

Plutarch - Concerning the Face Which Appears in the Orb of the Moon

<https://people.sc.fsu.edu/~dduke/lectures/plutarch-moonface.pdf>¹

Discussion is all over the map - theology, physic, geometry and, yes, whether the face in the moon is an illusion caused by shadows of natural features.

The moon's measurements are remarkably good by modern standards:

Aristarchus points out in his treatise 'Upon Magnitudes and Distances,' that the distance of the sun is more than eighteen times, but less than twenty times the distance of the moon, by which she is separated from us: and yet the computation that gives the greatest elevation to the moon says she is distant from us fifty-six times the space from the center of the earth [to the circumference]: this length is of forty thousand stadia², according to those who make a moderate calculation of it. And, calculated from this basis, the sun's distance from the moon amounts to over four thousand and thirty myriads of stadia³.

....

Those [who think the moon to be a fiery and burning substance, are in the wrong; and they] who demand that living creatures up there shall possess all the things that those here below require for their birth, nutriment, and existence, seem to pay no consideration to the disparities in nature of the two worlds....

As if, therefore, we were unable to approach or touch the sea, but only to stand afar off and contemplate it, and learning by inquiry that the water is bitter, undrinkable, and briny, someone should tell us that living creatures, numberless, huge, and varied in shape, are nourished in its depths, and that it swarms with wild creatures that use the water just as we do the air, you would think he was imposing upon you with fiction and prodigies. We appear to be similarly situated and to experience the same thing with respect to the moon in disbelieving that men of some sort inhabit her.

....

The conversation then drifts towards the possibility of the moon being the location of the Elysian fields.

¹ Many of the readings are copied from books, not web sites, and will have divergent translations. I just wanted to give URLs so that I could point people at source if necessary.

² A stadium is about 600 feet. (The Greek stade is slightly longer than the Roman one.) 56 x 40,000 stadia is about 260,000 miles, which is very respectable.

³ A myriad is 10,000, so 4000 myriads of stadia is about 40 million miles.

Lucian. A True Story.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45858/45858-h/45858-h.htm>

Menippus does not actually land on the moon, but hovers a while, looking down upon the Earth, before continuing his flight:

I must first tell you that the Earth seems much smaller from above than the Globe of the Moon, and that I should hardly have descri'd it, had it not been for the Tower of Pharos and the Rhodian Colossus. True it is, the Ocean casts a sort of glittering light occasion'd by the Suns Beams, which made me discern it by little and little...⁴

Menippus does not actually land on the moon in this attempt. Lucian himself, however, subsequently gets there using the Oz option:

On the morrow we put to sea again, the wind serving us weakly, but about noon, when we had lost sight of the island, upon a sudden a whirlwind caught us, which turned our ship round about, and lifted us up some three thousand furlongs⁵ into the air, and suffered us not to settle again into the sea, but we hung above ground, and were carried aloft with a mighty wind which filled our sails strongly. Thus for seven days' space and so many nights were we driven along in that manner, and on the eighth day we came in view of a great country in the air, like to a shining island, of a round proportion, gloriously glittering with light....

....

What they took for an island turns out to be the moon. Lunar politics have a lot in common with those of contemporary city states, and the inhabitants of the moon are currently at war with those of the sun over a disputed colony. It is, however, stocked with an outré collection of fauna and flora, wherefore the story proceeds to take a turn for the sillier:

On the enemy's left wing was stationed the Royal Ant Force, with Phaethon himself among them. These creatures looked exactly like ordinary flying ants, except for their enormous size, being anything up to two hundred feet long. They carried armed men on their backs, but with their huge antennae they did just as much of the fighting as their riders. They were believed to number about fifty thousand. On the right wing were placed an equal number of Gnat-shooters, who were archers mounted on giant gnats. Behind them was a body of mercenaries from outer space. These were only light-armed infantry, but were very effective long-range fighters, for they bombarded us with colossal radishes, which inflicted foul-smelling wounds and caused instantaneous death...

⁴ Every writer takes a stand on the question of whether the moon merely reflects the sun's light, as earth does, or whether it shines with its own 'proper' light, as more-distant luminaries do (and – this matters greatly in period – as Genesis suggests it does).

⁵ A furlong is 1/8 mile. I'm going to guess it was stadia.

Ariosto, Orlando Furioso

https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/AriostoCantoXXXIV.php#anchor_Toc85466492

The next fourteen centuries were a barren time for literary voyages to the moon⁶. There were borderline cases (e.g., Dante's trip to an allegorical sphere of the moon, Torralba's lunar detour on his way from Madrid to Rome, a good number of spiritual tours of the cosmos), but not much interest in the moon as an actual destination. One of the better lunar voyages of this stretch of time appears in "Orlando Furioso", when Astolf travels to the moon to find a cure for Roland's madness. Astolf is conveyed to the moon by means of Elijah's chariot, but his experiences are within the rules laid down by his pagan predecessors⁷.

The horses rise; first, like a hoverer,
The chariot rotates, then they approach
The sphere of fire, and by a miracle
They are not burned or singed, and all is well.

When they have left the ring of fire behind,
They reach the kingdom of the moon, which bright
As spotless steel, for the most part, they find,
Equal (though somewhat smaller) in their sight
To our own globe, the last of those confined
Within the circling spheres, although not quite
Identical, for if that were to be
The moon would be encompassed by the sea.

Astolfo had two reasons for surprise:
First, that the kingdom of the lunar sphere
Should be so large, when such a tiny size
Its circle seems to us when glimpsed from here;
Next, that he had to screw up both his eyes
To see the globe we live on plain and clear.
Since earth and ocean have no proper light,
Their image does not rise to a great height.

The homage to science completed, Ariosto proceeds with his fantasy: The moon that Astolf finds is, miraculously, the repository for whatever is lost on earth – be it lost goods, lost love, lost fame, or lost chances, or lost time. Eventually Astolf finds a mountain of lost wits, stored in neatly labeled bottles. The largest bottle, which Astolf brings back, is labeled "Orlando's Wits".

⁶ This should not be attributed to a lack of creativity on the part of medieval writers, but to the narrowness of my subject: The intervening centuries produced a large literature pertaining to human flight, but writers saw little reason to make the moon an imagined destination. That began to change in the sixteenth century.

⁷ It would be more accurate to say that pagan authority had merged with Christian theology. Earth and Man were at the center of creation as part of God's tidy design. The almost-perfect spheres of the heavens echoed God's perfection. So, to successively-lesser degrees, did the less-perfect sphere of the Earth and its neighboring spheres, and the even-less-perfect sphere of the human head. Everything was tied together by a deliberate plan, and apparent coincidences were deliberate messages from God.

Cervantes, Don Quixote

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996-h/996-h.htm>

Don Quixote at last feeling the Wind, Sure, said he, we must be risen to the middle Region of the Air, where the Winds, Hail, Snow, Thunder, Lightning, and other Meteors are produc'd; so that if we mount at this rate, we shall be in the Region of Fire presently.... May I be hang'd, quoth Sancho, if we ben't come to this Fire-Place you talk of, or very near it; for the half of my beard is sing'd already. I have a huge mind to peep out, and see whereabouts we are. By no means, answer'd Don Quixote; I remember the strange but true story of Doctor Torralva⁸, whom the Devils carry'd to Rome hoodwink'd, and bestriding a reed, in twelve hours time.... Among other things, he said, as he went through the air, the Devil bid him open his eyes, which he did, and then he found himself so near the moon that he could touch it with his finger; but durst not look toward the Earth, lest the distance should make his brains turn round. So, Sancho, we must not unveil our eyes, but rather wholly trust to the care and providence of him that has charge of us; and fear nothing, for we only mount high, to come souse down like a hawk, upon the kingdom of Candaya, which we shall reach presently: For though it appears not half an hour to us since we left the garden, we have, nevertheless, travell'd over a vast tract of Air.

Francis Godwin, The Man in the Moon, 1633/8

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-man-in-the-moone>

I confuked how to join a Number of them together, fo as to carry a heavier Weight, which if I could compafs, I might enable a Man to be carried iafely in the Air from one Place to another. I puzzled my Wits extremely with this Thought, and upon Trial found, that if many were put to the bearing of one great Burthen, by reafon it was impoffible all of them mould rife together juft at one Infant, the firft that rife finding himfelf flayed by a Weight heavier than he could ftir, would foon give over, and fo the (econd, third, and all the reft. I contrived at laft a Way whereby each might rife with only his own Proportion of Weight ; I fattened about each Ganfa a little Pulley of Cork, and putting a String of a juft Length through it, I fattened one End to a Block of almoft eight Pounds Weight, and tied a two Pound Weight to the other End of the String, and then caufing the Signal to be erefted, they all arofe together, being four in Number, and carried away my Block to the Place appointed. This hitting fo luckily, I added two or three Birds more, and made Trial of their carrying a Lamb, whole Happinefs I much envied, that he mould be the firft living Creature to partake of fuch an excellent Device.

....

Unfortunately, this breed of gansas migrates to the moon.

⁸ Eugenio Torralba's devils used an anesthetic to dampen the rigors of his trip to the moon. One presumes that the effect wore off, because he wound up recounting the tale to the Spanish Inquisition. The tale was popularized in verse in 1566.

Johannes Kepler, *Somnium*, 1611/34

<https://somniumproject.wordpress.com/somnium/>

One of the better early novels (from the perspective of intellectual history, at any rate) was written by Kepler himself. His actual voyage to the moon was low-tech – carried by lunar demons – but even there he considers the effects of high acceleration, lack of air, the cold of outer space, and removal from the Earth’s gravity. The rest, however, is travelogue – with copious footnotes – as Kepler speculates on lunar conditions in light of what is known about the moon and about (sorry) Kepler’s Laws.

Whatever is born on the land or moves about on the land attains a monstrous size. Growth is very rapid. Everything has a short life, since it develops such an immensely massive body. The Privolvans have no fixed abode, no established domicile. In the course of one of their days they roam in crowds over their whole sphere, each according to his own nature: some use their legs, which far surpass those of our camels; some resort to wings, and some follow the receding water in boats; or if a delay of several more days is necessary, then they crawl into caves. Most of them are divers; all of them, since they live naturally, draw their breath very slowly; hence under water they stay down on the bottom, helping nature with art. For in those very deep layers of the water, they say, the cold persists while the waves on top are heated up by the sun; whatever clings to the surface is boiled out by the sun at noon, and becomes food for the advancing hordes of wandering inhabitants.... Those for whom breathing is more essential introduce the hot water into the caves through a narrow channel in order that it may flow a long time to reach the interior and gradually cool off....

Cyrano de Bergerac, *The States and Empires of the Moon* 1648/57

https://ota.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/repository/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12024/A35530/A35530.html?sequence=5&isAllowed=y#index.xml-group.1_text.1_body.1_div.1

By the time of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the literary lunar voyage was well-enough established to be susceptible to parody. In his selection of devices for getting to the moon, *Cyrano* is an equal-opportunity thief as well as an indefatigable inventor. They include spring-driven wings, rockets, dew⁹, bone marrow, swimming (at the time of Noah's flood, when the waters were higher), the odor of sanctity, demons, magnets (such as those powering Elijah's chariot), and will power.

....

When the fire had consumed one row of the rockets, which had been arranged six by six, the device of a fuse, fixed at the end of each half dozen, set off another layer, and then another, so that the saltpeter caught fire and gave me a fresh lease of life, at the same time as it carried me farther into danger.

However, when the supply was all used up, the contrivance failed and I was resigning myself to leaving my crown upon that of some mountain when (without my making any movement at all) I felt my levitation continuing. My machine took leave of me and I saw it falling back towards the earth...

When, according to the calculations I have since made, I had traveled much more than three quarters of the way from the earth to the moon, I suddenly found myself falling head first, although I had not somersaulted in any fashion...

Cyrano does make it to the moon this time. It is inhabited. In fact, he encounters Domingo Gonzales there. Gonzales wears a ruff and he does not, and a committee of lunar scientists concludes that Gonzales is a male of their species.

⁹ He makes several attempts. This one fails because he lost his nerve and broke the vials of dew.