

BOOK REVIEW

Magic in Ancient Greece and Rome. By LINDSAY C. WATSON. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Pp. x + 248. Hardback \$45.50. ISBN: 9781350108950.

Watson's book is a relatively brief but substantial study of Greco-Roman magic, with a special focus on some of the recent archaeological discoveries and scholarly debates.

In the opening chapter he explains why the magical spells and practices of the corpus of texts known as the *Magical Papyri* should be associated with Greco-Roman culture and not Egyptian only.

Chapter 2 addresses issues of "violence" in amatory magic. Some have suggested that the violent-sounding language embedded in many amatory spells can be primarily understood as a way "to effect a psychic release for the individual in the grip of love" and not so much to evoke feelings of erotic passion from the targeted individual. Others have argued that this language is mostly symbolic, not intended to inflict real harm. Watson rejects both of these views, arguing that amatory spells were indeed meant to effect physical and psychological torment upon the targeted individual until he or she finally capitulated to the demands of the would-be lover. The torment, he notes, is usually just the sort that someone in the throes of passionate love might be expected to experience: sleeplessness, fever, inability to concentrate. Watson also challenges a thesis advanced by Christopher Faraone (and embraced by others) that *eros* spells, being strongly "aggressive" in character, were used almost exclusively by men, whereas *philia* spells, being far less aggressive, were used mostly by women. Watson argues instead that "the violent and compulsive love magic of literary figures such as Theocritus' Simaetha, Horace's Canidia or Apuleius' Pamphile, have their correlate in real life" (41). Finally, Watson challenges the widely held notion that amatory spells were used primarily for two reasons: to secure the marriage of a closely protected, sexually restrained maiden; and to advance one's social status by means of a high-status marriage. Watson suggests that in many cases the goal was simply to secure

exclusive sexual rights over a female who was not presently available. In some cases, this was likely because the female was a prostitute who was in high demand.

Chapter 3 deals with *defixiones* (“binding curses”), focusing on a few of the more recent discoveries at Aquae Sulis (modern Bath), Mainz and Rome. Some of these discoveries are what allowed H. S. Versnel to posit a new class of curses: “prayers of justice.” Although these sorts of prayers have so far only turned up in the UK and Germany, they are thought to contribute to our understanding of the diversity of magical practices in the Greco-Roman world more generally. Watson also devotes much of the chapter to a first century C.E. Latin curse tablet from the Ostiense quarter in Rome. Among other things, this tablet stands out from other *defixiones* for its “sadistic relish” (70) and its invocation of so many “hellish creatures who belong as much to the realm of literature and myth as to the normally pragmatic and tightly focused arena of *defixiones*” (66). Also discussed is a magical ensemble (voodoo dolls, curse tablets, coins, lamps, etc.) dating to the fourth century C.E., discovered in a fountain dedicated to the goddess Anna Perenna in Rome. Among other things, this find has confirmed that voodoo dolls were used in the Latin West and continued to be used long after the fourth century B.C.E. when many scholars had supposed them to have fallen out of use.

Chapter 4 discusses the use of herbs in both magic and medicine. That herbs were a major feature of Greco-Roman *magic* is evident from the stories about Circe, Medea, Erichtho, Pamphile and other sorcerers, along with a plethora of rituals in the *Magical Papyri*, various remedies of the *magi* that are recorded by Pliny and the complicated measures that were often taken for picking or cutting herbs. The use of herbs was no less firmly established in the field of medicine, being attested in writers like Theophrastus, Pliny, Dioscorides, Galen and others. This mutual interest in herbs in both magic and medicine is one of the key indicators of how closely related these two fields of study had been in the ancient world. Watson’s discussion about herbs becomes a jumping off point for a more general discussion about the three major principles that frequently undergirded magical rituals: similarity, contiguity and antipathy or contrariety. He contends that by taking such principles into consideration we can grasp much of the logic behind magical rituals. Hence, the rituals need not be characterized simply as pre-logical, pre-empirical, mystical etc.

Chapter 5, which is authored by Patricia Watson, explores the use of animals in magic. Attempts are made once again at discerning the logic behind various rituals. An animal’s reputation, color and sex, as well as its presumed magical

associations (e.g. with evil, the underworld, Egyptian deities) and concepts (e.g. transference, similarity) often factored into whether it would be used in a given ritual. Further questions are then explored, such as how animal parts were obtained or preserved, where and when they were used etc. The chapter ends with a concise but surprisingly thorough discussion about amulets.

Lindsey Watson returns in Chapter 6 to offer his reflections on fictional witches of Greco-Roman literature. He argues that there are several conspicuous differences between the Greek witches Circe and Medea, on the one hand, and several Latin witches, on the other. In general, Circe and Medea are beautiful (by definition since they are goddesses), venerable, high status, effectual, selfish but also caring, a mix of good and evil, mythical and circumscribed in their skills and powers. Latin witches, by contrast, are old, ugly, disreputable, of low status, ineffectual, selfish, entirely maleficent in their motives, operating in the contemporary world (rather than the mythical) and seemingly unlimited in their skills and powers. Watson next discusses the many overlaps between fictional witches and real-life practices of ancient magic as these may be discerned from the *Magical Papyri* and other evidence such as Pliny's *Natural History* (esp. bks. 28-30). These overlaps suggest that Greek and Roman poets "had first-hand knowledge of the books of magic which are known to have circulated widely in the Roman world" (189).

The final chapter probes the extent to which certain claims of Classical authors regarding human sacrifice reflect historical realities. Watson suspects that many of these claims, a few recent ones as well, were nothing more than disingenuous attempts at destroying reputations, generating hysterias and playing on old stereotypes. Nevertheless, he finds other evidence more difficult to dismiss. There were, for example, laws in ancient Rome that banned human sacrifice, spells in the *Magical Papyri* that speak (slanderously) of human sacrifice, statements by Pliny about human body parts being eaten at the advice of the *magi* and a first century C.E. epitaph from Rome of a young boy who was "carried off by a witch's hand." The last part of the chapter points out several historical links between literary and real (historical) witches. Watson does not accept the widely held opinion that literary witches reflect little or nothing about actual magical practices.

There are a few points in Watson's book that strike the present reviewer as disputable. He claims, for example, that Cybele and Isis – goddesses who are invoked in recently discovered curse tablets from a temple in Mainz which had been dedicated to these goddesses – had "no obvious connections to the

Underworld" (78). On this basis he claims that the tablets raise new questions about whether *defixiones* were normally tied to chthonic divinities. Yet Isis was closely associated with the Underworld through her husband Osiris; and the Phrygian goddess Cybele was likely seen as a mediatrix between the living and the dead and was frequently equated with Demeter, wife of Hades.

Watson's argument in Chapter 4 (117-121) that "a good deal of empirically derived, practical and commonsensical herbal lore" can be found in the works of Theophrastus, Pliny, Dioscorides and Marcellus Empiricus is intriguing but not quite convincing. Among the hundreds of herbal remedies listed by these authors, he only cites a small handful that are (or are thought to be) of genuine medical value, and with these he sometimes has to require a different type of administration than what the ancient authors themselves prescribed; furthermore, he has to exclude a great deal of "superstitious" and "transparent nonsense" that these authors also attributed to the same roots and herbs.

The stark differences between literary witches in Greek and Latin literature are curious but might not indicate, as Watson appears to think, that magic was conceptualized very differently in Greek- and Latin-speaking societies. After all, the sample size that Watson works with is very small, especially on the Greek side, and most of the extant Greek authors who spoke about Circe and Medea (e.g., Homer, Euripides, Apollonius) were writing at a much earlier time than the Latin authors who wrote about these same two witches (e.g., Ovid, Seneca) or other uniquely Roman witches (e.g., Horace, Lucan). It might have been enlightening to have considered a few later Greek authors. Diodorus Siculus, for example, portrays Circe as following quite closely in the maleficent ways of her mother Hecate. He portrays Medea, however, as virtuous until she wasn't. Some of Watson's contrasts between Greek and Roman witches (175-6) do not hold if one takes into consideration Diodorus' Circe, Theocritus' Simaetha and Ovid's Circe and Medea.

In terms of its format, *Magic in Ancient Greece and Rome* uses endnotes, which are not as reader-friendly as footnotes. Also, when names are referenced, the reader is only given the date of each author's work which will often require an additional flip back to the bibliography in order to determine the title.

Despite these minor disagreements and grievances, the book is must-read for those interested in the fascinating topic of magic in the Greco-Roman world. It is lucid, well-researched, cogently reasoned and insightful. For myself, it was most

helpful in its attempt to explain the logic and principles behind various magical practices.

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