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## Classical Witches

The idea of witchcraft in Ancient Greece and Rome

Master's thesis in Classical Culture  
Supervisor: Thea Selliaas Thorsen  
May 2023



Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses by John William Waterhouse



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## Note on abbreviations and texts

I used abbreviations according to Oxford Classical Dictionary. Other abbreviations:

c.f.	Compare ( <i>confer</i> )
f.	On the next page ( <i>folio</i> )
ff.	On the next pages ( <i>foliis</i> )
s.v.	Under the term ( <i>sub voce</i> )



## 1 Introduction

The idea of witchcraft has terrorized and fascinated people throughout history, from the earliest civilizations until today, and especially through the infamous witch hunts in which many people were killed in Europe and North America in the Middle Ages. The thought that we do not control our environment is difficult to accept, and it is a feeling that most, if not all, people share; in our lives we face injustices, difficult moments, losses and unrequited love. One way people rationalize it can be to attribute blame on external forces, like the gods, or on someone else wanting to harm them through hexes and curses, for example. On the other side, some people wanted to take action themselves or protect themselves from harm, and when normal means were not enough they searched for answers through magic. To quote Betz, magic is “the art of making people believe that something is being done about those things in life about which we all know that we ourselves can do nothing”.<sup>1</sup>

In the Western world, our idea of someone who practices witchcraft, is heavily influenced by Christianity; yet two main figures are prevalent, as Bailey and Durrant explained: the old crone, a stereotype made popular by the European witch hunts, and the young seductress, modeled after classical figures like Circe and Medea. Notably, these were not Christian, but pagan figures.<sup>2</sup> Antiquity therefore seems to be a good case for studying the idea of the witch as it appears to condition seemingly natural elements in the stereotypically Christian context of witchcraft. So, if we zoom in on Antiquity, how did the people in ancient times see witchcraft, and how could pagan figures and practices might have influenced our view today? Who did they regard as magi and sorcerers, and what were their practices? Were witches occult, feared characters, or was magic a part of daily life?

In this thesis I will pursue these questions in the context of Antiquity, particularly in Ancient Greece and Rome, from c. 500 BCE to c. 200 CE. I will investigate the idea of witchcraft, how one could define it and how it came to be, and how it deviated from other religious beliefs; I am going to compare these practices with certain Christian beliefs and concepts, as Christianity also belongs to the era of Antiquity, and how they might have influenced one another. I will

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<sup>1</sup> Betz, 1986: xlvi.

<sup>2</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 23.

furthermore examine what criteria were considered valid to be regarded as a witch, and what the common practices of professionals and amateurs were, based on texts and objects that have survived to our day.

I will also present famous figures in literature, such as precisely Medea and Circe, and what makes them famous witches – and how we can use literature to learn more about history. These are figures that helped shape the concept of what a witch was for centuries, but were they as noteworthy in Antiquity or have our ideals altered the way we see them? And what can we learn, if anything, from their stories when it comes to ancient societies?

Much could be said about individual rituals, let alone for a concept spanning nearly a millennium. In this thesis I do not dive deeply into each and every aspects of witchcraft; instead, I try to map out what made magic in antiquity different from what we understand nowadays, approaching it from varied angles in order to obtain a comprehensive image.

## 1.1 Methodology and theory

In his work *De Legibus* (“On the Laws”), Cicero called Herodotus the “father of history” (1.5, *apud Herodotum, patrem historiae*). Herodotus started his book known as *The Persian Wars* with the following claim: “[...] in order that so the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time, and that great and marvelous deeds done by Greeks and foreigners and especially the reason why they warred against each other may not lack renown” (Hdt., 1.1, ὥς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται, μήτε ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά, τὰ μὲν Ἕλλησι τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα, ἀκλεᾶ γένηται, τὰ τε ἄλλα καὶ δι’ ἣν αἰτίην ἐπολέμησαν ἀλλήλοισι). Authors registering those great deeds are the reason we can know about them, and give them the recognition they deserve.

I have approached the topic of witchcraft from two angles: first from the point of view of historical facts and secondary literature, in order to fully comprehend what magic entailed; and then from the point of view of classical literature, to exemplify these facts and put them into context.

According to Graf, it seems to have been virtually self-evident to most Greeks that heroic myth, even divine myths, were telling the events of their past and that the historical reality could be reconstructed from them – e.g., *Critias* 110a, where Plato wrote about the importance of the

narration of myths. Whereas modern historians tend to regard myth and history as distinct or even opposites, Graf argued that ancient historians largely saw them as being in the same realm.

Herodotus did not doubt the historicity of the myth, but he wanted to distill the truth from it.<sup>3</sup> In this thesis I follow a similar approach, in order to acquire valuable insight into the subject of witchcraft in antiquity. As Graf wrote, most figures in the Greek mythology have deeply human traits, even when they are not human, and so do their actions, whether good (love, friendship) or bad (hatred, murder);<sup>4</sup> analyzing their stories gives us a good insight into Greek and Roman societies. As Plutarch wrote, “may I therefore succeed in purifying Fable, making her submit to reason and take on the semblance of History” (Plut. *Thes.* 1, ἤ μὲν οὖν ἡμῖν ἐκκαθαίρομενον λόγῳ τὸ μυθῶδες ὑπακοῦσαι καὶ λαβεῖν ἱστορίας ὄψιν).

Graf explained that the modern concept of myth, along with the scholarly term *myth*, go back to Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812). He approached myth as a philologist; ancient texts are intrinsically connected to myths; therefore, one must understand the myths and their particularities in order to properly understand the texts. To separate it from the Latin *fabula*,<sup>5</sup> which has a hint of fiction or fantasy, he preferred the Greek term *mythus*.<sup>6</sup>

In Heyne’s view,<sup>7</sup> myths served first to explain one’s surroundings and phenomena and secondly to help memorialize the history; some myths are etiological – Graf referred to them with the Greek word *aetia*,<sup>8</sup> “causes”, already employed in antiquity as the title of Callimachus’ work on myth and metamorphosis.<sup>9</sup> They were also not simply a manner of expression, but part of man’s religious development; myth and ritual had a common starting point, the divine, but from there they developed individually.

He also claimed that the achievements of great individuals could have led to myth and the worship of heroes and gods. Besides, as myths reflected man’s environment, they varied according to where they were produced – as Graf explained, Heyne stressed the “national” character of the various groups of myths. Greek ones in particular are very complex, with invented and imported elements in part thanks to poets, especially tragedians. The idea that

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<sup>3</sup> Graf, 1993: 121f.

<sup>4</sup> Graf, 1993: 141.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford Latin Dictionary (OLD), 4b “a fable”.

<sup>6</sup> Liddell Scott Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon (LSJ), s.v. μῦθος, II “tale, story, narrative”.

<sup>7</sup> Most of Heyne’s writings on myths appeared in the *Opuscula Academica* (Göttingen, 1785-1812).

<sup>8</sup> LSJ, s.v. αἴτιος.

<sup>9</sup> Graf, 1993: 39ff.

myths are tied to their region was shared with Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), but while Heyne believed poetry arose after myth, Herder convened myth, language, poetry, and religion. To him, myth was not a way to explain the environment, but an autonomous response of people's minds to it.<sup>10</sup>

Naturally, this cannot be applied to every case. Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928) elaborated the myth-and-ritual theory, that myths arose to explain rituals, setting forth her arguments in her book *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912). Graf pointed out, however, that the extreme form of this theory, which claims every known myth originated in a ritual, is flawed: there are myths without rituals and vice-versa, and even several myths linked to the same ritual.<sup>11</sup>

To Kraus, history's purpose is to combine commemoration with education: re-citing the "great deeds" (*res gestae*) of the past to build a memory for people, which would help as guide for the future. Since unique experiences can be comprehended by assimilating it to what is familiar, any literary retelling of the past will inevitably move as to become figurative, part of fantasy. Oratory and epic share the goal of telling an important story in a compelling way.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle explained the difference between history and poetry as such: "poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars. 'Universal' means the kinds of things which it suits a certain kind of person to say or do, in terms of probability or necessity: poetry aims for this, even though attaching names to the agents" (Arist. *Poet.* 1451b, διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποίησις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἢ δ' ἱστορία τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον λέγει. ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, οὗ στοχάζεται ἡ ποίησις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη).

It is important to try to keep Antiquity's definition of magic separate from our own notions as much as possible, which over two millennia later are vastly different, and showing them in their own texts illustrates better what *they* saw as uncommon and obscure. Using modern terms to reference to phenomena reported by ancient Greek and Roman writers can be complicated, or even confuse us further. The word *telepathy*, for example, comes from two Greek words, *tele*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Graf, 1993: 9ff.

<sup>11</sup> Graf, 1993: 39ff.

<sup>12</sup> Kraus, 2005: 242f.

<sup>13</sup> LSJ, s.v. τηλε.

(“at a distance”) and *pathos*<sup>14</sup> (“experience”) – yet, as Luck explained, it was coined in the nineteenth century CE. The ancients could have referred to similar experiences: Luck mentions Democritus (c. 400 BCE), for example, who believed that images constantly flowed through space, some sent out by living people, and these images could appear to people in instances such as dreams.<sup>15</sup> On one hand, we should keep this in mind and try to observe this phenomena from their point of view; on the other, it can be useful to put them to test and try to explain them with our modern knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

## 2 What is magic?

### 2.1 Early ideas of magic

One could say that humankind has lived through three stages, magic, religion, and science, i.e., paganism, religion (Christianity, in our society) and technology. However, as Luck explained, that would be an oversimplification: the three coexisted in every stage in the history of civilization. A better way would be to say that that magic anticipated modern science and technology, in order to – precisely as Heyne wrote - explain facts that would not be understood for centuries or millennia.<sup>17</sup>

Dickie reminded us that trying to define magic and its relation to religion and science in a concrete way is a task doomed to failure for two reasons: first, because we must remember that the general notion of magic is a product of a particular set of circumstances in Ancient Greece, and our concept of magic in Christian cultures comes directly from it; and second, because these attempts wrongly assume that all concepts have at their heart a core or essence. As Sir Edmund Leach wrote, “as for magic, [...] after a lifetime’s career as a professional anthropologist, I have almost reached the conclusion that the word has no meaning whatsoever”.<sup>18</sup>

At some point, these ideas were so connected that they were indistinguishable. In the article on incantation published in Pauly-Wissowa’s *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* in 1924, the author (who Dickie did not name) says that incantation was

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<sup>14</sup> LSJ, s.v. πάθος, 2 “what one has experienced”.

<sup>15</sup> Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, pp. 161–62. In Luck, 2006: 80.

<sup>16</sup> Luck, 2006: 78f.

<sup>17</sup> Luck, 2006: 1.

<sup>18</sup> Leach, *Social Anthropology*, p. 133. In Dickie, 2001: 18.

an essential element in magic throughout Greek history. The example he gives was of a technique used in ancient medicine in patients that did not need harsher methods: singing over the affected part of the body (Hom. *Od.* 19.455-7 – chapter 5.1). The author makes it clear that this method was in some circumstances treated as an acceptable medical practice – there is no evidence that in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE anyone would have accused these doctors to have employed sorcery and abandoned traditional medicine.<sup>19</sup> The word that describes Circe’s magic is *pharmakon*<sup>20</sup> (Hom. *Od.* 10.287), which has varied meanings, including drug, medicine, poison, and spell - to Clydesdale, this could be an indication that the origin of medicine lies in magical practices.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2 Magic and magicians

Eventually magic became its own concept, separating from religion, medicine and so forth. However, properly defining “magic” and “magician” continued to be a complex issue, as what they meant varied according to place, time and context<sup>22</sup>. To Bailey, the gods themselves can be described as using magic, either as their own supernatural power, or through spells and incantations the same way a human magician would. He uses the example of Hephaestus, who was often described as using charms in his craft – mixing magic and technology.<sup>23</sup>

We can begin untangling the terms by looking at the core of the word “magic” itself. According to Bailey, the Latin word *magia* comes from the Greek “*mageia*”<sup>24</sup>, referring to the rites and ceremonies performed by the *magoi*<sup>25</sup> - a *magos* was originally a member the priestly caste of the Persian Empire. From the *magoi* we see the descriptions of famous witches, such as Homer’s Circe in the *Odyssey* and Apuleius’ Lucius in his *Metamorphoses*, but another interesting, less obvious example of *magoi* are the three Wise Men, whom the Gospels describe coming to visit the infant Christ after following the sign of a new star - interpreted through

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<sup>19</sup> Dickie, 2005: 24.

<sup>20</sup> LSJ, s.v. φάρμακον.

<sup>21</sup> Clydesdale, 2022: 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 54.

<sup>23</sup> Bailey, 2007: 26.

<sup>24</sup> LSJ, s.v. μαγεία, II “magic”.

<sup>25</sup> LSJ, s.v. Μάγος.

divination as symbolizing the birth of a great king<sup>26</sup> (the relation between magic and Christianity will be discussed further on chapter 3.2).

At first, the term *mageia* simply described the actions of the *magoi*. However, as Bailey argued, the Greek distrusted the rituals and practices of others, seeing them as sinister and strange, and the terms *mageia* and *magos* acquired some negative connotations<sup>27</sup> - under the Liddell Scott Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon's definition of *magos* we see "enchanter, wizard, esp. in bad sense, impostor, charlatan". This, in turn, affected the Latin terms *magus*<sup>28</sup>, *magia*, *magicus*. We also have the Greek *goeteia*<sup>29</sup>, "witchcraft" and *goēs* or *goētes*<sup>30</sup>, "wizard" - to Luck, the *goēs* could have seen himself as a kind of priest, descendant of the *magoi*<sup>31</sup>, but the word also acquired a negative meaning, referring to fraudsters<sup>32</sup>. As Versnel explained, in late antiquity, and especially in the Greek Magical Papyri (*Papyri Graecae Magicae* – chapter 2.2.2), the term *magos* would regain its authoritative meaning, and be embraced by philosophers and certain religious authorities.<sup>33</sup>

Referring to sorcerers, there are also the terms *agyrtaí*<sup>34</sup> and *manteis*.<sup>35</sup> Luck described an *agyrtes* as a "beggar-priest, mendicant sorcerer", from the verb *ageiro*<sup>36</sup> "gather together" - mostly in a negative way, perhaps through deceit;<sup>37</sup> and *manteis* as "seer, prophet", deriving from (*theia*) *mania*, "[divine] madness".<sup>38</sup>

It was not only during antiquity that properly defining the magician proved to be a difficult task. When translating the classical texts, their meaning vary according to the version: looking at Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (387-8), for example, while Loeb Classical Library has *magos* and *agyrtes* as "wizard hatcher of plots" and "crafty beggar", respectively, Perseus Digital Library<sup>39</sup> has them as "scheming juggler" and "tricky quack". Bailey describes the *manteis* as a "less-than-

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<sup>26</sup> Bailey, 2007: 21.

<sup>27</sup> Bailey, 2007: 16f.

<sup>28</sup> OLD, 2 "a magician, sorcerer".

<sup>29</sup> LSJ, s.v. γοητεία.

<sup>30</sup> LSJ, s.v. γόης "sorcerer, wizard", 2 "juggler, cheat".

<sup>31</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 108.

<sup>32</sup> Luck, 2006: 499.

<sup>33</sup> Versnel, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> LSJ, s.v. ἀγυρτεία, "begging, imposture".

<sup>35</sup> LSJ, s.v. μάντις, "diviner, seer, prophet".

<sup>36</sup> LSJ, s.v. ἀγειρω, "gather together", 2 "collect by begging".

<sup>37</sup> Luck, 2006: 494.

<sup>38</sup> Luck, 2006: 502.

<sup>39</sup> Jebb, 1887.

respectable diviner”<sup>40</sup> – but when looking at the texts, I could not find any references to the word that had unequivocally negative connotations. Essentially, whether the *magos*, the *agyrtes* and the *manteis* can be classified together, or whether they are seen in a positive or negative light, depends on the source.

When it came to women, other terms could be used. As Paule wrote, while English has a few terms for the people in question (“witch”, “sorceress”, “enchantress”), Latin has several<sup>41</sup>: *praecantrix*, *saga*, *maga*, *cantatrix*, *sacerdos*, *vates*, *docta*, *divina*, *venefica*, *malefica*, *lamia*, *lupula*, *strix*<sup>42</sup>, or simply *quaedam anus* – “some old woman”. There does not seem to be much distinction between what kind of witch they are: Erichtho is a *Thessala vates* when she brought a corpse back to life (Luc. *Pharsalia* 6.651); Medea is a *venefica* for using plants and potions (Ov. *Her.* 6.19; 93-4); Horace wrote about removing a living boy from a *lamia*’s stomach (Hor. *Ars P.* 340). Erichtho is also referred by the word *venefica*: “and therefore the witch forbade Philippi, defiled by her spells and sprinkled with her noxious drugs” (Luc. *Pharsalia* 6.580-1 *Pollutos cantu dirisque venefica sucis conspersos vetuit transmittere bella Philippos*), even though she is a necromancer. Paule concluded that a wide range of attributes can be narrowed down to a word *saga*; other terms come to light when there is extant narrative on a witch, such as Canidia and Meroe. Cicero categorizes a *saga* as someone sagacious, that knows many things (*multa scire*). They do not need to have supernatural abilities, merely have a sharpened awareness of their surroundings. Columella and Frontinus, however, grouped them with *haruspices*, as they could be professionals that made predictions about the future. This difference could be explained, according to Paule, by the time difference between them (roughly 130 years between Cicero’s *De divinatione* and Frontinus’ *Strategemata*), and how the terms evolved and expanded.<sup>43</sup>

Ripat claimed that often when referring to women who practiced medicine and philosophy, they seem to be better described as sorceress rather than within the medical sciences; they are “old” and “ridiculous”, instead of respected professionals, and to drive the point further they

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<sup>40</sup> Bailey, 2007: 17.

<sup>41</sup> Not all necessarily used during antiquity; some became terms used for witches in later periods.

<sup>42</sup> OLD, *praecantrix*, *saga*, *maga*: “witch”; *cantatrix*: “that uses incantations”; *sacerdos*: “priestess”; *vates*: 1 “a prophet, seer”; *docta*: s.v. *doctus*, 1 “learned, wise”; *divina*: s.v. *divinus*, 5 “(of persons) adept in magic”, 6 “able to know the future or hidden things, foreseeing, second-sighted”; *venefica*: “of or concerned with sorcery, sorceress”; 2 “a poisoner”; *malefica*: 3 “of or concerned with black magic”; *lamia*: “a female monster supposed to devour children, witch, bogey”; *lupula*: “a prostitute; (in quotes. as a general term of abuse)”; *strix*: “a kind of owl, regarded as a bird of ill omen, sometimes as a vampire or evil spirit”.

<sup>43</sup> Paule, 2017: 7ff.



might have supernatural powers. Within Latin literature they are mostly negative examples and cautionary tales about proper women.<sup>44</sup> I will examine this point further on chapter 5.

In summary, *sagae* have at least five denotations (wise woman, diviner, purifier, dreadful character, professional of erotic magic), in any combination of them. They can also be divine or mortal, professional or amateurs, good citizens or grave-robbers, fictional or historical.<sup>45</sup>

According to Luck, when looking at main testimonies, there is only a general idea on the personality of a sorcerer, due to the complexity of the topic.<sup>46</sup> In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima considers magic close to religion: "Through this also all divination proceeds, the skill of priests and those engaged in sacrifice and ritual and incantations and the whole of prophecy and magic. God does not mix with humanity, but by this means all exchange and communication from the gods to humans takes place both when they are awake and when asleep. The man who is wise in these matters is a man inspired spiritually, but he who is experienced in any other way about some kinds of skills and crafts is concerned with the material world" (Pl. *Symp.* 202 Ef διὰ τούτου καὶ ἡ μαντικὴ πᾶσα χωρεῖ καὶ ἡ τῶν ἱερέων τέχνη τῶν τε περὶ τὰς θυσίας καὶ τελετὰς καὶ τὰς ἐπωδὰς καὶ τὴν μαντείαν πᾶσαν καὶ γοητείαν. θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπῳ οὐ μείγνεται, ἀλλὰ διὰ τούτου πᾶσά ἐστιν ἡ ὁμιλία καὶ ἡ διάλεκτος θεοῖς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους, καὶ ἐγρηγοροῦσι καὶ καθεύδουσι· καὶ ὁ μὲν περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφὸς | δαιμόνιος ἀνὴρ, ὁ δὲ ἄλλο τι σοφὸς ὢν ἢ περὶ τέχνας ἢ χειρουργίας τινὰς βάνουσος). Betz divided magicians in two categories: one associated with Egyptian and Greek deities, who would most likely be a priest, and one that gathered practices and gods from different cultures, until they merged into something completely different.<sup>47</sup>

Luck explained it was and still is difficult to draw a line between regular philosophers and scientists, and those interested in magic – if one was interested in studying the mysteries of the world, they could very well investigate magical phenomena.<sup>48</sup> He mentions, for example, that both Apollonius of Tyana and Apuleius saw themselves as scientists and philosophers.<sup>49</sup> The question whether Apollonius of Tyana was a sorcerer or a true philosopher has been debated for centuries; Luck argues that he was both, and our main source on him, *Vita* ("Life") by

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<sup>44</sup> Ripat, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Paule, 2017: 7ff.

<sup>46</sup> Luck, 2006: 502.

<sup>47</sup> Betz, 1986: xlvi.

<sup>48</sup> Luck, 2006: 75.

<sup>49</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 104.

Philostratus, attempts to defend him from the charge of magic but “retains too much material that was part of the material to achieve its goal”.<sup>50</sup> Luck pointed out an inconsistency in *Vita*: while Apollonius was presented as a “wise man” along the lines of Pythagoras, Philostratus enriched his tradition with folklore – Luck suggests it was due to the fashion of the time.<sup>51</sup> Besides he was accused of witchcraft for having predicted a plague in Ephesus – interestingly enough, the fact that he also saved Ephesus from the plague was irrelevant for the court (Philostr. *V A* 4.44).<sup>52</sup> Apuleius, as we will see in chapter 5.5, was accused of being a magician, and while he denied the accusations and was not condemned, Luck claimed he is not fully convinced.<sup>53</sup>

Betz described magicians as such: “The magician claimed to know and understand the traditions of various religions. While other people could no longer make sense of the old religions, he was able to. He knew the code words needed to communicate with the gods, the demons and the dead. He could tap, regulate and manipulate the invisible energies. He was a problem solver who had remedies for a thousand petty troubles plaguing mankind: everything from migraine to runny nose to bedbugs to horse races, and, of course, all the troubles of love and money”.<sup>54</sup>

Luck, on the other hand, described professional sorcerers as shadowy figures, “philosopher for those who believe him, and a fraud, a charlatan, a criminal for those who have no use for him”. He summed their characteristics up as such: they manipulated higher powers; they pursued specific goals; their rites were individual and specific, even if to us they may seem stereotyped; they developed a professional-client relationship, expecting satisfied clients to recommend them to others; when they failed, they modified the technique; as they did not rely on a common faith, “instant success [was] everything to [them]; and they were not bound by ethics”.<sup>55</sup>

Lastly, it seems that magic was practiced by people of all classes - the idea that magic was prevalent only among the Roman lower class is inaccurate and has been abandoned, as it erroneously claims, Paule explains, that this class was uneducated.<sup>56</sup> Professional sorcerers, according to Luck, were also consulted by men and women of all classes, but much of their

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<sup>50</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 130ff.

<sup>51</sup> Luck, 2006: 21.

<sup>52</sup> Luck, 2006: 143.

<sup>53</sup> Luck, 2006: 71.

<sup>54</sup> Betz, 1986: xlvii.

<sup>55</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 102ff.

<sup>56</sup> Paule, 2017: 5.

clientele was performers, such as athletes and actors, who not only had to give their best in short periods (like on a play or competition), but had also many rivals and much at stake.<sup>57</sup>

### 2.2.1 Amateur magicians

There are also those who are considered sorcerers because they dealt with magical objects, such as curse tablets and dolls. Ogden argued that while many curse tablets were probably made and used by amateurs, there were possibilities for the involvement of professionals - not necessarily “magicians”, but scribes, metal workers and so forth - at four separate stages of the process: the drawing up of the curse text, the manufacturing of the tablet itself, the inscription, and the deposition, especially if it was in a grave.<sup>58</sup>

The simplest and most common forms of curse tablets involved only names, so according to Faraone, they could very well be home-made - though there is a reference in Plato’s *Republic* that mentions specialists who charged for their services (Pl. *Resp.* 364C “Or if he wishes to injure any enemy of his, for a small outlay he will be able to harm just and unjust alike with certain spells and incantations through which they can persuade the gods, they say, to serve their ends”; εἴτε τι ἀδίκημά του γέγονεν αὐτοῦ ἢ προγόνων, ἀκεῖσθαι μεθ’ ἡδονῶν τε καὶ ἐορτῶν, ἐάν τέ τινα ἐχθρὸν πημῆναι ἐθέλη, μετὰ σμικρῶν δαπανῶν ὁμοίως δίκαιον ἀδίκῳ βλάψει ἐπαγωγαῖς τισιν καὶ καταδέσμοις, τοὺς θεοὺς, ὡς φασιν, πείθοντές σφισιν ὑπηρετεῖν).<sup>59</sup> But the more complex ones, with their *voces magicae*<sup>60</sup>, would require a source such as a handbook – some tablets admits to it (one of the Bath tablets ends with “the written page has been fully copied out” – Tab. Sulis no. 8). As Ogden explains, there are multiple references of such books, mostly in connection with the attempt to eradicate them: Augustus, for example, had 2,000 prophetic scrolls burned in 13 BCE (Suet. *Lives of the Caesars* 2. *The Deified Augustus* 31.1).

Ogden further explains that some of the Bath tablets present errors that seem like dittography (unintentionally repeating letters or words when copying a text), such as Tab. Sulis 94 – which does not necessarily mean that a formulary had been used, simply that a previous copy had been made, perhaps a disposable one. A first draft is easy to understand: longer texts

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<sup>57</sup> Luck, 2006: 75.

<sup>58</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 54f.

<sup>59</sup> Faraone, in Gager, 1992: 123.

<sup>60</sup> OLD s.v. *vox*, “voice”; *magicus*, “magical”.

were likely planned in advance, so one could calculate the structure of the text and how it would fit into a small sheet.

When it comes to the inscription, the variation of handwriting styles is enormous. Scholars that have studied the tablets more extensively, such as Ogden and Faraone, can tell that some tablets are barely literate or actually illiterate, which shows that the inscribers were likely not professionals; some, on the other hand, are well-written and in a beautiful script – but this could indicate clerks, not necessarily “magicians”. The group of third century CE tablets from a well in the Agora were written out in a beautiful hand but contain a series of errors in the *voces magicae* (detected by comparing the tablets between themselves), which shows that the writer was not familiar with the material they were reproducing.<sup>61</sup>

As Ogden described, the making and use of tablets could be found throughout all classes. Curse tablets could also give voice to groups that were largely silenced in other sources: people from lower classes and slaves. It is assumed, for example, that most of the petitioners responsible for the Bath tablets were poorer: not only were the thefts petty, it seems the people were too poor to have a slave take care of their clothes while they bathed.<sup>62</sup>

### 2.2.2 The *Papyri Graecae Magicae*

The *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM) is a loose group of ancient documents gathered and defined as such by later scholars - they were only discovered in the nineteenth century, and not comprehensively edited and published until the 1980s.<sup>63</sup> One can consult them nowadays as they were published, with English translations, by Preisendanz and Henrichs, with introductions, notes and glossary by Betz and other scholars.<sup>64</sup>

The PGM can serve us today as a sort of guide into ancient sorcerers, and how they performed their rituals. By looking at concrete examples, we have an insight on what was important to them (love-spells were evidently popular), how they were performed, and how magic was not a completely closed practice – as I mentioned, many sorcerers were amateurs.

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<sup>61</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 54ff.

<sup>62</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 67.

<sup>63</sup> Luck, 2006: 16.

<sup>64</sup> Betz, 1986.

Their contents were varied, sometimes mixed up with other documents such as administrative and financial records; the magical rituals found in the PGM were mainly written between the second century BCE and the fifth century CE – as Betz wrote in its introduction, this body of material contains only a small fraction of spells that once existed.<sup>65</sup> When it comes to magic, many of the texts are simple, traditional spells, but as Hutton explained, in some respects they are highly regarded, representing something new.

One respect was that the operations they described were often more elaborate and ambitious, e.g., summoning deities, sometimes drawing them into the body of another human being, usually young boys. The second one is that they were mostly written in Greek (there are also texts in Demotic and Coptic), as their name suggests – the common language among those educated, in the eastern part of the Roman Empire -, and mentioned important Greek figures: those associated with occult knowledge such as Apollonius of Tyana, Graeco-Roman deities associated with immense power and wisdom such as Helios, and those related to magic and love spells – Hekate and Aphrodite, for example.<sup>66</sup> As Betz explained, the papyri represent a Greco-Egyptian syncretism, with the Egyptian religion partially surviving, but being heavily Hellenized, reduced and simplified.<sup>67</sup>

To some historians, the papyri can be seen as products of a new kind of sorcerer and resulting from the decay of the temple system and the services it previously provided. Others see them as contents of a temple library, written by a priest, but now working privately due to the societal changes (such as the Roman government frowning upon traditional Egyptian magic). The papyri could enable practitioners and clients to achieve power and knowledge, under the assumption that these skills would be taught further.

Hutton also explained that the papyri also appropriate the language of the late Roman religions for the practical purposes of magic, “to persuade the gods and goddesses”. The most famous of these texts is the Mithras Liturgy, which describes how one could ascend into the world of the divinities and discover immortality – the main goal was to be able to obtain answers to any question, earthly or heavenly.

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<sup>65</sup> Betz, 1986: xli.

<sup>66</sup> Hutton, 2003: 114ff.

<sup>67</sup> Betz, 1986: xlvf.

To Segal,<sup>68</sup> the mixture of magic and religion within the papyri presents an example of the futility of trying to separate the two; Graf and Thomassen claimed that a distinction can still be made,<sup>69</sup> while Betz declared that “they lacked what we would call ‘religion’”<sup>70</sup>. Regardless, it is clear that magic and religion overlap within the PGM.<sup>71</sup> And as Versnel explained, since in these papyri prayer, magical formulae, and rituals are connected, they can go against our modern distinctions between magic, religion and science as well.<sup>72</sup>

Regardless of who consulted the PGM, its scribes of the PGM were, according to Ogden, educated, likely trained scholars. At least five scrolls come from the library of an Egyptian specialist who was fluent in Coptic and Greek, and was deeply interested in both theology and magic.<sup>73</sup>

The list of contents in the PGM is extensive, including but not restricted to magical handbooks, varied love spells, spells for numerous health issues (e.g., cough, fever, scorpion stings, swollen testicles), and victory spells. One of the sections, for example, is the “Wondrous spell for binding a lover” (PGM IV 296-466)<sup>74</sup> - it was written in the early fourth century CE but, as Luck explains, the ideas it contains are older. It is an elaborate love charm, with some parts that reminds us of Theocritus and Horace (chapter 5.3); the papyrus instructs one of creating two dolls, representing oneself and the person they desire. However, as Luck points out, it is much more of a tool to subjugate a woman than a love charm, and it contains a rather cruel and aggressive tone.<sup>75</sup>

Another type of love charm in the PGM IV 2943-66<sup>76</sup> is intended to induce insomnia, though this is not the ultimate purpose of the spell; rather, as Luck explains, the person is supposed to lie awake and think of the sorcerer. Though the ending is uncertain, one may assume the sleepless period is supposed to end once the person falls in love with the sorcerer.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Segal, *Hellenistic Magic*: 373. In Hutton, 2003: 114ff.

<sup>69</sup> Graf, *Prayer in Magic and Religious Ritual*: 188-213; Thomassen, *Is Magic a Subclass of Ritual?*: 57-58. In Hutton, 2003: 114ff.

<sup>70</sup> Betz, in Faraone & Obbink, 1991: 254.

<sup>71</sup> Hutton, 2003: 114ff.

<sup>72</sup> Versnel, 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 109f.

<sup>74</sup> Betz, 1986: 44.

<sup>75</sup> Luck, 2006: 129.

<sup>76</sup> Betz, 1986: 94.

<sup>77</sup> Luck, 2006: 139f.

### 2.2.3 Thessaly

The region of Thessaly (also known as Haemonia, Emathia, Edonia and Atracia)<sup>78</sup> was heavily associated with magic in Antiquity, and we find numerous references to it in classical texts. Thessaly was (and is) on the northeast of Greece, surrounded by mountains on the north, east and south but with access to the sea on the east (see: image 1). As Phillips explains, the area has been important for the Greeks from an early time, and Thessaly was known for its legendary characters, such as the Centaurs, Jason and his Argo, and part of Heracles' story. From the classical age on, Thessalian women had the reputation of being able to “draw down the moon from the sky”.<sup>79</sup>

There is no consensus as to why Thessaly was so renowned for its witches; Clydesdale suggests that the region was remote enough for Romans to fantasize about it. Phillips mentioned a note a scholiast wrote on them, saying “The Thessalians (masculine plural) are slandered as being wizards (*goēs*), and even yet among us, Thessalians (feminine plural) are called ‘medicine women’” (*pharmakides*<sup>80</sup>).<sup>81</sup> The theory, according to this scholiast, was that when Medea was fleeing Thessaly (chapter 5.2) she threw out a chest with magical herbs that grew there<sup>82</sup> - giving origin to the land's “magical essence”, so to speak.

Most mentions on Thessalian sorcery are found in Roman literature, as Phillips explains; however, he noted that most Romans knew of the literary Thessaly more than of the real place (though at least one rite in the PGM mentions Thessaly – PGM IV 2140-44)<sup>83</sup>. We find references of Thessaly in, for example, Lucan's *Pharsalia*: “The place itself fed his false and cruel delusion: the camp was near the habitation of those Thessalian witches, whom no boldness of imaginary horror can outdo, and who practice all that is deemed impossible” (6.434-7 *Vanum saevumque furorem Adiuvat ipse locus vicinaque moenia castris Haemonidum, ficti quas nulla licentia monstri Transierit, quarum, quidquid non creditur, ars est*).<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Phillips, 2001: 383.

<sup>79</sup> Phillips, 2001: 378ff.

<sup>80</sup> LSJ, s.v. φαρμακίς, “sorceress, witch”; cf. *pharmakon* (φάρμακον).

<sup>81</sup> *Scholia vetera in Nubes*, p.749. In Phillips, 2001: 379.

<sup>82</sup> Phillips, 2001: 378ff.

<sup>83</sup> Betz, 1986: 76.

<sup>84</sup> Phillips, 2001: 378ff.

There are also instances where writers used “Thessalian” as a synonym for “magical”, e.g., “She charms the moon and stars with Thessalian incantations and pulls them down from the sky” (Hor. *Epod.* 5.45-6, *quae sidera excantata voce Thessala lunamque caelo deripit*); “I can scarcely keep you safe from the Thessalian bitches” (Apul. *Met.* 3.22, *Sic inermem vix a lupulis conservo Thessalis*).<sup>85</sup>

#### 2.2.4 Hecate

As Bailey explained, certain deities were especially associated with magic, spells and potions, and it was common for sorcerers to be devoted to them. In some of the earliest cultures, the mother-goddess was the most important figure, and the deity likely had some connection with the moon, the waxing and waning symbolizing the cycle of life and death, and with the underworld. The goddess most associated with magic was Hecate. She was a patron of magic and magicians, as Bailey wrote, imagined as a three-faced spirit who roamed at night and haunted crossroads; the howl of dogs was supposedly a sign that the goddess was approaching,<sup>86</sup> “and through the gloom dogs seemed to howl as the goddess drew nigh” (Verg. *Aen.* 6.257-8, *visaeque canes ululare per umbram adventante dea*).

On curse tablets, Hecate is conjured in conjunction with Hermes Chthonios, Gē Chthonia, Persephone, or Pluton; she is also prominent in the PGM, where she is often identified with Baubo, Brimo, Persephone/Kore and Selene. A curse tablet from the imperial period addresses her as “Lady Hecate of the heavens, Hecate of the Underworld, Hecate of the three roads, Hecate of the triple face, Hecate of the single face”;<sup>87</sup> according to one of the hymns to Selene-Hecate embedded in the Paris magical papyrus (PGM IV 2241–2358)<sup>88</sup>, Hecate keeps the keys that open the bars of Cerberus and wears the bronze sandal of her who holds Tartarus.<sup>89</sup>

Sorceresses of all periods invoked her name to help them make their spells more potent. As Bailey explained, Theocritus (c. 310-250 BCE) composed a poem called *Pharmaceutriai*, “The Sorceress” (*Idyll* 2, it is not known who gave it the title, if the author himself or an ancient

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<sup>85</sup> Phillips, 2001: 378ff.

<sup>86</sup> Henrichs, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Bailey, 2007: 27.

<sup>88</sup> Betz, 1986: 78.

<sup>89</sup> Henrichs, 2015.



editor)<sup>90</sup>, in which a young woman called Simaetha tried to get her lover back through magical means, performing a ritual to summon Hecate and using the goddess' power in a binding spell.<sup>91</sup> We also see her being called by Canidia, “One witch [Canidia and Sagana] calls on Hecate, the other on fell Tisiphone” (Hor. Sat. 1.8 33-4, *Hecaten vocat altera, saevam altera Tisiphonen*).

Medea was famously devoted to Hecate, “for Hera had detained her at home, though before that she was not often in the palace, but spent all day tending Hecate's temple, since she herself was the priestess of the goddess” (Ap. Rhod. *Argon* 3.250-52, “Ἡρῆ γὰρ μιν ἔρυκε δόμῳ· πρὶν δ' οὐ τι θάμιζεν ἐν μεγάροις, Ἐκάτης δὲ πανήμερος ἀμφεπονεῖτο νηόν, ἐπεὶ ῥα θεῆς αὐτὴ πέλεν ἀρήτειρα). The ritual she describes to Jason for him to obtain the Golden Fleece is also to the goddess:

“From it emerged a flower a cubit high above ground in color like a Corycian crocus, supported by two stalks, but in the earth its root was like freshly cut flesh. Its sap, like the black juice of a mountain oak, she had collected in a Caspian shell to prepare the drug, after bathing herself seven times in ever-flowing streams, and calling seven times on Brimo [Hecate] the youth-nourisher, Brimo the night-wanderer, the infernal goddess, queen of the nether dead—all in the gloom of night, clad in dark garments”.

(Ap. Rhod. *Argon* 3.854-63: τοῦ δ' ἦτοι ἄνθος μὲν ὅσον πήχυιον ὑπερθεν χροίῃ Κωρυκίῳ ἴκελον κρόκῳ ἐξεφαάνθη, καυλοῖσιν διδύμοισιν ἐπήορον· ἡ δ' ἐνὶ γαίῃ σαρκὶ νεοτμήτῳ ἐναλιγκίῃ ἔπλετο ρίζα. τῆς οἴην τ' ἐν ὄρεσσι κελαινὴν ἱκμάδα φηγοῦ Κασπίῃ ἐν κόχλῳ ἀμήσατο φαρμάσσεσθαι, ἐπτὰ μὲν ἀνάοισι λοεσσαμένη ὑδάτεσσιν, ἐπτάκι δὲ Βριμῶ κουροτρόφον ἀγκαλέσσα, Βριμῶ νυκτιπόλον, χθονίην, ἐνέροισιν ἄνασσαν, λυγαίῃ ἐνὶ νυκτὶ σὺν ὀρφναίοις φαρέεσσιν).

### 2.3 Magic and gender

The history of magic is incredibly complex, and the relations between magic and gender are a particularly complicated aspect of it. I chose not to investigate the topic too deeply, instead looking at it for the sake of context; it would be impossible to fully exclude it from my research, but it is not one of the main topics I approached.

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<sup>90</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 120.

<sup>91</sup> Bailey, 2007: 27.

As Hoyt explained, the main sources of what we understand by witchcraft in Greece were matriarchal religions of the Mediterranean; it is difficult to know their exact nature, but he argued that women were venerated for being the creators of life. Hoyt claimed that an important Greek cult that influence our current definition of witchcraft were the Dionysian Festivals, which were celebrated by women - in an altered state, they would “rend and tear anyone who came into their hands, even their own children” (as for example in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, where Pentheus is torn apart by his mother Agave).<sup>92</sup>

The Romans built upon certain aspects of the Greek myths, bringing elements of their own to the Graeco-Roman pantheon, but important contributions came from other cultures. We see their influence through several beliefs and rites, many of them seemingly focusing on women: e.g., the cult of Isis, brought from Egypt and first recognized under Caligula; Cybele, the Phrygian Aphrodite whose worship required self-castration of her priests; and *Bona Dea* - the good goddess - whose rites, carried on exclusively by women, were highly sexual according to Juvenal (*Satires* 6.314-45).<sup>93</sup> The *bonae mulieres*, “good women”, was a term used by authorities to describe women we would call “witches”, according to Bailey and Durrant.<sup>94</sup>

As Bailey and Durrant explained, the (real or supposed) religious celebration in honor of Bacchus, the Bacchanalia, became a basis for the idea of the witches’ sabbath in medieval Europe. These celebrations, described in Euripides’s *Bacchae* and Livy’s *Ab urbe condita* 39 (“History of Rome”), usually involved women led by male priests, consumption of wine, dancing, animal sacrifice and sexual frenzy. They were outlawed by the Roman Senate in 186 BCE.<sup>95</sup>

This focus on women and rites performed exclusively by them could have very well influenced our perception of witchcraft, and in ancient literature there is a clear association between harmful magic and women. When it comes to magical practices, however, there seems to be little base to it. According to Bailey, when looking at nonliterary sources – court cases on accusations of magic, curse tablets, inscriptions that could (somewhat) identify the person performing the spell – men appear to have been practicing magic as much as, if not more, than

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<sup>92</sup> Hoyt, 1989: 37.

<sup>93</sup> Hoyt, 1989: 38.

<sup>94</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 41.

<sup>95</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 31.

women.<sup>96</sup> However, Ogden claimed that PGM recipes assume that the practitioners are male, and among the herbal specialist we can identify, most were men.<sup>97</sup>

As Ogden explained, women's names are seen frequently in tablets, alone or with the name of men, and even in tablets that seem to deal with issues entirely between men – individuals are often identified in tablets not by their father's name (patronymic), but by their mother's (matronymic). There does not seem to be a good explanation for it, but to him one option is that early Egyptian and Babylonian spells used maternal parentage, and the custom may come from them<sup>98</sup> (civilizations like Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt seem to have followed matrilineal parentage, according to Dornan).<sup>99</sup> Another option is that maternal lineage is much more secure than paternal (*pater incertus, mater certa*), and it was important to identify the victims of curses with as much certainty as possible. We find a number of expressions of this type, such as the abbreviated Latin *q(uem) p(eperit) vulva*, "whom a womb bore"<sup>100</sup>. The use of matronymics indicated that they tended to appear in female discourse, which to Ogden suggest that, by the second century CE, cursing language was popular especially among women.<sup>101</sup>

Actual words of women in antiquity, not ones found through male sources, are rare. It is possible that some curse tablets could have been made by women, but we must remember that not only tablets usually followed a formula, one can never be sure if a tablet written from the point of view of a woman was composed without the help of a man, perhaps someone close to her or even a professional. It is uncommon to be able to discern who the authors of curse tablets were, as they usually avoided identifying themselves (with the exception of prayers for justice and erotic-attraction curses), but the vast majority of tablets where the author was identifiable were written by men.<sup>102</sup> Winkler's collation of erotic curses showed 28 male examples against 8 of women; Ogden estimated the female/male ratio to be actually around 1:2.<sup>103</sup>

In theory, it possible that women were more active than men in magic as a whole, but less active in curse tablets specifically. Since tablets were largely made by the cursers themselves, women could have been discouraged from making them due to less access to the materials,

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<sup>96</sup> Bailey, 2007: 32f.

<sup>97</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 63.

<sup>98</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 60ff.

<sup>99</sup> Dornan, 2012.

<sup>100</sup> Audollent, 1904 (300).

<sup>101</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 60ff.

<sup>102</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 60ff.

<sup>103</sup> Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*: 71-98. In Flint et al, 1999: 62ff.

higher level of illiteracy and low skill. Ogden, however, argued that the association of women with witchcraft in Ancient Greece was primarily an ideological act. Even if done so unconsciously, this validated the exclusion of women from power, and it was a convenient accusation, since it was difficult to refute in its secrecy.

For Graf the fact that almost all ancient literature was produced by men is sufficient to explain why the portraits of practitioners of magic were mostly of women. On the other hand, he believed that curse tablets were mostly the work of men because social status was much more important for men than for women, so men would have more reasons to curse others.<sup>104</sup> For Winkler, the misrepresentation of gender allowed men, “weakened by invading *eros*” to seek help “through the construction of public images which relocated both the victimage and the wickeder forms of erotic depredation”.<sup>105</sup>

Winkler also argued that erotic spells aimed at women show that “autonomous” (consensual and reciprocal) sexual desire from women was desirable, even though it was disapproved of in public. The belief that spells could cause such desire could be used to explain and even excuse this behavior from “respectable women”. To Winkler, the use of aggressive language used by men in tablets and the symbolism of dolls indicates a “historical misogyny” – exemplified by the famous Louvre Doll (image 2), transfixed by several nails, including one on the vagina<sup>106</sup>. In this aspect, Ogden fully disagreed. First, because aggressive language was generally common with curse tablets; second, because the piercing of voodoo dolls was not to indicate bodily harm, but restrain; and third, because ancient magic liked to make itself countercultural and paradoxical, and the harsh language was felt to be effective in its inappropriateness.<sup>107</sup>

## 2.4 Conclusion

Explaining the differences between magic, religion and technology as a whole, in the context of ancient Greece and Rome, is an uphill battle. First, because it was not always that the three concepts were actually separated – as Dickie explained, around the fifth century BCE and

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<sup>104</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 60ff.

<sup>105</sup> Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*: 71-98. In Flint et al, 1999: 62ff.

<sup>106</sup> Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*: 71-98. In Flint et al, 1999: 62.

<sup>107</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 60ff.

earlier, people did not make the distinction between them. Second, because even when they became separate ideas, it depended on who was explaining them, and what was the context behind it.<sup>108</sup>

When Johnston wrote about demons and demonology, she explained that the “clay” with which people expressed their fears with must remain malleable in order to remain effective; it is only when someone from the outside looks at it that a pattern emerges, with an artificial consistency.<sup>109</sup> The same analogy can be used to describe witches. People’s idea of a witch, whether referring to the professional, the malefic character or whatever other characteristic they want to use, only becomes relevant afterwards, as we (attempt to) study it; when the witch was portrayed in antiquity, they simply *were*.

As Collins pointed out, Rome had very few truly indigenous magical practices: most of their practices came from Greek magic, through absorption and adaptation, which in turn had been influenced by other cultures, such as the Egyptians and the Etruscans.<sup>110</sup> The Latin term *magia* came from the Greek *mageia*, referring to the actions of a *magoi*. But with time, those words started carrying negative connotations; among ancient scholars and even modern ones, the terms acquired different meanings. In Greek, we have the terms *magos*, *agyrtes* and *manteis* relating to sorcerers: while Luck had the terms in neutral ways - *magos* and *agyrtes* as “nightwandering wizards” and “itinerant diviners”, respectively<sup>111</sup>, Bailey saw them negatively - the two words grouped as “itinerant, disreputable beggar” and *manteis* as “less-than-respectable diviner”<sup>112</sup>; the LSJ gives us yet a third definition for the words: “enchanter, wizard, especially in bad sense, impostor, charlatan”, “begging, imposture” and “diviner, seer, prophet”, respectively.

The use of curses and magical rituals was, however, relatively popular. Even if professional sorcerers were seen through a negative light, Luck claimed they still performed their services for people of all social classes,<sup>113</sup> and we also have the amateur witches, who performed their own rituals and produced their own magical objects,<sup>114</sup> perhaps consulting magical papyri with

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<sup>108</sup> Dickie, 2005: 24.

<sup>109</sup> Johnston, in Paule, 2017: 19.

<sup>110</sup> Collins, 2008: 132.

<sup>111</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 103.

<sup>112</sup> Bailey, 2007: 17.

<sup>113</sup> Luck, 2006: 75.

<sup>114</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 54f.

instructions – now gathered as the *PGM*, and asking the gods for aid, especially chthonic deities; a popular candidate being Hecate.

Lastly, even though most people associate witchcraft with women – with the help of extensive literature including female characters, in practice it seems that there was not much of a difference. According to Bailey, evidence shows that men and women practiced witchcraft to a similar degree.<sup>115</sup> We must take this with a grain of salt, however, since our knowledge is less than optimal: as Ogden pointed out, not only do we not have that many sources on the word of women without interference of men, magical rites were mostly covert operations, so the practitioners did not identify themselves.<sup>116</sup>

### **3 Religion**

#### **3.1 Religion versus magic**

As Bailey argued, if we define magic as “an attempt to manipulate natural or supernatural forces by any means that are not physical”, we can see that religion, especially religious rituals and ceremonies, are not in any clear way separate from magic. In fact, ancient societies often regarded the rites of foreign peoples as magical practices; early Christian authorities explicitly did so, as I will show ahead. This does not mean that ancient peoples did not distinguish between the “religious” and the “magical”; however, the distinction is complex, and different from our modern categories, so this demarcation is never absolutely clear.<sup>117</sup> Greek and Roman magic is an interesting case: there is a separation between religion and magic, but only at a later stage, as we saw on chapter 2.1.

As I mentioned, it is common throughout history that, from an outsider’s point of view, a foreign religion may be odd or nonsensical. What was the national religion for the Persians possibly seemed as, for the Greek, like ritualistic magic. The witches of Greek myth, such as Circe and Medea, Apuleius, Apollonius of Tyana and even Jesus of Nazareth could represent, in different ways, a religious leader, prophet or miracle worker.<sup>118</sup> Bailey explained that forms of rites intended to affect the physical or spiritual form can be found in the earliest Western

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<sup>115</sup> Bailey, 2007: 32f.

<sup>116</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 60ff.

<sup>117</sup> Bailey, 2007: 12f.

<sup>118</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 95.

civilizations we know to have left written records. Mesopotamian city-states were not simply territories under a ruler but rather units linked to a particular patron god and their cult, governed by a priest-king that represented said god; under registers in their cuneiform writing there are curses and spells. The connection between our realm and the supernatural was essential to all aspects of life, and their success or misfortune depended on their good relationship with the gods or other forces; this means that disrupting this harmony in any way, knowingly or not, was taken seriously. Therefore, they had numerous rites, spells and rituals for purification and protection.<sup>119</sup>

As Luck wrote, conquered nations often were forced to adopt the religion of their conquerors, with their own beliefs being lowered to the level of magic and their gods becoming minor deities (or even evil figures). Power structures from real life were often superimposed on the religious beliefs, and similar laws of this world would to spiritual realms.<sup>120</sup> This is clear when we note that most ancient peoples did not believe in one single divine force ruling the world, but in many gods, theirs and other peoples'. Bailey explains that the belief in a range of lesser spiritual beings, such as the ones the Greeks referred to as *daimones*<sup>121</sup>, the Romans *daemones*<sup>122</sup>, and early Christians as “demons”, was also common. Unlike the Christian definition, however, these creatures were not inherently evil, but morally ambiguous, just as the gods themselves; while they could be harmful and destructive, humans could ask for help and protecting through acts and ceremonies.<sup>123</sup>

Luck cited some of the criteria that one could use to differentiate religion, i.e., acceptable rites, from magic - though they should be considered as guidelines, not hard rules, especially because they cannot be applied to every religion. For example, he wrote that magic is described as being manipulative, whereas religion relies on selflessness in the form of prayer and personal sacrifice; magic is about means to an end, religion focuses on the ends in themselves (salvation, eternal life); magic focuses on the individual needs, as immoral as they might be – i.e. curse tablets being about revenge, personal justice, unrequited love - , whereas religion is concerned with of the community; magic rites are usually private and secretive, whereas religious rites take place with as group, during the day and often available for all. Prayers to the gods are normally

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<sup>119</sup> Bailey, 2007: 13ff.

<sup>120</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 157f.

<sup>121</sup> LSJ, s.v. δαίμων, A II 2 “generally, spiritual or semi-divine being inferior to the Gods”, “esp. evil spirit, demon”

<sup>122</sup> OLD, “supernatural being or spirit, a spirit intermediary between man and the gods”.

<sup>123</sup> Bailey, 2007: 12.

said aloud, but magical incantations addressed to a daemon are usually silent or pronounced with a “special sound” (*susurrus*<sup>124</sup> *magicus*).<sup>125</sup> - Luck suggested this was due to the operator not wanting to acknowledge their wishes openly.<sup>126</sup>

But as Arbesmann explained, in many rituals the two attitudes existed simultaneously, often blending into one another; it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide in which category they would fall, magic or religion. He also wrote that while the reciter of the magic formula could seem cruder, this does not mean that magic formulas are older than prayer and that the latter grew out of the former.<sup>127</sup>

Official magic, such as rites, purifications of the community, and cursing of foreign nations, could be very close to religion, as Luck explained.<sup>128</sup> In ancient times, magic was part of everyday life, and ordinary people did not dwell much on it; Gordon identified five specific changes within society that caused people’s perception of magic to adapt to the new conditions: (1) the formation of the city state; (2) the change from independent cities to Hellenistic kingdoms; (3) the emergence of the Principate; (4) the crisis in the third century, which led to the tetrarchy; and (5) the growth of Christianity and transition to a Christian Empire. For much of the period diversity and plurality were the rule, and it was only towards the end of the classical period, in the late Roman republic, he explained, that magic and religious practices were controlled by magistrates<sup>129</sup> - more on this on chapter 3.3.

Bailey claimed that even for the Persians themselves, their *magoi* were not always benevolent - and Greek negative descriptions of them are also not hard to find. Heraclitus of Ephesus described them as wanderers, who practiced impious rites (though this is according to later sources, as his original text is not known to have survived), and the prophet Tiresias in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* can be seen in a negative light,<sup>130</sup> with the king accusing him of being a *magos* and an *agyrtes* (lines 387-90) – I discussed the terms in the previous chapter.

Bailey continued to explain that even though the practices of the *magoi* overlapped with other ritual practices in the Greek world, *mageia* never became an umbrella term for it. In turn,

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<sup>124</sup> OLD, “the sound made by one speaking in a low voice, a whisper”.

<sup>125</sup> Luck, 2006: 3.

<sup>126</sup> Luck, 2006: 55.

<sup>127</sup> Arbesmann, *New Catholic Encyclopedia II* (1967), 667. In Luck, 2006: 3.

<sup>128</sup> Luck, 2006: 9.

<sup>129</sup> Ankarloo & Clark, in Flint et al, 1999: xv-xvi.

<sup>130</sup> Bailey, 2007: 17.



the Romans turned *mageia* into a more generalized concept, though slowly. The word first appeared in the works of Cicero and Catullus, in the first century BCE, describing the works of the Persian *magoi* (now in Latin, *magi*).<sup>131</sup> But the authors had a previous notion of illicit rites, such as the *carmina*<sup>132</sup> (in the sense of harmful spells and incantations) and the practice of *veneficius*<sup>133</sup> (poisoning, though it could also cover forms of harmful spells).<sup>134</sup>

The Roman usage of “superstition”, i.e., “belief that is not based on [...] scientific knowledge, but is connected with old ideas about magic”<sup>135</sup>, has a long history. Bailey explained that the noun *superstitio*<sup>136</sup> appeared in the first century BCE in the work of Cicero – “for religion has been distinguished from superstition not only by philosophers but by our ancestors” (Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.71f, *non enim philosophi solum verum etiam maiores nostri superstitionem a religione separaverunt*) -, but the adjective *superstitiosus* can be found as early as the work of Plautus – “he’s a prophet, he’s telling the truth” (Plaut. *Curc.* 398, *superstitiosus hicquidem est, uera praedicat*). Note that, as Bailey pointed out, the original usage was apparently as divination or prophecy, central elements of the Roman religion<sup>137</sup> - we see this happening here, in Plautus’ text.

According to Luck, the development of magical beliefs in ancient times would be a good example of the differences between the general population and the “intellectual” elite. Magic has its roots in prehistoric times, but as soon as the studies of science and philosophy began to grow, circa the sixth century BCE, there seems to be a conception of a separation between the “enlightened” minority and the “backwards” majority. Magic was practiced by the rural population but could also be found in the cities, as we can see by the places curse tablets have been found. Long after Christianity became the norm, these ideas and practices survived among the *pagani*<sup>138</sup>, though in a simplified form.<sup>139</sup> However, as I wrote earlier, Paule claimed that

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<sup>131</sup> Bailey, 2007: 17f.

<sup>132</sup> OLD, s.v. *carmen*, 1b “a magical chant, spell, or incantation”; c “an Oracle or prophecy”.

<sup>133</sup> OLD, cf. *venefica*.

<sup>134</sup> Luck, 2006: 19.

<sup>135</sup> Cambridge Dictionary.

<sup>136</sup> OLD, 1 “an attitude of irrational religious awe or credulity, superstition; a particular superstitious belief or practice”; B “(applied, more or less disparagingly, to foreign or non- orthodox religious practices or doctrines; later app. without derogatory overtones)”.

<sup>137</sup> Bailey, 2007: 17f.

<sup>138</sup> OLD, s.v. *paganus*, “an inhabitant of a *pagus*, peasant, countryman” b “(pl.) the inhabitants of the low-lying districts of Rome”.

<sup>139</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 96f.

magic was a practice among all classes, and believing the lower class was uneducated would be factually incorrect.<sup>140</sup>

For Graf, there were two main factors for the separation of magic and religion. On the one side, philosophical reflections about the gods and the divine led to ideas that clashed with the ones made by those who practiced *mageia*; on the other, natural science, especially medicine, had begun to look at nature as a closed system, free from divine intervention, and any changes to it were due to earthly causes only. In both cases, the relationship between gods and humans was altered, and certain religious practices were now *mageia*. If Graf is correct, this initial concept of *mageia* was far from what we see now as magic; it was basically way of distinguishing between what were acceptable forms of religious behavior and what were not.<sup>141</sup>

Luck divided magical operations into two kinds, theurgical and goetic. The word *theurgia* seemed to mean, in some contexts, simply a kind of magic practiced by a respected priestlike figure (not a regular magician); *goeteia*, on the other hand, seemed to have a more negative meaning.<sup>142</sup>

According to Sheppard, Theurgy was a form of pagan religious magic that covered a range of magical practices, from cures to animating statues of gods. It was based on a theory of cosmic sympathy (the belief that all parts of the universe are connected)<sup>143</sup> but here it was taken further, extending beyond the material world and reaching the divine.<sup>144</sup>

Luck described Theurgy as a higher form of magic, that established a connection between the practitioner – a figure more priestlike than a *magos* – and the high deities. It was supposed to be grander and more deeply religious than *goeteia*, but in practice its principles and procedures were not essentially different. Maximus of Ephesus for example, a famous theurgist of the fourth century CE, had great influence on the emperor Julian but was later executed under the rule of emperor Valens.<sup>145</sup>

As Iamblichus wrote, “the theurgist, by virtue of mysterious signs, controls the powers of nature. [...] He does not really expect to perform all these amazing things, but by using such words he shows what kind of power he has and how great he is, and that because of his

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<sup>140</sup> Paule, 2017: 5.

<sup>141</sup> Dickie, 2005: 20f.

<sup>142</sup> Luck, 2006: 51f.

<sup>143</sup> Protopapadakis, 2021.

<sup>144</sup> Sheppard, 2015.

<sup>145</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 149f.

knowledge of these mysterious symbols he is obviously in touch with the gods” (Iambl., *Myst* 6.6).<sup>146</sup>

For Dodds, “theurgy, like spiritualism, may be described as magic applied to a religious purpose, and resting on supposed revelations of a religious character”<sup>147</sup> - while theologians debated the gods, theurgists attempted to influence them.<sup>148</sup> To Luck, however, it could be argued that the term *theurgia* was introduced to make magic seem more respectable, as practitioners did not want to be called simply a *magoi* or *goēs* – they were theurgists.<sup>149</sup> Their sacred book *The Chaldean Oracles* is lost to us, but according to Luck parts of it have been reconstructed.<sup>150</sup>

### 3.2 Christianity

Religion is a tricky topic to navigate, and when it comes to Christianity, one must be cautious regarding the sources. It is a rather polemic subject; some sources would be hostile and in disagreement with it, while others, as Luck reminded us, whole-heartedly believe in it and could have embellished or omitted some fact, therefore not being fully reliable either.<sup>151</sup>

From the very beginning, the history of Christianity can be seen as rooted in magic. As I mentioned before, the three Wise Men that travelled to see the infant Jesus were Persian *magoi*, and while for Christians the coming of Christ represented victory against the magicians, as Bailey wrote, for the non-Christians Jesus himself could be viewed as a *magos*, doing ritualistic performances.<sup>152</sup>

Luck explained that for the first centuries, Christians were not expressly forbidden from practicing magic; a fifth-century bishop would be familiar with pagan magic, and priests could provide amulets and charms for the faithful. One curious case Ogden mentioned, for example, is of a curse tablet found in Bath (Tab. Sulis 98, dating from the fourth century CE) that, although addressed to the pagan deity Sulis, curses the thief of a sum of money regardless of them being

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<sup>146</sup> In Luck, 2006: 53f; I was unable to find the original text, only the translated version in secondary literature.

<sup>147</sup> Dodds *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, pp. 200–201. In Luck, 2006: 52.

<sup>148</sup> Luck, 2006: 53f.

<sup>149</sup> Luck, 2006: 51f.

<sup>150</sup> Luck, 2006: 53f.

<sup>151</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 125.

<sup>152</sup> Bailey, 2007: 46.

pagan or Christian – the terms used indicated it being from of a Christian, so here we possibly have a Christian person using a pagan cursing technique.<sup>153</sup>

Exodus 22:18 expresses it clearly, “Do not allow a sorceress to live”<sup>154</sup>. We see in 1 Samuel 28, however, the telling of King Saul seeking supernatural guidance before a battle, even though he had exiled all sorcerers and diviners from his kingdom. He consulted a seer from Endor, and promised not to punish her: “Saul swore to her by the Lord, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this’”; she then brought him the words from Samuel (while the Old Testament naturally predates Christ and is not strictly related to Greek and Roman cultures, it is still an important part of the Christian belief system, so I consider it relevant for this discussion).

In 391, however, the Roman temples were closed, and in 529 Justinian shut down the Academy of Athens. The Christian Church had to fight for its position, and prove to others that their God was more powerful than the old ones – miracles were exclusive work of holy men<sup>155</sup>, and to this date, for an individual to be elevated to saint in the Roman Catholic Church it requires detailed proof of two miracles. Note that “miracle” means “an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs; an extremely outstanding or unusual event, thing, or accomplishment”<sup>156</sup> – it does not necessarily mean a positive phenomenon, simply one that is seemingly divine or supernatural. In king Saul’s case, for example: according to Bailey and Durrant, theologians in the medieval and early-modern periods argued that the seer could not have summoned the spirit of Samuel, as she was a witch – she must have summoned a demon instead, fooling the king.<sup>157</sup>

According to Luck, a good example of the Church’s resistance against magic can be found in the writings of saint John Chrysostom and saint Augustine, and from canon 36 of the Council of Laodicea, held between 341 and 381. The canon specifies that “priests and clergy may not be sorcerers (*magoi*), enchanters (*epaoidoi*)<sup>158</sup> or astrologers (*mathematikoi*)<sup>159</sup> and must not make

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<sup>153</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 46.

<sup>154</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 46.

<sup>155</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 158.

<sup>156</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

<sup>157</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 65f.

<sup>158</sup> LSJ, s.v. ἐπωδός, B “enchanter”.

<sup>159</sup> LSJ, μαθηματικός, 2 B “astrological, astrologer”.

amulets (*phylacteria*)<sup>160</sup>, which are poison for the soul”. This, Luck pointed out, suggests that the practices must have been considerably common, if they were condemned so strongly.<sup>161</sup>

Bailey explained that the followers of Christ could also seem like magicians to others – in Mark 3:14, for example, Jesus appoints his 12 disciples and gives them authority to expel demons in his name. The Acts of the Apostles recount many marvelous deeds attributed to the disciples, many considerably magical, such as people carrying the sick into the street so that Peter’s shadow could pass over them and heal them (Acts 5:15).<sup>162</sup> A six-century literary source tells us of St. Euthymius appearing in a dream to a man dying of pains in his stomach, opening the stomach up and drawing out a tin tablet.<sup>163</sup> Even Moses can be seen as a magician, as he had been “taught the whole wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in words and in deeds” (Acts 7:22).<sup>164</sup>

Simon is a religious leader mentioned in Acts 8:9 ff, “Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great”. Like a good “businessman”, as Luck called him, when he sees miracles being performed, he offers money to have the same abilities (Acts 8:18-19). For Luck, he seemed like a magus who borrowed from early Christianity (and other pagan cults) whatever he saw best - but unlike Jesus, Simon used demons for his own purposes and practiced necromancy; according to the *Clementine Recognitions* (2.15), he even claimed to have created a human being (when people asked to see the being, he said he had already made it disappear). He appears in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, where Simon and Peter challenged one another before Nero – a contest of spiritual powers. He manages to fly for a short period of time, but Peter breaks his spell and he falls to the ground, breaking his leg. Simon also manages to perform a miracle in Rome, though when Peter is present, his power does not work as it did with his absence.<sup>165</sup>

According to Bailey and Durrant, saint Augustine converted to Christianity in 385, and then became a priest and later bishop of the city of Hippo. For the rest of his life, he dedicated to demonstrating Christianity’s superiority to pagan religions, particularly that pagan deities were actually demons and pagan religious practices were mere superstitions. His main works on magic

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<sup>160</sup> LSJ, s.v. φυλακτήριον, 2 “safeguard, security; amulet”.

<sup>161</sup> Luck, 2006: 23.

<sup>162</sup> Bailey, 2007: 46f.

<sup>163</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 76.

<sup>164</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 115.

<sup>165</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 125ff.

and evil were *De Divinatione Daemonum* (“On the Divination of Demons”, dating 406) and *De Civitate Dei* (“The City of God”, 413-25).<sup>166</sup> For Augustine, as Bailey and Durrant explained, evil represented the lack of good, and the devil could lure humans to fall into temptation with heresy and apostasy, including witchcraft. The main sin of a witch, according to the canon *Episcopi* for example, was that she drew others into heresy and imperiled her soul and others’.<sup>167</sup>

An important figure when discussing early Christianity is Libanius. He lived in Antioch in the 4<sup>th</sup> century – as Burr reminded us, though demographically the population of Antioch at the time was more than 50 per cent Christian (the name “Christians” was first applied to the followers of Jesus there – Acts 11:26), Greek was spoken among the religious communities, and it can be argued that Hellenistic cultural values still influenced public and private life.

She explained that Libanius was close to emperor Julian, but their paganism differed - his views on religion cannot be separated from his devotion to the culture of learning, epitomized for him in rhetoric. For him, she claimed, if Christianity could be contained within the pluralism of Hellenistic culture and religion, then it could coexist among other philosophical phenomena one might not personally endorse; however, if it threatened to eliminate polytheism, it would amount to the “unthinkable destruction of Hellenism”.<sup>168</sup>

And of course, we must discuss Jesus Christ. In some ways, Jesus seems like other sorcerers: he exorcized demons, cured ailments, predicted future events and so forth. As Luck wrote, much as his life, as told in the Gospels, has parallels in other myths, such as the story of his birth, the dangers in his life (especially as an infant), and challenges of spiritual powers against demons (in his case, Satan). In John 11, for example, Jesus brings Lazarus from the dead – necromancy is not an uncommon practice among magicians, including a rite performed by Erichtho (chapter 5.4), who is described in the *Pharsalia* as the furthest thing from a saint; in Mark 7:33-34 he cured a deaf-mute man by spitting on his tongue and said “Ephphatha!” (“be opened”) – which could be interpreted as an incantation.<sup>169</sup>

But as Luck wrote, his magic was less performative, doing so out of compassion and not accepting anything in return; he was even impatient with those that required proof in order to believe him. Faith in him was important, but not strictly necessary – he could cure people even

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<sup>166</sup> Bailey & Durrant 2012: 29.

<sup>167</sup> Bailey & Durrant 2012: 70.

<sup>168</sup> Burr, 2006.

<sup>169</sup> Bailey, 2007: 46.

when they were unaware of it (Matthew 8). He also did not claim to perform miracles through his own power, but rather by the power of God through him, without the need for complex rituals and spells.<sup>170</sup>

### 3.3 Laws against magic

Understanding the ancient laws against magic can be a good way of seeing how the general acceptance of magic evolved throughout the years. As Bailey and Durrant reminded us, witchcraft and its related practices, such as necromancy and some forms of divination, have been subject of several laws, including the famous Code of Hammurabi, from circa 1750 BCE.<sup>171</sup>

According to Collins, scholars know very little on Greek laws against magic from the classical period; for some city-states, such as Athens, no legislation concerning magic has survives, while for others like Teos, there is only evidence of a narrow prohibition against harmful drugs. This does not mean that they were not concerned with magic; there is indirect evidence that the Greeks considered some types of magic more harmful than others, and several legal cases concerning the effects of them – especially when they resulted in injury or death.

The legislative cases we do find were usually over the use of *pharmaka*, which is an ambiguous term (the Latin equivalent, *venenum*<sup>172</sup>, can be equally unclear); in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they were usually accompanied by adjectives signaling if they were beneficial or harmful: e.g. “Here, take this potent herb, and go to the house of Circe” (Hom *Od.* 10.287, τῆ, τόδε φάρμακον ἐσθλὸν<sup>173</sup> ἔχων ἐς δώματα Κίρκης ἔρχεσθ). Similarly, in legal cases it was not a matter of *pharmaka*, but of its context and the damage it caused; the penalty for intentional homicide, Collins pointed out, was execution or permanent exile. The “Teian Curses”, a fifth-century BCE inscription from Teos, forbids the manufacture of harmful drugs – referring to *pharmaka* that harmed or killed, not to all cases of it.

There are cases of erotic spells in which a *philtron*<sup>174</sup> is used, such as the one told by Aristotle or a member of his school is the *Magna Moralia* – in this case, though the husband

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<sup>170</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 124f.

<sup>171</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 25f.

<sup>172</sup> OLD, 1 “a potent herb or other substance used for medical, magical, etc., purposes”; B “a magic or supernatural influence”; 2 “a poison”; B “the use of poison, poisoning (as a criminal offence)”. Cf *venefica*.

<sup>173</sup> LSJ, s.v. ἐσθλός, “good”.

<sup>174</sup> LSJ, s.v. φίλτρον, “love-charm”.

died, the wife was acquitted on the ground that she had not intended to kill him.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, Deianira used a *philtron* on her husband Herakles to increase his affection, killing him in the process, in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*.

Collins explained that, when it came to magic, Roman jurists sought out the Greek precedents, using Greek terminology to explain it; however, they also had their own interpretations. As earlier statutes were interpreted by later jurists, it can seem that the Romans always condemned magical cases, which is not the case. By the second century CE *magia* had become merged with *maleficium*<sup>176</sup>, which originally had no connotation with magic

The earliest code of Roman law concerning magic is found in the Twelve Tables, dating from the fifth century BCE. There is much controversy concerning the Tables, as Collins explained, as we only know of it through writers of the late Republic. He mentions an example of later viewpoints that were projected onto the Twelve Tables, coming from Pliny the Elder, an important source on them. As one law restricted the use of evil charms, *malum carmen*, he and other scholars took it as meaning incantation or spell. Recently, however, it has been demonstrated that a *malum carmen* could also refer to slander or the use of abusive language. Therefore, we cannot say without a doubt that the law referred to the use of magic exclusively.

The most important piece of legislation against poisoners and magicians (*veneficus*) is the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis ete veneficiis*, or “Law of Cornelius on Assassins and Poisoners/Sorcerers”, from 81 BCE – this law came to influence, in one way or another, all subsequent laws against magic, according to Collins. As he noted, with the case of later jurists reinterpreting the original terms, the Cornelian law gradually extended to include other suspicious behaviors; the original intent seems to have been against those accused of murder by stealth. If this is correct, the issue was the intend to kill with poison, not the *venena* itself.<sup>177</sup> According to Bailey and Durrant, Apuleius was tried under this law, as well as being accused of divination and using “voodoo” dolls.<sup>178</sup>

Bailey and Durrant mentioned other cases of laws against magic. In 186 BCE the Senatorial Decree of Bacchanals conflated magic and divination with treason, and allegedly 5,000 people were executed. In the fourth century, emperor Constantine legislated against magic, especially

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<sup>175</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 121f.

<sup>176</sup> OLD, “a misdeed, crime, offence”; 3 *-ium* [*magicum*] “black magic, sorcery”.

<sup>177</sup> Collins, 2008: 132ff.

<sup>178</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 121f.



erotic spells - he exempted healing and weather magic, the latter as it benefited agriculture. In 357 and 358 Constantius II forbade astrology, divination and augury (the interpretation of omens); further prohibitions of sorcery and witchcraft, with the support of the Church, came with the *Codex Theodosianus* in 438 and the *Codex Justinianus* in 529.<sup>179</sup>

### 3.4 Conclusion

As Lucretius wrote in his *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things): “When man’s life lay for all to see foully groveling upon the ground, crushed beneath the weight of Superstition, which displayed her head from the regions of heaven, lowering over mortals with horrible aspect, a man of Greece was the first that dared to uplift mortal eyes against her, the first to make stand against her; for neither fables of the gods could quell him, nor thunderbolts, nor heaven with menacing roar, but all the more they goaded the eager courage of his soul, so that he should desire, first of all men, to shatter the confining bars of nature’s gates”. (62-71, *Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret in terris oppressa gravi sub religione, quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans, primum Graius homo mortalitatis tollere contra est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra, quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem inritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret*).

As Bailey wrote, religious rites and ceremonies are not in a clear way distinguishable from magic;<sup>180</sup> one could argue that the reason we can differentiate magic from religion is societal convention. Cultures evolve, important events change mindsets and some activities become “backwards” or “occult”,<sup>181</sup> while others remain the norm, as he explained. Even further, they can be outlawed – strictly forbidden from being practiced, because the ruler’s beliefs would go against them.

Luck summed up the different positions of scholars on the relationship between magic and religion in four arguments: that magic becomes religion; that religion attempts to reconcile personal powers that magic has failed; that religion and magic have common roots; and that

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<sup>179</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 121f.

<sup>180</sup> Bailey, 2007: 12f.

<sup>181</sup> Bailey, 2007: 12f.

magic is a degenerate form of religion.<sup>182</sup> I would agree with how he described it: magic in ancient times was “a religion that has been distorted and misinterpreted beyond recognition by a hostile environment”.<sup>183</sup>

While Luck claimed that the turn into magical beliefs can be explained by the difference between the *pagani* and the elite, who would (or could) learn more about philosophy and science,<sup>184</sup> Paule wrote that the lower class was not, in fact, uneducated.<sup>185</sup> Assuming the Roman society was as nuanced as our own, perhaps it is not a matter of class, but intellectuality. Social classes are not a monolith when it comes to knowledge, and it is plausible that some people in higher classes believed in magic, and some people in lower classes did not. And there were tablets, for example, found in the cities, as opposed to it being something exclusive to the countryside. Theurgy somewhat bridged the gap, being more religious than *goeteia* (and theurgists being more respectable than the *goēs*, but as Luck explained, their principles were not that different.<sup>186</sup>

As we live in the Christian world, it is important to note that a main breaking point is the arise of Christianity. Miracles are for holy-men and saints; if happening through the powers of others, they were possibly influenced by demons.<sup>187</sup> As the expression goes, *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (“no salvation outside the Church”). But when looked closely, much of Christianity overlap with magic, especially at the early centuries. Many apostles, even Jesus, performed rites like sorcerers, but under a different name – even if, Luck pointed out, their rites seemed to have come from a place of compassion and the general good, them not accepting compensation for what they did.<sup>188</sup>

Another way we could try to separate religion and magic is, certain magical practices were outlawed - though one could argue that Christians were also persecuted in the first centuries CE. But, as Collins claimed, the main issue with witchcraft was the consequence of it, specifically it resulting in injury or death; *pharmaka*, the most common case we find in the legislation, was in itself an ambiguous term, ranging from magical potion to poison. As Collins explained, the legal

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<sup>182</sup> Preuss, Frazer, Marrett and Schmidt; in Luck, 2006: 34.

<sup>183</sup> Luck, 2006: 38.

<sup>184</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 96f.

<sup>185</sup> Paule, 2017: 5.

<sup>186</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 149f.

<sup>187</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 158.

<sup>188</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 124f.

basis for the prosecution of witches in late medieval and early modern times came from the Roman laws;<sup>189</sup> the influence of these laws lasted for centuries, and is most likely a part of our interpretation of witchcraft today.

In the end, we can see it the way Tylor wrote: magic was either bad religion or bad science – bad religion because it did not evolve to Christianity, bad science because it did not evolve to what we understand now as technology.<sup>190</sup>

#### 4 Practices

I will now discuss concrete examples of magic performed at ancient times, found through archeological finds and texts. The most common magical artifact is by far the curse tablet, but there were other items such as dolls and amulets used to either cursing or protection.

My goal here is that by learning about these magical artifacts we can better contextualize ancient magic, as we have examples we can see and read ourselves (or, most likely, their translations). Though many important figures have made use of artifacts such as these, which we will see on chapter 5, many were likely made by everyday people, who are not part of epic poems but rather amateurs looking for revenge or better luck.

These practices spanned several centuries, though they naturally changed and evolved with the times. Most of these practices were presumably made under the belief of sympathetic magic; as Luck explained, sympathetic magic (“sympathy” here meaning action and reaction) is based on three principles: similarity (between objects or substances, for example), contact (two object that touch might exchange properties and influence one another) and contrariety (antipathy, similar to sympathy).<sup>191</sup> This means that often the material of the object was relevant, or how it was related to their target-person – when we have that information.

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<sup>189</sup> Collins, 2008: 132.

<sup>190</sup> Tylor, in Phillips “In Search of the Occult”, *Helios* 15: 151–70. In Luck, 2006: 1f.

<sup>191</sup> Luck, 2006: 5.

## 4.1 Curse tablets

As Jordan described, curse tablets were tablets made of lead, usually small thin sheets, used with the intent of influencing the well-being of people or animals against their will through supernatural means.<sup>192</sup> According to Ogden, over 1600 tablets are known today, mostly written in Greek; the oldest set, containing 22 tablets, is from the Greek colony of Selinus, in Sicily, and were made around the fifth century BCE.<sup>193</sup> The majority of the tablets I use as example in this thesis are from the *Tab. Sulis* corpus, from Bath, England. Not all tablets found are available for studying, as some are unfortunately too damaged or too fragile to unroll<sup>194</sup>. An example is shown on image 3.

Several scholars, such Faraone, Graf, Audollent and Ogden, use the same classifications for curse tablets.<sup>195</sup> They are separated into five categories: litigation curses (including political curses), competition curses, trade curses, erotic curses (separation or attraction) and prayers for justice. Here are Ogden's explanations for each:

Litigation curses are believed to have been prepared before or during trials and were crafted in hopes of influencing the speeches made in their course; their purpose was deliverance, not revenge. It is also believed that they were only made by the defendants (as in, the people with something to lose), based on their vocabulary; though there is no reason why prosecutors would not use tablets to secure a conviction. The tablets found rarely mention the subject of the legal dispute they were aimed at. The tablets from Selinus fall in this category – they also seem to have been rather popular in classical Athens.

The earliest competition curse can be found in a passage in Pindar from 476 BCE, and before the Roman Empire, they addressed theaters rather than sporting events. The majority of competition curses, however, are Roman circus curses from the second century CE onwards; Ogden believes this is due to circuses were taken very seriously during the empire, and money was often involved. An imperial decree of 389 CE required that those found of magic in the circus be publicly exposed (*Theodosian code* 9.16.11), and charioteers were also punished under

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<sup>192</sup> Jordan, in Flint et al, 1999: 38.

<sup>193</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 3f.

<sup>194</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 4.

<sup>195</sup> I am unsure of who was the first scholar to do, in order to give them proper credit.

it. It is worth noting that even in the Latin west, circus curses were usually written in Greek – Ogden suggested that this could be due to most charioteers coming from the Greek east.

Trade curse tablets are almost exclusively from the classical and Hellenistic Greek worlds, many from classical Athens. They seem to have been made usually between rival tradesmen, such as shopkeepers, carpenters, smiths, scribes and brothelkeepers. Their victims compass virtually everyone, women and men, free and enslaved. Note that though some tablets reference some individuals as pimps, this could be slander and should not always be taken literally.

Erotic or amatory curse tablets are particularly important: not only do they contain a quarter of the classifiable tablets found, they are, according to Ogden, the category of tablets mostly clearly forced to evolve under the circumstances under which they were made. There are literary sources that show the Greek used erotic magic since at least the archaic period (such as a girdle Hera borrows from Aphrodite as a love charm in order to seduce Zeus – *Iliad* 14.198-223 and 292-351), but erotic tablets only appear in the fourth century BCE, well after we find other types of binding spells. It was not until the second century CE, when the curse tablet culture was well-established, that tablets were finally used for attraction. Although they referred to binding, to “bind” a lover to oneself was not to restrain them. Two types of erotic curses are found: separation curses and attraction or aphrodisiac curses; separation curses disappear in the third century CE, attraction curses in the fourth. All forms of sexual permutations have survived, but the most common found was men pursuing women.

Finally, prayers for justice are, to Ogden, the most distinctive category of curse tablets. Some scholars argue that prayers for justice should not be classed with curse tablets, as they are so distinctive: on one hand, they are usually written in lead sheets and transfixed by nails, they intended to influence the actions of people against their knowledge (as other tablets)<sup>196</sup>, and they were typically placed in common deposition sites for other tablets, such as sanctuaries and sacred springs; on the other, they do not use the usual binding formula nor *voces magicae*, they usually addressed major deities (though was still a preference for those with chthonic connections), they had a conditional or pre-established duration instead of being open-ended (as in, they were to be lifted when the curses had achieved justice), and their language was humble and praising the

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<sup>196</sup> Jordan, “A survey of Greek defixiones not included in the special corpora”, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 26: 151; in Flint et al, 1999: 38.

powers invoked – which was more common with regular religious practice than with magic. Besides, they usually did not include names, unless the curser had a suspect in mind, while some of the other tables only had names on them. The most common justice tablets sought the restitution of stolen goods – such as all but one of the 130 tablets from Bath.<sup>197</sup>

According to Ogden, the use of curse tablets spread out during the imperial period, especially around the second century CE, and tablets were found in every modern country around the Mediterranean and in Britain. Given the immense geographical spread, it is surprising that curse tablets were considerably uniform in their texts. From the second century CE onwards many of the tablets show inputs from various cultures, particularly Egyptian and Jewish.

Latin tablets were mostly found in the Western half of the empire, dating from the third and fourth centuries CE and are mostly prayer-for-justice types – these make up the majority of two important batches, Bath (*Tab. Sulis*) and Uley. It is difficult to determine when the tradition of cursing died out; Ogden estimated it to have been between the sixth and eighth centuries CE.

As for what standard term the ancients used to the curse tablets (if they even had one), the best Greek option according to Ogden is *katadesmos*<sup>198</sup>, “a binding”, which expresses either the physical form of the tablets (rolled up), their function of restrain (not physical, as I will discuss ahead), or both. The best Latin term is *defixio*<sup>199</sup> (plural *defixiones*), only found in one obscure source, but derivate of the verb *defigere*<sup>200</sup>, which is actually found in British curse tablets. Regardless, the word *defixio* has become the standard term for curse tablets.<sup>201</sup>

I mentioned that almost all tablets found are made out of lead or a lead alloy; Ogden believed this is due to lead being more durable than other options (no wax tablets have survived, but wax dolls have been found), cheap, easy to obtain, and it provided an easily inscribable surface (curses are not the only types of documents found inscribed in lead). Curse tablets were also found in bronze, copper, tin, ostraca, limestone, talc, and gemstone; the PGM contain recipes for curse tablets in gold or silver (PGM X 24-35)<sup>202</sup> and iron (PGM IV 2145-2240)<sup>203</sup>, but for some reason, those found are classified today as amulets.

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<sup>197</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 31ff.

<sup>198</sup> LSJ, s.v. δεσμός, “2. bonds, chains”.

<sup>199</sup> OLD, s.v. *defixus*, “motionless, still”.

<sup>200</sup> OLD, s.v. *defigo*, 1 “to fix by thrusting down into something, plant, embed”; 3 “to keep (one’s thoughts, eyes, etc.) directed (on), fix, focus; (pass.) to have one’s attention, etc., directed”.

<sup>201</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 3ff.

<sup>202</sup> Betz, 1986: 149.

<sup>203</sup> Betz, 1986: 76.

But also, Ogden claimed, one reason could be because lead had magical associations: some Attic curse tablets demanded that the victims become as cold and useless (*achrestos*)<sup>204</sup> as the lead in which the curse was inscribed.<sup>205</sup> One other wishes that the victim's tongue comes to resemble lead,<sup>206</sup> and two others request that the victim's tongue actually becomes lead.<sup>207</sup> In the imperial period lead from water pipes was apparently significant, as a papyrus recipe for curse tablets (PGM VII 396-404)<sup>208</sup> instructs that the lead should be taken from a cold-water pipe, and a Sethian tablet claims to have been made from one. Lead from a water pipe was colder than usual (drawing a parallel to corpses), and water was relevant in the activation of curse tablets – or perhaps the destruction of a public water pipe was dangerous and countercultural, which in itself increased the magical powers to the curse - it was common for magical ingredients to be dangerous or difficult to obtain, such PGM IV 2943-66<sup>209</sup> requiring the eyes of a living bat.<sup>210</sup>

Curse tablets pierced with nails, as Ogden explained, were common among classic tablets, but rare in the imperial period. One tablet, for example, shows five nail holes, and its text refers specifically not only to “binding” but “nailing down” their enemies<sup>211</sup>; another asks the opponent's tongue to be “stabbed”<sup>212</sup>. The meaning behind nailing the tablet may have been different in prayers of justice: one of them has a nail-hole on the top, suggesting that it was nailed up intending for the thief to read it.<sup>213</sup> The nail itself could also be special: Pamphile, one of Apuleius' witches (chapter 5.5), maintained a supply of nails from crucifixions (Metamorphoses 3.17).

Ogden further explained that the curse could be made more effective if it was accompanied by something that belonged to the victim (*ousia*<sup>214</sup>), usually hair or pieces of clothing - *pars pro toto* magic, “part for whole”, meaning that the fragment would symbolize the person as a whole; if a part of the victim was buried with a corpse, it could have a “deadening”

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<sup>204</sup> LSJ, s.v. ἀχρηστος, “useless”.

<sup>205</sup> Wunsch, 1987.

<sup>206</sup> Wunsch, 1987: n. 67.

<sup>207</sup> Wunsch, 1987: n. 96-7.

<sup>208</sup> Betz, 1986: 128.

<sup>209</sup> Betz, 1986: 94.

<sup>210</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 11ff.

<sup>211</sup> Gager, 1992: 131 (44).

<sup>212</sup> Gager, 1992: 159f (66).

<sup>213</sup> Gager, 1992: 190 (90).

<sup>214</sup> LSJ, s.v. οὐσία, “in Magic, a material thing by which a connection is established between the person to be acted upon and the supernatural agent”.

effect on them. This technique was mostly used in erotic spells, whether of attraction or separation. I mentioned on chapter 2.4 that cursers also did not name themselves on the tablets, to avoid retribution - from living and dead; the exception to this were prayers for justice and erotic spells.<sup>215</sup>

There were five main places for a curse tablet to be placed in: graves, chthonic sanctuaries, bodies of water, a place relevant to the curse or its victim, and sanctuaries of non-chthonic deities (mostly for prayers for justice). Ogden believed that graves were the first sites used, though both graves and chthonic sanctuaries were the cases of the curse tablets from Selinus. It is possible that bodies of water were not commonly used before the imperial period, and earlier Greek tablets found in wells or other bodies of water were not in their original deposition place, i.e., thrown away as trash. Water was associated with corpses in its coldness, and it could potentially be a connection with chthonic deities.

The preferred graves for deposition were those of who died by violent means, or before their time – their souls were believed to remain restless until the age they should have died as elders, and they would wander by their graves and cemeteries, especially at night. These souls were thought to be more likely to help, either out of enthusiasm or bitterness – magicians wanted to redirect this bitterness towards their goal. The PGM included a hymn that explicitly begged off the help of one who died a violent death (PGM IV 1390-1495);<sup>216</sup> it is also the case of Dido when she cursed Aeneas in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, and Canidia (chapter 5.3) when she and her fellow witches kill a boy when manufacturing a love potion. Another option on the same line was battlefields or places of execution: fragments of tablets from Amathous in Cyprus were found at the bottom of a shaft under human bones, assumingly a mass grave, and the tablets state “I invoke you, demons (*daimones*<sup>217</sup>), many men buried together, and dead by violence, and dead before your time and nameless...”.<sup>218</sup> Curses could promise to “free” the spirit of the dead person if they do the curser’s binding; graves themselves could also be protected with their own curses, usually inscriptions on wood or stone.

As Ogden reminded us, two main issues arose with depositing tablets on graves: one, it could anger the ghost or the infernal powers; two (a likely one), it risked angering the corpse’s

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<sup>215</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 10ff.

<sup>216</sup> Betz, 1986: 64.

<sup>217</sup> LSJ s.v. δαίμων, A II 2. “generally, spiritual or semi-divine being inferior to the Gods.; esp. evil spirit, demon”.

<sup>218</sup> Faraone 1991: 23 (11).



family and the local citizens. Greek imperial-period inscriptions tell us that those who interfered with corpses would be punished with a fine, paid either to the family or to the authorities responsible for protecting it - in 359 BCE Ammianus Marcellinus declared that those who dug up graves for magical reasons were to be executed. The risks and unpleasantness of the task, however, were to make the magical efficacy of the curse more potent<sup>219</sup>.

It is not clear if the souls were supposed to perform the acts on the curses themselves, or pass along the message to greater infernal powers, as they could hover between the two worlds. The dead were also good for binding spells, as they represented lifelessness and uselessness. We have here the concept of *ateleia*<sup>220</sup>, “unfulfillment”, a state wished upon some curse victims; this is more than just restraint: the *atelestoi* were those that died and did not receive due rites - like those that died by violence or before their time, these spirits cannot rest and are bitter and angry (we see this illustrated in the *Odyssey*, “Do not, when you depart, leave me behind unwept and unburied and turn away; I might become a cause of the gods’ wrath against you”; 11.72 μή μ’ ἄκλαυτον ἄθραπτον ἰὼν ὄπιθεν καταλείπειν νοσφισθεῖς, μή τοί τι θεῶν μήνιμα γένωμαι). As an Attic tablet presents, “And as this corpse lies here “unfulfilled” (*atelēs*<sup>221</sup>), so let all that comes from Theodora, both her words and her actions, towards Charias and towards other people, be ‘unfulfilled’ (*atelesta*). I bind Theodora before Hermes of the underworld and the ‘unfulfilled’ (*atelestoi*) and Tethys” (from Procopius’ *Wars* 1.24).<sup>222</sup>

According to Ogden, the earlier curse tablets usually did not intend on their victims dying, though changed in later tablets:<sup>223</sup> e.g., “let him perish and fall, just as you lie (here), prematurely dead”.<sup>224</sup> The main idea on curse tablets was of binding, restraining, and their language reflects it. The most basic tablets, likely the earliest ones, simply contained the name of the victim or victims in the nominative. Next would be came the addition of a verb of binding such as *katadeō*, with the name(s) then in the accusative. They soon got even more varied, and expressed binding in more indirect ways; there were also tablets that asked the gods to the binding on the curser’s behalf. Tablets using the direct binding verbs often repeated said word many times, or used them separately for different parts of the victim’s body - the body parts that

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<sup>219</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 15ff.

<sup>220</sup> LSJ, s.v. ἀτέλεια, “incompleteness, imperfection”.

<sup>221</sup> LSJ s.v. ἀτελής, 1, “not brought to an end or issue, unaccomplished”.

<sup>222</sup> Gager, 1992: 90 (22).

<sup>223</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 15ff.

<sup>224</sup> Gager, 1992: 64 (11).

were singled could be relevant to the curse, such as tongues in curses related to lawsuits. Some aimed to prevent the victim from sleeping, eating or drinking – which could be an indirect way of harming the victim (an athlete underperforming, for example) -, but usually these curses were conditional, until the victim did what the curser wanted.<sup>225</sup>

Along binding was the idea of twistedness, “restraining thought confusion” – this was common with voodoo dolls, as we will see ahead. Magical texts were twisted in many ways; they could be physically twisted, by rolling of the lead sheets, but also on the texts themselves, often written in a twisted way. Ogden explained that it is common to find texts written in “boustrophedon” form, i.e., alternating from left to right and right to left; they can also have lines upside down or in a spiral, for example. The names of the victims usually remained undistorted, or just in reverse-spelling, so it would not conceal their identity, just cause a form of sympathetic confusion. The meaning of the words might also be twisted: the tablets addressed to one called Pasionax begin with “Whenever you, O Pasionax, read this letter...” but then change to “...but neither will you, Pasionax, read this letter...”<sup>226</sup>

## 4.2 Voodoo dolls

When I mention voodoo dolls in this thesis, it is important to note that I am not talking about the practices of modern voodoo (or Vodun, a Caribbean religion) and these dolls are not connected to it; the term is merely a convenient descriptive to gives us a good notion of the nature of these objects.<sup>227</sup>

Faraone’s study of known “voodoo dolls”, or *kolossoi*<sup>228</sup>, contained 38 separate finds - a “find” includes groups of dolls found together. Though there were fewer cases of dolls when compared to tablets, they show a similar geographical spread – they are also found already in the archaic period, which means they are an antecedent to curse tablets.<sup>229</sup> Though it can be tricky to define the use of an object, he considered these dolls magical if they have two or more of these criteria: twisted arms or legs behind its back, as if they are bound; the doll is transfixed with

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<sup>225</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 26ff.

<sup>226</sup> Gager, 1992: 130f (43).

<sup>227</sup> Bailey, 2007: 23ff.

<sup>228</sup> LSJ s.v. κολοσσός, “generally, statue; of small images”.

<sup>229</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 71ff.

nails; a part of the dolls such as the head, torso or feet are twisted back to front; the doll is found closed in a tight container; there is the name of a victim transcribed on it; or if the doll was found in a grave, sanctuary or body of water.<sup>230</sup>

Similar to tablets, Ogden explained, most dolls found were made of lead; the second most popular material was bronze. Wax dolls are only found in late antique Egypt, but there are tablets referring to the use of “lead and wax”, which could refer to an accompanying wax doll.<sup>231</sup> Clay was also used, and many dolls were made of terracotta (as we can see on image 2), but many unbaked clay dolls have not survived to our times. Cast bronze and terracotta dolls were more difficult to make than clay or wax ones, but lead was malleable enough to be able to mold by hand. The quality of dolls varies, from detailed models to some barely recognizable as figures. Canidia used a doll made of wool and one made of wax for erotic purposes; Ogden believed that some wax dolls were activated by melting, though many were found in tombs still intact. *Ousia* such as human hair could also be incorporated.<sup>232</sup>

The deposition sites for voodoo dolls were similar to those for curse tablets, graves being the most common – Ogden suggested that they may have originally been placed in graves to lay restless ghosts to rest by binding.<sup>233</sup> Other sites are sanctuaries, (though scholars are not positively sure any of them were chthonic), and in water, such as riverbeds and a sewers – or what used to be a body of water.

As Ogden explained, these dolls represented in concrete form the binding expressed in curse tablets. In some cruder dolls this can be not as clear, but in many dolls the binding is obvious, their arms and legs twisted and bent – often in violent ways, particularly in the neck and legs. The purpose of this is believed to be not to hurt or kill the victims, but to show a “confusing” design (similar to the twisted inscriptions on curse tablets); different distortions, such as enlarged male genitals and demonic faces, can also be found. Some dolls were actually mutilated: the head could be cut off, broken or missing limbs, or even flattened. Some were transfixed by nails (such as the one on image 2), but like the binding, the purpose was seemingly to restrain rather

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<sup>230</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 3.

<sup>231</sup> Gager, 1992: 158 (64).

<sup>232</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 16.

<sup>233</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 16.

than maim. Dolls could be put in small containers, simulating a coffin, some made of lead and possibly inscribed - like curse tablets.<sup>234</sup>

According to Ogden, even though some dolls were very detailed, it is believed that none give the appearance of having been made to portrait a specific person. When a doll was inscribed with a name we can safely assume it was the victim's, but some dolls were inscribed with more than one person's name. Dido, however, burned an actual bust of Aeneas in the *Aeneid*, along with his clothes and belongings, in her suicide-curse against him.

Dolls could also be made out of dead animals. A pair of Latin tablets tell that a dead puppy was used with them<sup>235</sup> – dogs were associated with Hecate, as I mentioned previously; Ovid mentions the binding of tongues to stop gossip by sewing up the mouth of a fish (*Ov. Fast.* 2.577-8, *quodque pice adstrinxit, quod acu traiecit aena, obsutum maenae torret in igne caput*). Animals could also be the victims of dolls, specifically when the goal was to bind the animal they represented:<sup>236</sup> nine horse figurines from Roman Antioch, inscribed with what seems to be both horse and human names, curses the animals and the chariot-drivers.<sup>237</sup>

A good example of the use of dolls is the case of the orator Libanius, who got sick and lost the ability to speak. A chameleon voodoo doll was found in his lecture room, with its head chopped off and stuffed between its hind legs, one of its feet closing its mouth (symbolizing silence), and the other chopped off (so he could not gesticulate). Once the doll was removed, Libanius recovered (*Lib. Oration* 1.9).<sup>238</sup>

### 4.3 *Voces magicae* and symbols

*Voces magicae*, “magical words” or “words of power”, are words that are not obviously meaningful in Greek or any other language. They were common during and after the imperial period, and in translations they are usually transliterated in small capitals. As Ogden explained, they are yet another part of the twistedness we find in tablets and dolls, this time in language.

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<sup>234</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 71ff.

<sup>235</sup> Gager, 1992: 143f (53).

<sup>236</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 75ff.

<sup>237</sup> Gager, 1992: 15.

<sup>238</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 27f.

According to him, the most important group of *vores magicae* are the “Ephesian letters” (*Ephesia grammata*) – not to be confused with the Epistle to the Ephesians; the name may derive from the Babylonian ep̄esu, “bewitch”. Their usual order is *askion, kataskion, lix, tetrax, damnameneus* and *aision* (or *aisia*) (ασκιον, κατασκιον, λιξ, τετραξ, δαμναμενευς, αισιον / αισια), but they can be rearranged into a hexameter. Scholars have found evidence of them being in circulation since at least the fifth century BCE, but they are only found on curse tablets from the first century CE on. The *Ephesia grammata* could have protective qualities that made them suitable for amulets, such as a Menander fragment<sup>239</sup> that used them to ward off spells from newlywed couples.

*Voces magicae* were considered to be unintelligible to mortals, which made them powerful: in circa 300 CE Iamblichus claimed that foreign names (*barbara onomata*),<sup>240</sup> which could include *vores magicae*, lost their power when translated to Greek. On the other hand, Ogden claimed, most words were at first corruptions of names of deities or demons in some language – Graeco-Egyptian professionals might have progressively distorted them and broken their metrical pattern. Regardless, the more the *vores magicae* were used, the more familiar they became, turning less “unintelligible” – which was the main point, as Ogden wrote.<sup>241</sup> In the *Ephesia grammata*, for example, parts of *vores magicae* can be semi-translated: in the formula MASKELLI MASKELLŌ PHNOUKENTABAŌ OREOBAZAGRA RHĒXICHTHŌN HIPPOCHTHŌN PYRIPĒGANYX, the last three words are evocative, in Greek terms, of “bursting-forth from the earth, horse-earth and fire-spring-master”.<sup>242</sup>

“Characters” (*charaktēres*)<sup>243</sup> are certain magical figures that resemble alphabetic letters. They began appearing in curse tablets in the second century CE, but from then on they became common in magical texts and objects. According to Ogden, they likely made use of their mysteriousness, similar to the *vores magicae*: if they had a meaning at all, it was maybe something otherwise inexpressible. Their use was not always hidden: seven *charaktēres* were inscribed on the wall of a theater in Miletus, with an inscription asking them to protect the city.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> F313 Körte.

<sup>240</sup> LSJ, s.v. βάρβαρος, “non-Greek, foreign”; s.v. ὄνομα, “name”.

<sup>241</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 46f.

<sup>242</sup> Gager, 1992: 268.

<sup>243</sup> LSJ, s.v. χαρακτήρ, II “mark engraved, impress, stamp”.

<sup>244</sup> Gager, 1992: 10f.

Even the regular letters of the alphabet could be magically effective, particularly vowels. There were seven Greek vowels, a number believed to be of mythical significance, as reminded us Ogden, and associated with planets, angels and sounds. Another means to use alphabets was to blend Greek and Latin in the same tablet<sup>245</sup>, such as writing the curse in Latin but the *voces magicae* and the names (of horses, in the case he mentioned) in Greek.<sup>246</sup>

He also mentioned that it is common to find magical words arranged into shapes, such as triangles and squares. Triangles, for example, are made by repeating a word in aligned rows, omitting a letter from either end each time. Palindromes were also used, as the words would remain the same when the rest of the text was backwards – possibly maintaining their magical effect.<sup>247</sup>

Later curse tablets were sometimes decorated with images, which Ogden believed could have been drawn dolls – though some are not decipherable; some examples were images of bound or pierced figures, snakes (usually associated with the chthonic realm), and demonic figures.<sup>248</sup>

#### 4.4 Apotropaic measures

Luck claimed that, in ancient times, jealousy over someone else's good fortune was the root of black magic. Even the gods could be jealous of a mortal's success, and decide to destroy them. One of the ways to protect yourself was through apotropaic objects, i.e., objects meant to protect one against evil, such amulets and talismans.<sup>249</sup>

Curses were mostly secret, hidden away or deposited in graves, so it is understandable that people would want to protect themselves from the occasional curser. The main way, according to Ogden, was through the use of protective amulets. Uninscribed amulets can be difficult to identify as so, but there are inscribed versions from the fourth century BCE, the earliest record being a Cretan one inscribed with the *Ephesia grammata*.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 46ff.

<sup>246</sup> Gager, 1992: 65 (12).

<sup>247</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 46ff.

<sup>248</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 50.

<sup>249</sup> Luck, 2006: 19.

<sup>250</sup> McCown 1923: 128.

According to Luck, amulets were worn as protection against evil powers in general. They could be made of cheap materials, but precious stones were believed to have special powers – he claimed that many of the carved gems that survived to our day had a magical rather than an ornamental function. Any person could wear an amulet, regardless of faith, and the objects themselves often had a mix of Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and other culture’s elements.<sup>251</sup>

Amulets became popular in the imperial period, the most distinctive ones being a roll of inscriptions on papyrus, gold or silver sheets, worn around the neck in a copper tube, and the inscribed gemstones. Ogden explained that most amulets were to provide general protection or protection against a specific disease, such as colic, fever or sciatica, but some were explicitly made in order to ward off curse tablets;<sup>252</sup> an example of these is: “Drive away, drive away the curse from Rufina. And if anyone harms me in the future, turn away the curse back upon him”.<sup>253</sup> In this particular case, Gager believed the object was made against an already existing curse, and as a general protection for future ones; Kotansky interpreted the Greek word used for curse, *hypothesis*, as “lawsuit”.<sup>254</sup>

The PGM had instructions for making amulets against magical spells, such as one made of an iron sheet inscribed with three Homeric verses (PGM IV 2145-2240).<sup>255</sup> However, as Ogden explained, the best way to stop a curse was to locate and remove or destroy the tablet or doll – which, of course, could be very difficult unless the tablet was hidden in one’s home, or they had information of its location.<sup>256</sup>

Interesting enough, the use of protective amulets led to what Ogden described as a magical “arms race”, i.e., people setting up their own curses against their curser.<sup>257</sup> It is also not uncommon to find tablets requesting the victim to be unable to perform a sacrifice successfully – thus ensuring that they were unable to reach the gods and avert the effects of magic.<sup>258</sup>

And there are also curses that are oddly paradoxical: a curse from Cnidus from the first century BCE, for example, used magic to protect its author not against magic, but against the

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<sup>251</sup> Luck, 2006: 49.

<sup>252</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 51ff.

<sup>253</sup> Gager, 1992: 225 (120).

<sup>254</sup> In Flint et al, 1999: 51.

<sup>255</sup> Betz, 1986: 76.

<sup>256</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 51ff.

<sup>257</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 53.

<sup>258</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 51ff.

accusation of it:<sup>259</sup> “I dedicate to Demeter and Kore the one that said against me that I was making poisons/spells (*pharmakon*) for my husband”.<sup>260</sup> It is also not uncommon to find tablets requesting the victim to be unable to perform a sacrifice successfully – thus ensuring that they were unable to reach the gods and avert the effects of magic.<sup>261</sup>

#### 4.5 Conclusion

“There is indeed nobody who does not fear to be spell-bound by imprecations” (Plin. *HN* 28.19 *defigi quidem diris deprecationibus nemo non metuit*). This is a rather straight-forward chapter; in learning about magical objects, we can better understand ancient magic and what I have discussed in the previous chapters. They were likely made by all sorts of people, and offer a window into what Romans and Greeks wanted out of their magical rituals.

The most popular ones seemed to have been the *defixiones*, curse tablets, sheets of lead with inscriptions asking for justice, revenge or, most popularly, love<sup>262</sup> – though as Ovid wrote, “if anyone thinks that the baneful herbs of Haemonia and arts of magic can avail, let him take his own risk” (Ov. *Rem. Am.* 249-50, *Viderit, Haemoniae siquis mala pabula terrae Et magicas artes posse iuvare putat*). The main goal was, according to Ogden, to “bind” their victim – not physically, but in order to obtain what they wanted; even in the case of “voodoo” dolls pierced by nails, their binding was symbolic.<sup>263</sup>

Sympathetic magic was the core behind these objects: their material likely had magical properties – make them cold like the metal, or their tongues heavy; their deposition sites were graves and cold waters; they could contain *ousia*, to add to the connection with the victim.<sup>264</sup>

Some inscriptions contained *voces magicae* – I already mentioned that much of Roman and Greek practiced were heavily influenced by other cultures, and these “magical words” were likely corruptions of names, distorted with time.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 53.

<sup>260</sup> Gager, 1992: 188 (89).

<sup>261</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 51ff.

<sup>262</sup> Jordan, in Flint et al, 1999: 38.

<sup>263</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 71ff.

<sup>264</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 11ff.

<sup>265</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 46f.



And of course, it was natural that people would want to protect themselves from curses, especially them being so covert. We have evidence of amulets and talismans against evil,<sup>266</sup> and even curses cursing the sorcerer back.<sup>267</sup>

## 5 Relevant classical literature: A selection

Hutton's definition of a witch is mostly focused on early modern European witches, but it may also be applied to ancient ones. He claimed that a witch was essentially someone who represented a direct threat to other humans; he used four distinguished features: a person who worked to harm their kins rather than strangers, therefore a more internal threat; their work was not isolated events, instead they worked and learned their craft within a tradition (some of which relating to religion); they were generally hostile, and associated with hatred of humanity – during the middle ages, having had pacts with the Christian devil; and finally, that witches could be resisted, by having them lift their curses, prosecuting them with the law or physically harming or killing them.<sup>268</sup> This is the base that we have for examining these characters: some were evil, some used supernatural powers to harm others, and some simply performed rituals for their own benefit.

The majority of witches in classical literature are women, as I discussed on chapter 2.4, and their main goal was usually either acquisition of love or revenge for love taken away; as Ogden explained, it is difficult to find a male counterpart for those women, let alone one who worked with erotic magic. However, we have seen that the practitioners were almost evenly men and women – we have the example of a male sorcerer in Apuleius, and in literature his character Lucius.<sup>269</sup>

March claimed we can get a good image of these figures with the Athenian tragedies from the fifth century BCE. At the time, according to her, myths were being dramatized for the first time - though so many sources have been lost to us -, and mythical women became dramatic

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<sup>266</sup> Luck, 2006: 19.

<sup>267</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 53.

<sup>268</sup> Hutton, 2017: 3f.

<sup>269</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 62f.

characters, with the tragedies often focusing on women's thoughts and actions more than men's, as well as their pain.<sup>270</sup>

The earliest great Greek sorcerers, Medea and Circe, were of divine lineage – women who were wise and powerful. The portrait of witches evolved throughout the centuries, and we start seeing the crone performing horrible rituals, such as Canidia - who in one of the works she features is despised and ridiculed.<sup>271</sup> In a parallel with real-life sorcerers, we have varied characters: young and old, women and men (more precisely, one man), who were evil or simply went on with their business, and performances of varied types of magic – though erotic magic is predominant. They might even have contradictory portraits if they are depicted in more than one text.

As I wrote in the introduction, many historians believe we can learn from the past through myths, if we properly analyze them. At first glance, the characters here would not be the ideal way of obtaining an accurate image, as clearly they are fictitious – their portraits did not need to reflect reality. But I present them because even though they are literary characters, they are a product of their time and place – in other circumstances they would have been written differently. They do not need to be realistic, but indirectly they end up being so; they are written the way the author knew how to. Therefore, they are a good way to illustrate what and who I have presented in the previous chapters, and beautifully so: these are rich, fascinating characters.

## 5.1 Homer's *Odyssey*

The *Odyssey* both does and does not fit the subject of witchcraft, because while it has some great examples of magical rites and practices, they are not “magic” in the strict sense of the word, as they predate the definition of it – as I discussed on chapter 2.1. Therefore, I shall not spend much time analyzing the texts; they illustrate much of what I have discussed in previous chapters, and some of them I have mentioned before throughout the thesis.

Homer's work is possibly of the oldest examples of Greek magic we have, especially when it comes to Circe. Even though to us Circe is clearly a sorcerer, it should be acknowledged that there is nothing in the Greek text that suggests that Homer possessed the concept this concept or

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<sup>270</sup> March, 2008: 446ff.

<sup>271</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 156f.

saw Circe as such – there is no indication, for example, that her behavior was considered impious or sacrilegious by him. Dickie claims, however, that in Athens by the fourth century BCE Circe was already assumed to be a sorceress.<sup>272</sup>

She is not precisely a witch, as she is divine, the daughter of the sun-god Helios (Hes. *Theog.* 1011, Κίρκη δ' Ἡελίου θυγάτηρ Ὑπεριονίδαο). Circe's magic, however, involves the use of a wand, potions and salves, and Odysseus protects himself with use of a magical herb, *moly*<sup>273</sup>, revealed to him by Hermes. According to Luck, the necromantic ceremony in book 11 serves as models for Aeneas' descend to the underworld in Vergil's *Aeneid* and the magic rites of Erichon in Lucan's *Pharsalia*.<sup>274</sup> These were practices found in real-life examples of sorcerers.

Possibly the most fantastic episode is in book 10, where Circe used drugs to transform Odysseus' men into pigs; note that we find another example of *pharmaka* (line 236) accompanied by an adjective, “evil drugs” (λύγρ).<sup>275</sup> “So he spoke, and they cried aloud and called to her. And she at once came forth and opened the bright doors, and invited them in; and they all, in their innocence, followed her inside. Only Eurylochus remained behind, for he suspected that this was a snare. She brought them in and made them all sit on chairs and seats, and made for them a potion of cheese and barley meal and yellow honey with Pramnian wine; but in the food she mixed evil drugs, that they might utterly forget their native land. Now when she had given them the potion, and they had drunk it off, then she immediately struck them with her wand, and penned them in the pigsties. And they had the heads, and voice, and bristles, and shape of swine, but their minds remained unchanged, just as they were before. So they were penned there weeping, and before them Circe flung mast, and acorns, and the fruit of the cornel tree to eat, such things as wallowing swine are accustomed to feed upon” (10.229-43, ὦς ἄρ' ἐφώνησεν, τοὶ δὲ φθέγγοντο καλεῦντες. ἢ δ' αἴψ' ἐξεληθοῦσα θύρας ὤϊξε φαεινὰς καὶ κάλει· οἱ δ' ἅμα πάντες ἀιδρεῖησιν ἔποντο· Εὐρύλοχος δ' ὑπέμεινεν, οἰσάμενος δόλον εἶναι. εἶσεν δ' εἰσαγαγοῦσα κατὰ κλισμούς τε θρόνους τε, ἐν δέ σφιν τυρόν τε καὶ ἄλφιτα καὶ μέλι χλωρόν οἴνω Πραμνεῖα ἐκύκα· ἀνέμισγε δὲ σίτω φάρμακα λύγρ', ἵνα πάγχυ λαθοῖατο πατρίδος αἴης. αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δῶκέν τε καὶ ἔκπιον, αὐτίκ' ἔπειτα ράβδω πεπληγυῖα κατὰ συφροῖσιν ἐέργνυ. οἱ δὲ συῶν μὲν

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<sup>272</sup> Dickie, 2005: 23.

<sup>273</sup> Though there is much discussion on the topic, some believe that *moly* was referring to snowdrop, *Galanthus nivalis*. In Plaitakis & Duvoisin, 1983.

<sup>274</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 110f.

<sup>275</sup> LSJ, s.v. λυγρός, “baneful, mournful”.

ἔχον κεφαλὰς φωνὴν τε τρίχας τε καὶ δέμας, αὐτὰρ νοῦς ἦν ἔμπεδος, ὡς τὸ πάρος περ. ὧς οἱ μὲν κλαίοντες ἐέρχατο, τοῖσι δὲ Κίρκη πάρ ῥ' ἄκυλον βάλανόν τε βάλεν καρπὸν τε κρανεῖης ἔδμεναι, οἷα σύες χαμαιευνάδες αἰὲν ἔδουσιν).

The reason for her transforming the men into pigs is not explained. But aside from this instance, Circe is possibly the only sorcerer (at least in this list) that is not inherently selfish and evil – perhaps because the notion that magic had to be negative, in contrast with religion, was not yet concrete.

## 5.2 Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, and Euripides' *Medea*

Though Euripides' (484 – 406 BCE) *Medea* was written first, the text is a continuation of the story between Medea and Jason in Colchis, so inverted them for the sake of clarity. As Hooper explained, Medea was one of the granddaughters of the Sun god, Helios, daughter of King Aeëtes, and niece of the goddess Circe. She lived in Colchis which, as Hooper wrote, was to the Greeks was a barbaric land – Jason even says so: “First, you now live among Greeks and not barbarians, and you understand justice and the rule of law, with no concession to force” (*Medea* 536-8 πρῶτον μὲν Ἑλλάδ' ἀντὶ βαρβάρου χθονὸς γαῖαν κατοικεῖς καὶ δίκην ἐπίστασαι νόμοις τε χρῆσθαι μὴ πρὸς ἰσχύος χάριν').

The *Argonautica*, by Apollonius of Rhodes (born c. 295 BCE) tells about her meeting Jason. As he is on his quest to bring back the Golden Fleece, the goddesses Hera and Athena are watching him and realize that they must intervene. They go to Aphrodite and beg her to ask her son Eros to shoot one of his magical arrows, to make Medea – a skilled sorceress (“Aeetes’ daughter, expert in magic drugs”; 3.27 κουρην Αἰητεω πολυφαρμακον) – fall in love with him and help him.<sup>276</sup> Although she feels guilt over betraying her father and people, she ultimately does so and leaves with Jason. But, as Hooper explained, their marriage is not recognized by the Greeks; as such, she is not a citizen, and is without the legal rights and protections; neither are their children<sup>277</sup> - which is relevant for the latter part of the story.

As Griffin argued, Jason is only successful because of Medea. She used her spells and potions so he could get the Golden Fleece, and with that she went against her own father and

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<sup>276</sup> Hooper, 2021.

<sup>277</sup> Hooper, 2021.

people to do so – even killing her brother Apsyrtus. And while she did so for love, which could be an attest of his character – the brave and charming hero -, she actually falls in love with him because of Hera and Athena. To Griffin, she is the true hero of the story, especially since, as we see in Euripides’ work, he does not deserve his luck.<sup>278</sup>

Euripides’ *Medea* continues the story that began on the *Argonautica* - the same story was told by Seneca the Younger in the homonymous *Medea*; due to their similarity I focused on Euripides’ version. Years after fleeing from her land, as Hooper summarized, Jason leaves Medea for the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. As Griffin argued, at this point Jason does not need her anymore, she is actually a burden to him; without her, he would be free to marry the daughter of Creon. Medea is infuriated: after abandoning everything for him, he betrays her and has her and their sons exiled from Corinth. And thus, she seeks revenge, killing the princess and the king by using her sons – and killing them in the process too.<sup>279</sup> Euripides altered the story of Medea significantly, turning her into, as Hoyt called her, a war bride;<sup>280</sup> unlike the *Argonautica*, he put most the supernatural elements aside, and focused on the couple and their troubles, as human characters.<sup>281</sup>

As Roisman explained, the play can be divided in two parts. On the first one the characters, the Chorus and even the reader side with Medea. She left her land for Jason and is now abandoned by him; she cannot go back to her family either. Jason is portrayed as selfish and arrogant, seeing nothing wrong with his actions and even claiming that she was lucky by marrying him, as he now lives in Greece (as I have mentioned before). The Chorus agrees: her revenge is reasonable, “For you will be justified in punishing your husband, Medea” (267-8, ἐνδίκως γὰρ ἐκτείση πόσιν, ἡΜήδεια). On the second part, however, we learn about her revenge plans.<sup>282</sup>

The most striking moment of *Medea* is the murder of her children, which is of course horrific. The Chorus no longer supports her, and Medea is well-aware of how vile her actions are - she needs to steel herself before killing them, “do not weaken, do not remember that you love

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<sup>278</sup> Griffin, in Stuttard, 2014: 13f.

<sup>279</sup> Hooper, 2021.

<sup>280</sup> Hoyt, 1989: 37.

<sup>281</sup> Griffin, in Stuttard, 2014: 14f.

<sup>282</sup> Roisman, in Stuttard, 2014: 111ff.

the children, that you gave them life” (1246-7 καὶ μὴ κακισθῆς μηδ’ ἀναμνησθῆς τέκνων, ὡς φίλταθ’, ὡς ἔτικτες).

The Nurse and the Tutor are also aware of how Medea can be; as Griffin reminded us, she is not a gentle, meek woman, but a brave, passionate one – we have known this since she went against her father and sided with Jason. As the Nurse says, “I have seen her turn a savage glance at them, as if she meant to do something to them. She will not let go of her anger, I am sure, before she brings it down on someone’s head” (292-4 ἤδη γὰρ εἶδον ὄμμα νιν ταυρουμένην τοῖσδ’, ὥς τι δρασείουσαν· οὐδὲ παύσεται χόλου, σάφ’ οἶδα, πρὶν κατασκῆψαί τινι).

She is also very charismatic, as she manages to deceive both Jason and the king Creon when she begs for an extra day there – Creon silences his own instincts with her,<sup>283</sup> “and now, though I see that I am making a serious mistake, nonetheless, woman, you shall have your request” (350-1 καὶ νῦν ὀρῶ μὲν ἐξαμαρτάνων, γύναι, ὅμως δὲ τεύξῃ τοῦδε).

In her justification for her extreme revenge, Medea emphasizes that she will not be laughed at by her enemies. According to Roisman, not only is this a compelling motive for her, this would have resonated with Euripides’ audience, who would have considered being mocked as shameful as being dishonored. Medea will not, in any way, be seen as weak.<sup>284</sup>

Though she is mostly known for being an evil woman, and a dangerous character, there is no doubt that she is a witch. Her rituals are better seen on the *Argonautica*, but we also see her performing them when she murders the princess, with a poison so powerful it can be unrealistic: “if she takes this finery and puts it on, she will die a painful death, and likewise anyone who touches her: with such poisons will I smear these gifts” (787-9, κἄνπερ λαβοῦσα κόσμον ἀμφιθῆ χροῖ, κακῶς ὀλεῖται πᾶς θ’ ὅς ἂν θίγῃ κόρης· τοιοῖσδε χρίσω φαρμάκοις δωρήματα).

Medea is a powerful sorceress, and of divine lineage; those around her are aware of that: “[Creon] any indications of this combine: you are a clever woman and skilled in many evil arts” (284-5 συμβάλλεται δὲ πολλὰ τοῦδε δείγματα· σοφὴ πέφυκας καὶ κακῶν πολλῶν ἴδρις). She predicts Jason’s death, “But you, as is fitting, shall die the miserable death of a coward, struck on the head by a piece of the Argo, having seen the bitter result of your marriage to me” (1386-8 σὺ δ’, ὥσπερ εἰκός, κατθανῆ κακὸς κακῶς, Ἄργοῦς κἄρα σὸν λειψάνῳ πεπληγμένος, πικρὰς τελευτὰς τῶν ἐμῶν γάμων ἰδών), and the religious cult after the death of her children, “And I

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<sup>283</sup> Griffin, in Stuttard, 2014: 14ff.

<sup>284</sup> Roisman, in Stuttard, 2014: 116ff.

shall enjoin on this land of Sisyphus a solemn festival and holy rites for all time to come in payment for this unholy murder”, (1381-3, γῆ δὲ τῆδε Σισύφου σεμνὴν ἑορτὴν καὶ τέλη προσάψομεν τὸ λοιπὸν ἀντὶ τοῦδε δυσσεβοῦς φόνου).

But as Rutherford reinforced, she is not a goddess; she lacks the detachment and the power of a deity. She makes it abundantly clear that she killed her children to punish Jason: “[Jason] And so you killed them? [Medea] Yes, to cause you grief”, (1398-9: ΙΑΣΩΝ κάπειτ’ ἔκανε; ΜΗΔΕΙΑ σέ γε πημαίνουσ’).

And both characters believe that they are correct and the gods will side with them. She also shows that she is indeed mourning for the children as much as Jason, but her anger and hatred for him was bigger – her revenge is not cold-blooded. As Rutherford wrote, “although we can find cases of gods who grieve and cases of gods who take revenge, we cannot find cases where the same deity does both.”<sup>285</sup>

### 5.3 Horace’s *Epodes* and *Satire*

It is possible that Canidia was based off a real person, a perfume-maker from Naples named Grattidia, with whom Horace (65 – 8 BCE) was romantically involved but had the affair ending in bad terms (though, as Paule explained, it is impossible to be sure of her real identity).<sup>286</sup> Regardless, Horace does not present the character in a positive way in any of the works.

As Paule wrote, Canidia has a prominent role in three of Horace’s poems - *Satire* 1.8 and *Epodes* 5 and 17, and is mentioned by name in three others, *Epode* 3 and *Satires* 2.1 and 2.8<sup>287</sup> - I focused on the poems in which she is a main character. While Canidia’s portrayal changes between poems - at her strongest she leads other witches to starve a Roman child, in order to use his organs in a love potion (*Epode* 5); at her weakest, she can be scared away by a flatulent Priapic statue (*Satire* 1.8) -, her core characteristics remain rather constant.

Interestingly enough, as Paule pointed out, Horace does not explicitly describe her as a witch, *saga*, at any moment; more than once, she is referred to as *anus*<sup>288</sup>. She is also compared

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<sup>285</sup> Rutherford, in Stuttard, 2014: 91ff.

<sup>286</sup> Paule, 2017: 1ff.

<sup>287</sup> Paule, 2017: 1f.

<sup>288</sup> OLD, 1. An old woman. B. (as a foolish type of person). C. (as a sorceress).

to, but not labeled as, a *venefica*<sup>289</sup> e.g., “Ah that’s it! He walks free because of the spells of a cleverer witch” (*Epode* 5.71-2, *a! a! solutus ambulat veneficae scientioris carmine*). Yet in the way she is portrayed, it is clear to us that she is a witch. There are even references to voodoo dolls: “One image there was of wool, and one of wax” (*Sat.* 1.8.30, *lanea et effigies erat, altera cerea*); “I can make wax dolls feel, as you yourself are aware thanks to your curiosity” (*Epode* 17.76-6, *an quae movere cereas imagines, ut ipse nosti curiosus*).

*Epode* 5, as Paule summarized, is about a young boy who has been kidnapped, and is at first begging Canidia and the other women who captured him to let him go. His pleas go unheard, and he is buried up and left to starve to death, so his organs can be used in an erotic spell – it is mentioned that Canidia has attempted to tie her lover Varus through spells before, but they have failed. The boy then, losing hope, swears at them, vowing to come back from the dead as a Fury to attack them in their sleep - as we have seen before, the spirits of those who died before their age or through a violent way are believed to be particularly powerful. The poem ends at this, and we are left without knowing if the witches are successful, or if the boy manages to get his revenge.<sup>290</sup>

In this poem, Canidia (and her fellow witches) are horrifying, almost demonic. Paule compared her to other figures: the Sumerian Lilith, the Roman *strix* and the Greek *lamia*, known for preying and murdering small children. Lilith was Adam’s first wife, and after he rejected her, she retreated into the wilderness, bred with demons and gave birth to her demonic offspring; as for the *strix*, we find a good description at Ovid’s *Fasti*: “at night they fly and seek out children separated from their nurses to snatch them from their cradles and rend their bodies” (6.135-6, *nocte volant puerosque petunt nutricis egentes, et vitiant cunis corpora rapta suis*). He noted that the fear of having a child taken or killed is prevalent among many cultures,<sup>291</sup> which is not difficult to understand, especially at ages when child mortality rates were high.

*Satire* 1.8 is more light-hearted. Here, the narrator is a wooden statue of the god Priapus, placed at the Gardens of Maecenas in Rome. The garden, however, was once a cemetery for the poor; so, at night, Canidia and other witches come to dig for human bones. Priapus is so revolted he scares them away with flatulence.<sup>292</sup> He does not fear them, but is mostly annoyed at their

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<sup>289</sup> Paule, 2017: 16ff.

<sup>290</sup> Paule, 2017: 62ff.

<sup>291</sup> Paule, 2017: 62ff.

<sup>292</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 122f.



presence: “’tis not so much the thieves and beasts wont to infest the place that cause me care and trouble, as the witches who with spells and drugs vex human souls” (17-20 *cum mihi non tantum furesque feraeque suetae hunc vexare locum curae sunt atque labori, quantum carminibus quae versant atque venenis humanos animos*).

The statue of Priapus is in itself interesting: according to Ripat, his figure at gardens was to ensure the presence of animals, and their produce – and to improve their vigor, so they stayed fat and produced plenty of milk, wool and so forth.<sup>293</sup>

In this poem, as Paule explained, she is a comic figure, a skittish old hag. Priapus is, according to Paule, a stand-in for Horace; *Satire* 1.8 is the only poem in the first book not written in Horace’s own voice. The Gardens of Maecenas are overseen by the Roman elite, yet Canidia is an invader, using the place for its former function, which adds to Priapus’ insult. Her goal is not so clear, other than divination purposes: “that there-from they might draw the sprites, souls that would give them answers” (28-9 *ut inde manis elicerent, animas responsa daturas*) – these lines seem to be mock-heroic, referencing a scene on the *Odyssey* 11.36ff. Her ritual, according to Paule, does not resemble any known rite, and it is presumably an invention from the author, using elements from various sources.<sup>294</sup>

Luck suggested that in this text, Horace is making light of witchcraft. Sorcerers were a reality and many were feared, but Horace seems to say that they were mostly ineffective, maybe charlatans, and ordinary citizens must not be afraid of them or pay for their services.<sup>295</sup>

In both works, she is almost inhuman; In *Satire* 1.8 her appearance is described as horrifying, “their sallow hue had made the two hideous to behold” (25-6, *pallor utrasque fecerat horrendas aspect*). She is also described as animalistic:<sup>296</sup> in *Epode* 5 she is compared to a beast, “why do you glare at me like a stepmother or a beast wounded with a spear?” (9-10, *quid ut noverca me intueris aut uti petita ferro belua?*), and her hair is tied with snakes, “her untidy hair entwined with little snakes” (15-6, *brevibus implicata viperis crinis et incomptum caput*). In *Satire* 1.8 she and Sagana (another witch) dig the dirt with their nails and tear the flesh of a lamb

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<sup>293</sup> Ripat, 2016.

<sup>294</sup> Paule, 2017: 77f.

<sup>295</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 122f.

<sup>296</sup> Paule, 2017: 77.

with their teeth, like animals<sup>297</sup> (26-28, *scalpere terram unguibus et pullam divellere mordicus agnam coeperunt*).

In *Epode* 17, as Paule explained, Horace has been tortured by Canidia – he lost his youth, he can barely breathe and he complains that she has driven him mad. He begs her to relent, citing mythological figures who have showed mercy, and pleads for forgiveness after offending her, offering to do whatever it takes for her to forgive him. But oddly enough, his apologies are filled with possible insults towards her. At first it may seem like he is praising her, but as Paule noted, we must keep in mind these lines: “I am willing to make atonement with a hundred bullocks, if you so wish; or, if you like, to proclaim on my lying harp: ‘O chaste and respectable lady, you will walk among the constellations as a golden star’” (37-41, *iussas cum fide poenas luam, paratus expiare, seu poposceris centum iuvenco, sive mendaci lyra voles sonari, tu pudica, tu proba perambulabis astra sidus aureum*).

To him, there are two ways of interpreting it: either Horace is admitting that he slandered her and is now correcting his error, or he is from here on lying when he praises her. It is unclear, however, why he would insult her when he is at her mercy – or perhaps if he has given up altogether.

Regardless, Canidia does not show him mercy. She cites her own examples of figures that were tortured, and swears to torment him until he begs for death – and even that she will deny him. She then asks him if he thinks she, whose powers he is well aware of, will suddenly go powerless against him, and with this the poem ends. Since this is the last poem in the collection, Canidia has the honor of being the one with the last word<sup>298</sup>, which makes it clear that, even if she was once regarded as a comic figure, she is nevertheless powerful.

As Luck pointed out, it is difficult to say whether Horace actually believed in witchcraft – in some moments he takes it seriously, in others he makes fun of it. Witchcraft practiced by women who resembled Canidia was a fact, and many people did indeed fear those women. But, as he mentioned, they were mostly obscure figures, and their practice was threatened by harsh laws.<sup>299</sup> One of the possibilities for such negative portrayal of witches, Luck suggested, might have been that emperor Augustus was planning drastic legislation on witchcraft, and enlisted

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<sup>297</sup> Paule, 2017: 28f.

<sup>298</sup> Paule, 2017: 102ff.

<sup>299</sup> Luck, 2006: 61.

(through Maecenas) Vergil and Horace to aid him; little is known about this legislation, but the effect seems to have lasted.<sup>300</sup>

#### 5.4 Lucan's *Pharsalia*

Erichtho appears in Book 6 of the *Pharsalia*, Lucan's (39 – 65 CE) epic on the Civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey. As Bailey and Durrant explained, Erichtho is unlike some of the other sorceresses of classical literature, like Circe and Medea: she is portrayed as a hideous creature, almost demonic (similar to Canidia, though even more terrifying). She lives in Thessaly, as I mentioned on chapter 2.2.3, and in the *Pharsalia* she consults a son of Pompey, asking her to summon the spirits of the dead. She picks up the boy of a young soldier and reanimates him, in order to obtain answers from him.<sup>301</sup>

As Pyplacz wrote, Erichtho is depicted as a revolting and at frightening creature, who creates chaos by burning crops and poisoning the air with her breath: “her tread blights the seeds of the fertile cornfield, and her breath poisons air that before was harmless” (6.521-22, *Semina fecundae segetis calcata perussit, Et non letiferas spirando perdidit auras*). She claimed that Erichtho symbolizes the chaos and pointlessness of the Civil War: her name already explains it, *eris*,<sup>302</sup> “strife”, and *chthōn*,<sup>303</sup> “earth”; but also implying “battlefield”.<sup>304</sup> Erichtho harms people and society similarly to how the Civil War harms the Roman Republic, surrounding herself with death.

She also argued that it would be impossible to include gods in the poem, as doing so would require them to take sides in the civil war. Therefore, Lucan substituted them with Erichtho, who, while human, is perhaps more powerful than the gods themselves. She is not only able to revive the dead and predict the future, which shows that she is extremely powerful, but also to intimidate the gods: “At the first sound of her petition the gods grant every horror, dreading to hear a second spell” (6.527–528, *Omne nefas superi prima iam voce precantis, Concedunt carmenque timent audire secundum*). She is a counterpart to the Delphic priestesses, not only in

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<sup>300</sup> Luck, 2006: 110.

<sup>301</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 67f.

<sup>302</sup> LSJ, s.v. ἔρις, A “strife, quarrel, contention”.

<sup>303</sup> LSJ, s.v. χθών.

<sup>304</sup> Pyplacz, 2015.

appearance and personality, but with her relationship with the gods, “proud of her wide-spread fame, the wicked witch” (6.604, *Inpia laetatur vulgato nomine famae*) – *inpia*<sup>305</sup> here translated as “wicked”, but also meaning “showing no regard for the gods”. As Pypłacz wrote, “a person who can afford to ignore Olympian proscriptions and who – being a frequent guest in Pluto’s subterranean palace – is allowed to commute at will between the Earth and the Underworld is certainly no ordinary human being.”<sup>306</sup>

Erichtho also performs her rituals in horrible ways, violating funeral pyres, torturing and killing people, and mutilating corpses: “and knows nothing of the organs of victims offered in sacrifice; she rejoices to lay on the altar funeral fires and incense snatched from the kindled pyre” (6.525-6, *Novit: funereas aris inponere flammās, Gaudet et accenso rapuit quae tura sepulchro*); “she buries in the grave the living whose souls still direct their bodies: while years are still due to them from destiny, death comes upon them unwillingly” (6.529-32 *Viventes animas et adhuc sua membra regens Infodit busto, fatis debentibus annos Mors invita subit; perversa funera pompa Rettulit a tumulis, fugere cadavera letum*).

She even gets wild animals to work for her, tearing bodies with their teeth and claws. As Pypłacz pointed out, this is an inversion on the story of Romulus and Remus: instead of nursing people, the animal feeds on corpses, “she waits for the wolves to tear it, and means to snatch the prey from their unwetted throats” (6.552-3, [...] *morsusque luporum Expectat siccis raptura e faucibus artus*). She is perverse, and her rites go against nature.<sup>307</sup>

While only appearing in one of the books of the *Pharsalia*, Erichtho is a striking character. Her horrible appearance and grotesque behavior are one of the most similar portraits of what we visualize today as a villain and a witch. She is a nightmarish sorcerer, and therefore a fascinating one.

## 5.5 Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, or The Golden Ass

It would be impossible to discuss Roman magic without including Apuleius (124 – 170 CE) and his novel *Metamorphoses*, or The Golden Ass. Not only is the novel one of the best

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<sup>305</sup> OLD, s.v. *impius*.

<sup>306</sup> Pypłacz, 2016.

<sup>307</sup> Pypłacz, 2016.

examples of magic rituals and sorcerers, but as I mentioned, Apuleius himself was accused of being a magician. As Hutton explained, one of the charges made against him was that he put a boy into trance, in order to make the child a mouthpiece for a deity who could then be questioned – a process several rites in the PGM describe. Apuleius called it a lie, and claimed that he did not know whether such operation was possible at all; the court believed him.<sup>308</sup>

Luck pointed out that, based on Apuleius' defense speech, we can see how easy it was for a scientist or philosopher to be accused of witchcraft and that accusations could have been used as a pretext to destroy an enemy; in this case, however, Luck believed Apuleius was not completely above suspicion.<sup>309</sup>

According to Luck, *Metamorphoses* is a piece of fiction with autobiographical elements.<sup>310</sup> Three characters are important here: Pamphile, an accomplished sorceress who works mostly with erotic magic and has the ability to create potions that transform people into animals (Book 2 describes her transformation into an owl); Photis, her slave maid who aids her on her magic and is a sorcerer herself; and of course Lucius, the main character, who wants to learn more about the craft and requests Photis to help him. Pamphile has a bad reputation among the citizens, and people like Lucius' aunt Byrrhena warn him to be careful with her, but since he wants to know more about the practice, this only encourages him – though he finds it safer to go to Photis instead.

In one instance, Photis tells Lucius that Pamphile is “desperately in love with an extremely handsome Boeotian boy”, and is using her means to enchant him: “When she was coming back from the baths yesterday, she happened to catch sight of her young man sitting at a barber's shop, and so she ordered me to pilfer some of his hair, which had been snipped off by the shears and was lying on the ground” (3.16, *Hunc iuvenem, cum e balneis rediret ipsa, tonstrinae residentem hesternae die forte conspexit, ac me capillos eius, qui iam caede cultrorum desecti humi iacebant, clanculo praecipit auferre*).

This is a prime example of sympathetic magic, using some of the victim's hair (*ousia*) to symbolize him in a ritual. The barber unfortunately notices Photis and reprimands her, threatening to hand her over to the magistrates.

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<sup>308</sup> Hutton, 2003: 117.

<sup>309</sup> Luck, 2006: 71.

<sup>310</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 139.

The description of Pamphile’s laboratory is also fascinating. It exemplifies in a great way what I presented on chapter 4: curse tablets, nails used in crucifixions, dead animals (that could be used in the making of dolls, though this is not described in the novel), and again, parts of human bodies – which here could symbolize spirits Pamphile wants help from. “First she arranged her deadly laboratory with its customary apparatus, setting out spices of all sorts, unintelligibly lettered metal plaques, the surviving remains of ill-omened birds, and numerous pieces of mourned and even buried corpses: here noses and fingers, there flesh-covered spikes from crucified bodies, elsewhere the preserved gore of murder victims and mutilated skulls wrenched from the teeth of wild beasts” (3.17 *Priusque apparatu solito instruit feralem officinam, omne genus aromatis et ignorabiliter laminis litteratis et infelicitium avium durantibus damnis, defletorum sepultorum etiam cadaverum expositis multis admodum membris: hic nares et digiti, illic carnosus clavi pendentium, alibi trucidatorum servatus cruor et extorta dentibus ferarum trunca calvaria*).

As the title suggests, the novel is about metamorphosis. The most obvious one is Lucius getting turned into a donkey, but the chapters include many inset stories – many also involving magic, one of the central themes of the novel. Already the first one, Aristomenes telling a tale about his friend Socrates, describes Meroe in no uncertain terms: “‘A witch,’ he replied, ‘with supernatural power: she can lower the sky and suspend the earth, solidify fountains and dissolve mountains, raise up ghosts and bring down gods, darken the stars and light up Tartarus itself’” (1.8, “‘*Saga*’ inquit ‘*et divini potens caelum deponere, terram suspendere, fontes durare, montes diluere, manes sublimare, deos infimare, sidera extinguere, Tartarum ipsum illuminare.*’).

Though the word used to describe Meroe is usually *saga*, as Paule explained, in one instance she is referred to as a *lamia*,<sup>311</sup> “he was stunned by the stench of that filthy liquid those *she-monsters* had soaked me in, and he shoved me violently away” (1.17, *At ille, odore alioquin spurcissimi umoris percussus quo me lamiae illae infecerant, vehementer aspernatur*).

Like most witches in the novel, Meroe also makes use of erotic magic – and alludes to another very important witch, Medea: “but she prevented this plan with the power of her magic spells. Just as the famous Medea, in the one short day’s truce gained from Creon, burned up his entire house and daughter and the old man himself with flames from a crown, so Meroe, by performing necromantic rituals in a ditch—as she herself recently told me when she was drunk—

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<sup>311</sup> Paule, 2017: 15f.

shut all the people up in their own homes with the silent strength of supernatural forces. So for two whole days it was impossible to break the locks or tear open the doors or even dig through the walls, until the people, at everyone’s unanimous urging, cried out and most solemnly swore that they would not lay hands on her themselves, and furthermore that if anyone should intend otherwise they would come to her defense and rescue” (1.10, *Quod consilium virtutibus cantionum antevertit, et, ut illa Medea unius dieculae a Creone impetratis indutiis totam eius domum filiamque cum ipso sene flammis coronalibus deusserat, sic haec devotionibus sepulcralibus in scrobem procuratis, ut mihi temulenta narravit proxime, cunctos in suis sibi domibus tacita numinum violentia clausit, ut toto biduo non claustra perfringi, non fores evelli, non denique parietes ipsi quiverint perforari, quoad mutua hortatione consone clamitarent quam sanctissime deierantes sese neque ei manus admolituros et, si quis aliud cogitarit, salutare laturos subsidium*).

Frangoulidis set up parallels between Lucius and Socrates. Both occur at Hypata (see: chapter 2.2.3), but while Socrates was unlucky to meet Meroe, Lucius deliberately seeks out to learn about the occult. When Lucius tries to seduce Photis, she warns him off twice:<sup>312</sup> “‘Well, well, my schoolboy,’ she said, ‘that is a bittersweet appetiser you are sampling. Be careful not to catch a chronic case of bitter indigestion from eating too sweet honey’”) (2.10, “*Heus tu, scolastice,*” ait “*dulce et amarum gustulum carpis. Cave ne nimia mellis dulcedine diutinam bilis amaritudinem contrahas*”); in Socrates’ case, she is kind to him at first and only after they sleep together that he realizes it was a trap. The gender roles are also inverted: it is Lucius who takes the initiative while having ulterior motives.

Yet Lucius is lucky to not die – unlike Socrates – possibly because he goes after Photis, not Pamphile, a more experienced witch. Him turning into an ass is actually good, since he has the chance to turn back in the end. As Frangoulidis reinforced, it was he who insisted on learning about magic, not her; she is not searching to find a victim and trap them, she barely wants to help him in the first place, “‘What! You sly fox!’ she cried. ‘Are you trying to force me, my love, to lay the axe to my own legs? I can scarcely keep you safe from the Thessalian bitches, unarmed as you are. If you get wings, where will I ever find you and when will I see you again?’” (3.22, “*Ain,*” inquit “*vulpinaris, amasio, meque sponte asceam cruribus meis illidere compellis? Sic inermem vix a lupulis conservo Thessalis. Hunc alitem factum ubi quaeram, videbo quando?*”).

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<sup>312</sup> Frangoulidis, 2008: 46ff.

Another relevant story is told by Thelyphron, at Byrrhena's dinner party (Book 2). He is offered money to watch over a corpse, as it has been known of witches in the area to shape-shift and steal body parts. He does so, not realizing that he is enchanted during the night, and since he shares a name with the deceased person it is him who ends up mutilated. This is an attempt to warn Lucius, but as Frangoulidis explained, the protagonist fails to learn anything with the story. Both men were aware of the dangers of dealing with witches: as Thelyphron narrates, he was explained what the sorcerers were capable of.<sup>313</sup> “‘First of all,’ he replied, ‘you must stay perfectly wide awake all night long, with straining unblinking eyes concentrated continuously on the corpse. You must never look around you, or even look aside, because those horrible creatures can change their skins and creep in secretly with their looks transformed into any sort of animal at all. They could easily cheat even the Sun’s eyes, or Justice’s. They put on the form of birds, and again dogs, and mice—yes, and even flies. Then with their dreadful spells they overwhelm watchmen with sleep. No one can even count the number of subterfuges these evil women contrive on behalf of their lust. And yet, as pay for such dangerous work no more than four or maybe six pieces of gold are offered. Oh yes, and I had almost forgotten to mention that if someone fails to deliver the body unscathed in the morning, he is forced to patch any part that has been plucked off or reduced in size with a piece sliced from his own face.’” (2.22, “*Iam primum’ respondit ille ‘perpetem noctem eximie vigilandum est exsertis et inconivis oculis semper in cadaver intentis, nec acies usquam devertenda, immo ne obliquanda quidem, quippe cum deterrimae versipelles in quodvis animal ore converso latenter arreperant, ut ipsos etiam oculos Solis et Iustitiae facile frustrentur. Nam et aves et rursus canes et mures, immo vero etiam muscas, induunt. Tunc diris cantaminibus somno custodes obruunt. Nec satis quisquam definire poterit quantas latebras nequissimae mulieres pro libidine sua comminiscuntur. Nec tamen huius tam exitiabilis operae merces amplior quam quaterni vel seni ferme offeruntur aurei. Ehem et—quod paene praeterieram—siqui non integrum corpus mane restituerit, quidquid inde decerptum deminutumque fuerit, id omne de facie sua desecto sarcire compellitur.*”).

Both men overestimate their abilities, as Frangoulidis explained: Thelyphron claims to be more “keen-sighted indeed than Lynceus himself or Argus” (2.23), while Lucius compares himself later in the plot to Hercules (2.32). And as such, they are punished for it; once again,

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<sup>313</sup> Frangoulidis, 2008: 85ff.



Lucius transfiguration is not permanent, unlike Thelyphron's (though he is luckier than Socrates).<sup>314</sup>

The final book of the novel is, as Frangoulidis explained, particularly important when we analyze the magical elements. He argued that when Lucius encounters Isis, the goddess of true magic and miracles, and joins her religion, he sees the opposite kind of magic of that of witches; positive opposed to negative. Her role "can only be fully appreciated through the presence of the diametrical opposite", and so it is necessary for him to go through it before he reaches Isis - in a contrast with the other figures: "I have come in pity at your misfortunes; I have come in sympathy and good will. Now stop your tears and cease your lamentation; banish your grief. Now by my providence your day of salvation is dawning" (11.5, *Adsum tuos miserata casus, adsum favens et propitia. Mitte iam fletus et lamentationes omitte. Depelle maerorem. Iam tibi providentia mea illucescit dies salutaris*).

Frangoulidis further explained that all the inset stories involving magic occur throughout the chapters, except for the last one. To him, at the end Lucius goes through them as cautionary tales, advice to guide them in the story, but in the end he has no need for them anymore.<sup>315</sup> "You have endured many different toils and been driven by Fortune's great tempests and mighty stormwinds; but finally, Lucius, you have reached the harbour of Peace and the altar of Mercy" (11.15, "*Multis et variis exanclatis laboribus magnisque Fortunae tempestatibus et maximis actus procellis, ad portum Quietis et aram Misericordiae tandem, Luci, venisti.*").

The witches in the novel are, to Frangoulidis, forces of violence and disorder, working only for their own benefit and their lust; Isis, on the other hand, is a symbol of love.<sup>316</sup> Lucius' transformation into an ass is also relevant: as he explained, the ass characterizes the protagonist still at his human form, highlighting his stubbornness, foolishness and lustfulness. Moreover, Isis hates the ass because his color reminds her of her enemy Seth-Typhon, who not only dismembered her brother and husband Osiris, is depicted as a human figure with an ass' head.<sup>317</sup> His arrival at the harbor of Cenchreae is a good example: at Hypata he is in darkness "when we reached the first square a sudden wind blew out the light on which we were relying. With difficulty we extricated ourselves from the blackness of improvident Night, and, smashing our

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<sup>314</sup> Frangoulidis, 2008: 85ff.

<sup>315</sup> Frangoulidis, 2008: 4ff.

<sup>316</sup> Frangoulidis, 2008: 130.

<sup>317</sup> Frangoulidis, 2008: 153f.

toes against stones, we reached our lodgings in a state of exhaustion” (2.32, *Sed cum primam plateam vadimus, vento repentino lumen quo nitebamur exstinguitur, ut vix improvidae noctis caligine liberati, digitis pedum detunsis ob lapides, hospitium defessi rediremus*); at Cenchreae he is enlightened, “about the first watch of the night I awoke in sudden1 fright and saw, just emerging from the waves of the sea, the full circle of the moon glistening with extraordinary brilliance” (11.1 *Circa primam ferme noctis vigiliam experrectus pavore subito, video praemicantis lunae candore nimio completum orbem commodum marinis emergentem fluctibus*).

Isis answers to Lucius’ appeal and saves him – triumphing over the chaos of the “negative” magic. As Frangoulidis pointed out, she demands for his celibacy, removing his sexuality (both as ass and as man). She also replaces Photis as the female figure in his life – she offers him roses through her priest Mithras, unlike Photis, who promised him the flowers but failed to procure them. He is still curious for magic, but now in a purer way.<sup>318</sup>

## 5.6 Conclusion

“The Phasian had kept the son of Aeson, Circe had kept Ulysses, if love could be saved by spells alone”, (Ov. *Ars am.* 2.103-4, *Phasias Aesoniden, Circe tenuisset Ulixem, Si modo servari carmine posset amor*).

The characters I have presented are a great way to illustrate what I analyzed in the other chapters. They are brilliant witches that survived the test of time – Medea, for example, is known even by some people that are not so familiar with classical texts.

Though I did not go in depth regarding the *Odyssey*, it contains several instances of magic and witchcraft – even if, as I explained, at the time it was not considered so. Homer’s work and his portrait of Circe inspired many witches to come, as Bailey and Durrant mentioned,<sup>319</sup> and were a model for other classical authors, such as Lucan.<sup>320</sup>

Medea is the quintessential scorned wife, famous for murdering her sons so she could cause as much pain as possible to her husband Jason – an act that shocked people at the time and today alike, as even she knows her acts are extreme. Her witchcraft is better seen in the *Argonautica*,

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<sup>318</sup> Frangoulidis, 2008: 171ff.

<sup>319</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 23.

<sup>320</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 110f.

where she is the key for Jason's success in obtaining the Golden Fleece, but her poisoning of her sons and Creon's daughter are the main aspect of Euripede's tragedy.

Canidia's portrayal is interesting, because her character in *Satire* 1.8 and in *Epode* 5 are rather contrasting. In the former she is comical, Horace using her to make light of witches by showing her as a skittish old woman, as Luck claimed.<sup>321</sup> In the latter, however, she is monstrous, torturing a child by starving him so she and her companions can use his organs in a love potion. And in *Epode* 17 her final act is to torture the author himself, having the last word in the entire *Epodes*.

Erichtho takes the role of horrifying witch even further, poisoning the air with her breath and rejoicing in funeral fires, as Pyplacz explained.<sup>322</sup> She is nightmarish, even more so considering she is a symbol of the Civil War, as Pyplacz argued.<sup>323</sup>

And lastly, we have Lucius. The fact that Apuleius was accused of magic, as Hutton explained,<sup>324</sup> adds an important layer to the *Metamorphoses* and how it presents witches and witchcraft. The work shows many sorcerers in the main plot and the inset stories, from the scary Meroe in the first book to the apprentice Photis, the assistant to the infamous Pamphile who end up accidentally turning Lucius into an ass. His misadventures come to a happy ending when he encounters the goddess Isis – as Frangoulidis explained, showing the good side of magic in contrast to the dark and dangerous rites in the first books.<sup>325</sup>

All these sorcerers (and lone sorcerer) portray different sides of witchcraft, using potions and magical objects, divination and even murder to reach their goals.

## 6 Conclusion

The classical witch is a fascinating subject. I cannot (as probably no one can) account for the full meaning of this idea with certainty. Indeed, if one claims to do so, one has probably misunderstood or underestimated the subject. Whether people wanted to protect themselves, get their revenge or attract love - for centuries they tried to do so through supernatural means. Betz

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<sup>321</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 122f.

<sup>322</sup> Pyplacz, 2016.

<sup>323</sup> Pyplacz, 2015.

<sup>324</sup> Hutton, 2003: 117.

<sup>325</sup> Frangoulidis, 2008: 4ff.

described it as “nothing but the art of making people believe that something is being done about those things in life about which we all know that we ourselves can do nothing; *mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur*” (“the world wishes to be deceived, and so it may be deceived”).<sup>326</sup>

As I have shown on chapter 2, magic became its own concept circa the fifth century BCE; before it was not an unusual enough topic for people to take notice of it, and rites were not exclusively for witches. Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have examples of practices that seemed to have been part of everyday life and not unusual practices, as Dickie explained.<sup>327</sup> But, as I presented, eventually people started separating the ideas, referring to *mageia* and the actions of the *magoi*.

In the same chapter, I discussed that Greek and Roman magic were heavily influenced by other cultures, such as Etruscan and Egyptian; according to Bailey, the *magoi* were the priestly caste of the Persian Empire.<sup>328</sup> With time, he explained, *mageia* acquired a negative connotation - we must be careful when analyzing texts from antiquity, as the meaning of certain words change according to source and translation. This adds to the complexity of the topic: we have several words for “sorcerer” alone, such as *magos*, *goes*, *agyrtes* and *manteis* in Greek; in Latin, especially referring to women, the list is extensive and often context-based (describing something as “Thessalian” is often enough to imply witchcraft).

Based on the fact that the definition of witches and magic did not have a clear-cut meaning, I argued that witchcraft often overlapped with other concepts, such as philosophy, science and religion. As Luck wrote, if one was curious about the mysteries of the world, there was a chance they would want to learn about magic.<sup>329</sup> Besides, as I have shown, not only have people of all classes performed magical rites (as Luck explained),<sup>330</sup> it was also balanced between men and women.<sup>331</sup> In literature, however, it was heavily skewed towards sorceresses, as I presented on chapter 5.

A sorcerer was someone who practiced magic, which means many were amateurs. They made use of magical objects – I went into depth on the most common ones found throughout my research, curse tablets, “voodoo” dolls and amulets, on chapter 4. Ogden explained that we find

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<sup>326</sup> Betz, 1986: xlviii.

<sup>327</sup> Dickie, 2005: 24.

<sup>328</sup> Bailey, 2007: 21.

<sup>329</sup> Luck, 2006: 75.

<sup>330</sup> Luck, 2006: 75.

<sup>331</sup> Bailey, 2007: 32f.

varied writing styles (implying different levels of literacy) and mistakes in the formula and *voces magicae*, showing that many performed their rites for themselves, and not as professionals who would have more knowledge on the craft.<sup>332</sup> And to aid these people, there were several papyri with instructions, e.g., the ones collected in the *PGM*, presented on chapter 2.2.2 – and as Betz explained, they only contain a fraction of the spells that have existed.<sup>333</sup>

Sorcerers often asked for help from the gods; there are several rites in the *PGM* that conjure Hecate,<sup>334</sup> and many of the witches in literature prayed to her. So, as I discussed on chapter 3, what would separate magic from religion? Once again, I cannot give a concrete answer. As Bailey explained, the rites of other peoples were often seen as magical practices<sup>335</sup>, and since Greek and Roman rites were so influenced by other cultures, many of the practices became magic through (forced) assimilation.<sup>336</sup> The Romans then turned *mageia*, or *magia* in Latin, into a more generalized concept, according to Bailey.<sup>337</sup>

But they did (somewhat) separate magic from religion, and I explained some of the reasons how they might have done so. Luck had some criteria for differentiating the terms, such as one being manipulative while the other more selfless, one focusing on the community and the greater good and the other being private and secretive.<sup>338</sup> But he also argued that official magic, such as the purification of a community, would be very close to religion.<sup>339</sup> Graf argued there were two main factors separating magic and religion. One is how philosophy made people reflect more about the gods, and their ideas ended up clashing with those of people who practiced magic; the other is that people began looking at nature as a system free of divine influence, as they learned more about natural sciences. In both cases, the relationship between men and the world was changed.<sup>340</sup> Though our knowledge of ancient laws related to magic is not perfect, we do have some examples and what they entailed, such as the Twelve Tables and the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis ete veneficiis*, presented on chapter 3.3, which show that some practices came to be unacceptable by the legislators.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 54ff.

<sup>333</sup> Betz, 1986: xli.

<sup>334</sup> Bailey, 2007: 27.

<sup>335</sup> Bailey, 2007: 12f.

<sup>336</sup> Luck, in Flint et al, 1999: 157f.

<sup>337</sup> Bailey, 2007: 17f.

<sup>338</sup> Luck, 2006: 3.

<sup>339</sup> Luck, 2006: 9.

<sup>340</sup> Dickie, 2005: 20f.

<sup>341</sup> Collins, 2008: 132ff.

In the end, Graf summarized the difference between the two concepts as what was acceptable religious behavior and what was not. I presented on chapter 3.2 that the growth of Christianity reinforced this point, as miracles could only be performed by those in the faith – anyone else was practicing witchcraft and being influenced by the devil, as Bailey and Durrant explained.<sup>342</sup> I argued, however, that Christianity could be seen as not being much different from magic, starting with the Three Wise Men being *magoi* and ending at Jesus himself performing rites described in literature and even the PGM, from cures to resurrection. As Bailey and Durrant claimed, our current idea of a witch is heavily influenced by Christianity;<sup>343</sup> I believe this separation into “good” (i.e., miracles performed by saints) and “bad” (witchcraft) is one of the main ideas behind their influence.

And lastly, on chapter 5 I presented classical literature related to witchcraft, and how these literary witches exemplified what I discussed previously. Graf claimed that the historical reality could be reconstructed from myths,<sup>344</sup> following Heyne’s idea that myths could explain people’s surroundings and help them remember great deeds.<sup>345</sup>

I argued that their characteristics mirrored those of real-life sorcerers, in the way that they are varied and complex; some were regular people while some were described as nothing short of a monster, some performed erotic rites while others tortured and killed their victims. What they have in common, as Ripat explained, is that they are negative examples of women.<sup>346</sup>

In a general way, almost all aspects of witchcraft can be summed up by “it depends on who is answering the question” – and more often than not, the answer seemed to have been a negative one. And the fact that these answers are so relative and diversified is precisely why this topic is so interesting.

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<sup>342</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 65f.

<sup>343</sup> Bailey & Durrant, 2012: 23.

<sup>344</sup> Graf, 1993: 121f.

<sup>345</sup> Graf, 1993: 9ff.

<sup>346</sup> Ripat, 2016.

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## 7.4 Images

Image 1: Balme, M., Lawall, G., and Morwood, J., *Athenaze. An Introduction to Ancient Greek*. New York, 2016: xxxvi

Image 2: Wikimedia Commons. Photograph by Marie-Lan Nguyen, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voodoo\\_doll\\_Louvre\\_E27145b.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voodoo_doll_Louvre_E27145b.jpg). Downloaded on 23.03.2022.

Image 3: Photograph by Mike Peel ([www.mikepeel.net](http://www.mikepeel.net)). Downloaded on 18.02.2022.

## 8 Appendix



Image 1: Greece and the Aegean Sea



Image 2: voodoo doll dating from the second or third century CE, coming from Egypt, perhaps Antinoopolis. She is made of unbaked clay, hands and feet bound behind her, and transfixes by 13 nails: top of the head, eyes, ears, mouth, chest, hands, vagina, anus, and feet. Presumed to represent Ptolemais, victim of the spell. Currently at the Louvre Museum, in Paris.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Ogden, in Flint et al, 1999: 77



Image 3: curse tablet found in Bath (Tab. Sulis 54), United Kingdom. Translation: “May he who carried off Vilbia from me become as liquid as water. (May) she who obscenely devoured her (become) dumb, whether Velvinna, Exsupereus, Verianus, Severinus, A(u)gustalis, Comitianus, Catus, Minianus, Germanilla (or) Jovina”.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Roman Inscriptions of Britain



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