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Lux reflecta: On Moonlight in Mythology and Science

"In days gone by there was a land where the nights were always dark, and the sky spread over it like a black cloth, for there the moon never rose, and no star shone in the obscurity."

Throughout history moonlight has been a favourite light phenomena that humankind has pondered on and observed intensely. In poetry and song moonlight features prominently as well as in innumerable paintings. Systematic observation of the moon and its light has been an important driver in the development of science. In contrast to the violent, short-lived and blinding sensation of a flash of lightning, soft moonlight provides the observer with a study object that presents no danger.

The Earth's closest neighbour in space is its constant companion. As our nearest cosmic source of light for many centuries the moon delineated the boundary of the terrestrial domain and was held to be the mediator between this world and the next. A diversity of theories about the origin of the moon's light and its phenomenal spots led to various definitions of the form of the moon and the nature of its surface. As reflected sunlight moonlight allows detailed observation of the moon with the naked eye. The reflected light rays have also spawned philosophical reflections about the interstellar order of space in one direction, and to metaphysical questions about the boundaries of terrestrial captivity in the other.

¹ Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, The moon, in: *Grimm's Household Tales* (Project Gutenberg Online Book: 7.1.2004), p. 549.