to believe. Not eccentricity or mere singularity, but personality, God-reliant, hell-defiant, and man-resistant personality is the basis of true character. It is being one's self, as in the sight of God, and as responsible directly to God, that shows character, and that secures the recognition of character.

“To his own master he standeth or falleth”, says Paul. To your own Master — and one only is your Master — you must stand or fall. Emerson but paraphrases and applies this apostolic truth when he says: “That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him.... Do that which is assigned you, and you cannot hope too much, or dare too much.” And quaint old Henry Vaughan presses it home in another way, when he says to each of us severally:

*“Seek not the same steps with the crowd; stick thou  
To thy sure trot; a constant, humble mind  
Is both his own joy, and his Maker's too;*



*Let folly dust it on, or lag behind.*

*As sweet privacy in a right soul*

*Outruns the earth, and lines the utmost pole.”*

### III. THE COMPOSITION OF OUR CHARACTERS

Our characters are ourselves. Yet none of us, Minerva-like, sprang into being full-formed and full-armed for our work in life. Individually we are growths rather than creations — growths from divinely created germs, but nevertheless growths. In the process of our growing, various elements have entered into our being, and various influences have combined to form and shape our characters.

Every person is himself from the beginning. At birth and by inheritance he has germs of character which are his own peculiarly. Tendencies, tastes, possibilities, are his, which are not another's. Training and opportunities can do for him what they could not do for the great mass of mankind; and on the other hand, the lack of just the training and just the opportunities which might do so much for him would be far more unfortunate in his case than in the case of one of any other nature. His limitations and his possibilities are all within the range of his germinal nature; but that range is a very wide one.

A man can never really be any one but himself; but he may be fully developed, well rounded, symmetrical, graceful, appearing at and doing his best, or he may be dwarfed, irregular, repressed, awkward, showing and being at his worst. What he might be, by the grace of God, depends upon his native characteristics. What he is, depends on his varied circumstances, associations, companionships, experiences.

The influences which go to make up his character as finally manifested to the world are many and varied more numerous and diverse than perhaps we have been accustomed to suppose.

There are some things which we see at a glance to be influential in shaping and directing our characters. The example and instructions of our parents and teachers; the circumstances of ease or hardship in which we are brought up, the natural surroundings of our childhood's home — in city, or country, or at the sea-shore; the occupations and the companionships of our earlier years; the intellectual, social, and religious privileges which are ours during that period of our lives; these and a host of other things like them we are always ready to take into account as developing and training agencies, in

the bringing us to be what we are.

Beyond all this, we are compelled to admit, that a single emergency or catastrophe sometimes changes a life for its entire history, the events of an hour doing more to shape and develop the chief characteristics of a nature than all the former experiences of that life. The blow that leaves a child fatherless or motherless, or that takes away husband or wife from one whose career until now has been that of scarcely undisturbed love and joy, does more than bring bitterness of sorrow and a sense of desolateness of soul to the bereaved one. It calls into play new powers of effort and endurance, and summons hitherto unused and perhaps unsuspected energies, to meet responsibilities which did not exist before. It seems, in fact, to make a new character, through changing the proportions of the elements of character.

The same is true, in a sense, of a sudden change in one's circumstances, such as brings poverty in the place of affluence, blindness or the dependent state of a cripple instead of bodily perfectness, or which summons one to new and enlarged responsibilities — as of a military command in time of war, or of exalted political station, or of the care and use of great wealth received by marriage or inheritance. A character has, indeed, apparenly been transformed by a night of horror on a burning steamer, by the shock of a plunging train through an open draw-bridge, by a terrible experience of calumny or unjust suspicion, or the treacherous failure of a friend, or by peculiar fear and anxiety on behalf of those who are loved dearer than life.

All these things enter into the composition of character; yet they are not the only — perhaps not the most potent — agencies in giving shape and play to the distinctive characteristics of one's nature.

The important elements of character-making — or character-shaping — which we are most likely to overlook or undervalue are the exceptional impressions made upon us by casual acquaintances in our earlier life, and the quieter influences exerted over us by those with whom we are closely associated in after years—when our characters are commonly supposed to be fully and finally established. If we could trace back to their first exhibit some of the characteristics which now mark us most distinctively, we should perhaps find that we owe their development, not to the steady training in their direction received by us at home or in school, but to the sudden

disclosure of their attractiveness in the life of some one whom we were with but for a brief season ; or, again, we should see that the temptations which try us most severely, and the evil thoughts and imaginings which have given us greatest trouble in life, are the outgrowth of germs planted in our minds by persons of whom we have no distinct recollections apart from the harm they thus did us.

It may have been an exceptionally confident assurance of unwavering faith given expression to by a saintly grandmother on her occasional visit at our childhood's home, that first made vividly real to us the explicit promises of revelation, and led us to rest thence-forward on every word of God as sure and unflinching in spite of all seeming obstacles to its performance. Or it may have been a single hissing sneer of a Saturday afternoon playmate, in reflection on the purity and un-selfishness of a person whom we had looked up to with admiration and reverence, which put the poison of suspicion and doubt, concerning even the noblest and the best, into our mind, to work its pernicious influence for all time to come.

It may have been one sturdy sentence of inspired resolve, spoken by a man of intensest energy, and of absolutely unflinching will, at a time when any ordinary person would have deemed all human effort hopeless, which made us realize once for all the truth of his declaration that "only Omnipotence can stand in the way of a man of determined purpose." Or it may have been one hour's instruction in sin by a chance visitor, almost under our watchful mother's eye, that in its consequences was little less to us than the partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was to our first parents in Eden.

[...]

Nor is it in childhood only that our characters are shaped and directed by our associates. The best characters are always open to improvement, and always in danger of deteriorating.

Many a husband seems actually made over by his wife; and many a wife seems absolutely another person through her husband's influence, after a few years of married life. It is perhaps a friend of our maturer years whose purity and nobleness, whose gentleness and grace, whose spirit of fairness

and charity, or whose well-defined views on every point of ethics where he has a conviction, impress us with the correctness and beauty of his ideal, gradually influence us to his ways of thinking, and inspire us to strive toward his standards of judgment and feeling.

Or again, our moral tone is lowered and our tastes are vitiated by intimate companionship, in social life or in business, with one of grosser nature, or of perverted and de-based tendencies. Characteristics which had been long repressed in our nature come into new prominence, and those which had before distinguished us drop out of sight. So long as we live, our characters are in the formative state; and whether we be counted strong or weak, our characteristics are continually being re-shaped and re-directed by those whom we newly come to know and admire, or with whom we are newly brought into intimate association. A fresh ideal held before us, a purer, nobler, lovelier character coming distinctly into our range of observation and study, is something to thank God for; for it may be an inspiration to us, and a help toward the better and higher development of our characters than we have before realized.

Meanwhile, we are ourselves the shapers and directors of the characters and the characteristics of some whom we meet or reach. This thought ought to give us a sense of added responsibility and of added anxiety. What we are may settle the question of what a multitude of others shall be and shall do. Our lives and characters are entering into and becoming a part of the lives and characters of those whom we never knew until recently, and their lives and characters are entering into and becoming a part of ours. The composition of their and our characters is still in progress.

[...]



