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Who Does That? Further Conversations on *Drawing Down the Moon*

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Abstract

This paper addresses responses to *Drawing Down the Moon* by Shannon Grimes, James Davila, Gregory Shaw, and Naomi Janowitz, using the cues of extraordinary efficacy, performance, social location, and ends to determine whether something is labeled magic and by whom. In each of the papers, the cue of social location appears as the most significant, even though the others each play a role as well.

Keywords

magic – alchemy – *Sefer ha Razim* – theurgy – erotic

Introduction

In the brief space allotted to me, I can hardly hope to address all the ideas these papers have raised, but I would like to try to pull together a few threads, focusing on the idea of magic as a discourse—not a thing itself, but a way of talking about things.¹ Seeing magic as a discourse allows us to evaluate each of these topics, not to decide whether any one of them *is* magic or not, but rather to analyze how and for whom such things might be brought into the discourse of magic. While the cues of extraordinary efficacy, performance, and ends are significant, the cue of social location, or the identity of the performer, appears as the key element in each of these

¹ “Magic is a discourse pertaining to non-normative ritualized activity, in which the deviation from the norm is most often marked in terms of the perceived *efficacy* of the act, the familiarity of the *performance* within the cultural tradition, the *ends* for which the act is performed, or the *social location* of the performer.” (Edmonds 2019, 5).

papers (be it Zosimus's alchemy, the *Sefer ha Razim*, Iamblichus's theurgy, or even the various erotic practices) for determining whether it is labeled magic and by whom.

Shannon Grimes: Alchemy and Metallurgy

Shannon Grimes raises the question of whether the practices of someone like Zosimus of Panopolis should fall within the discourse of magic, given the social contexts in which he worked. "Alchemy, in this era," she claims, "is no different from metallurgy, which could only be practiced in temples or by trade guilds, and the majority of texts show the rather normative practices of these professional groups."² How do we distinguish between "craft secrets," which would be considered ordinary practice by most, and "magic," or "alchemy," which would be marked as extraordinary? The criteria for making the distinction cannot simply be a theoretical orientation, since we find physical theory in Aristotle and others. Zosimus explicitly differentiates himself from such thinkers, relegating Aristotle among those whose thought could not reach beyond the mortal world.

[Aristotle] was not [united with] the Divine Mind, but was rather a mortal man, a mortal intelligence and a mortal body. He was the most brilliant of the nonluminous beings, in contrast to the incorporeal beings. . . . But since he was mortal, he could not elevate himself as far as the heavenly sphere; nor did he know how to render himself worthy. This is why his science and his deeds stayed in the lower region of this sphere.³

I suggest that the cues in my definition of magic can help us clarify the situation: looking at Zosimus in particular for discourse about extraordinary efficacy, performance, ends, and social

² Grimes 2018, 75.

³ Zos., *On Electrum* CMA Syr. II.12.4 (trans. Grimes 2006).

location, in order to show how Zosimus positions himself outside the norm as an alchemist, even if he explicitly rejects the label of magician.

In describing his procedures, Zosimus promises extraordinary efficacy of results; he performs amazing and divine things. As I have shown, the recipes in Zosimus and other alchemical texts resemble those in the so-called Greek Magical Papyri in their promise to the reader that “you will be amazed” at the efficacy of the results. In one recipe, the priest Nephotes touts the marvelous efficacy of his procedure:

Nephotes to Psammetichos, immortal king of Egypt. Greetings. Since the great god has appointed you immortal king and nature has made you the best wise man, I too, with a desire to show you the industry in me, have sent you this magical procedure which, with complete ease, produces a holy power. And after you have tested it, *you too will be amazed* at the miraculous nature of this magical operation. ... And address whatever god you want and ask about whatever you wish, and he will reply to you and tell you about anything. And if he has spoken dismiss him with the spell of dismissal, and *you who have used this spell will be amazed*.⁴

Like the magical recipes for bowl divination (*lecanomancy*) in the Great Paris Magical papyrus, Zosimus assures his addressee that “you will be amazed” at the results of his procedures for producing asbestos or working with silver.

I will make these things clear to you. For it is known that the alabaster stone has been called ‘brain’ on account of it retaining every fleeting dye. Therefore, taking the alabaster stone, cook it a day and a night, and have chalk (*asbestos—the unquenched*). And take the sharpest vinegar and quench it, and *you will be amazed* at the divine creation. For it makes the whitest appearance.⁵

And having smelted one pound of pure silver, make a projection from the dry matter 3 or 6 parts and *you will be amazed*. This is the divine and great mystery that is sought, and able to conquer poverty and to ward off enemies.⁶

⁴ See Edmonds 2020. PGM IV.154–160; 221–233.

⁵ Zos., CAAG 2.113–115:

⁶ Zos., *From the Great Art of the Ancients* (Mertens 1995, 48–49).

Zosimus's concern with the transmutation, purification, and perfection of the soul or spirit indicates that the ends he seeks are outside of the normative practices of the metallurgists. He defines alchemy as the salvation of the soul, releasing it from the bonds of matter. "The spirit, having been purified and assimilated to it through fire, saves the soul, if it is taken care of with craft."⁷ Alchemy, however, is not just an ordinary, practical craft; its method encompasses the formation of all nature.

And all things are woven together and all things are unraveled; and all things are mixed together and all things combined; and all things are mingled together and all things separated; and all things are drenched and all things are dried off; and all things flower and all things fade in the bowl altar. For each thing happens by method and by weighing and measurement of the four elements. The weaving together and unraveling of all things and the whole binding together of things does not occur without method. The method is natural [physikē], breathing in [physōsa] and breathing back out [ekphysōsa] and preserving the organizations, increasing and decreasing. And everything, to put it briefly, produces nature, when it is harmonious with its separation and unification, as long as nothing of the method is left out. For nature turned upon itself transforms nature. And this is the nature of the excellence of the whole cosmos and what binds it all together.⁸

The ends that Zosimus seeks are not simply the practical ends of the metallurgists, or even the jewelry makers who make gems or the clothes dyers; the aim is the understanding of how to manipulate nature.

As for the social location of Zosimus's alchemy, Grimes argues that, rather than imagining him as free-lancer or a client scholar with a patron, as Dufault has suggested, Zosimus is best understood as "a master craftsman, in charge of collecting, interpreting, and translating recipes

⁷ Zosimus, *On Substances and the Four Elements*, CAAG II.151.3–10.

⁸ Zos., *On Excellence*, CAAG II.110.15–111.7 = MA 10.85–99 M. Cp., Demokritos, CAAG I.47.12 = PM 16.166–170 Martelli. But those who with ill-judged and irrational haste want to prepare a remedy for the soul and for relieving any distress do not perceive that they will go wrong. For they believe that we are presenting a mythical rather than a mystical discourse, so they do not carry out any close examination of the images.

for the lower-ranking artisan-priests.”⁹ She points out that the establishment of trade guilds in the first century CE in Egypt opened up the craft of metallurgy to wider circles than had been possible in Pharaonic Egypt. Although these speculations about Zosimus’s position are plausible, I would note that he does not present himself in the texts themselves as a master craftsman in a guild, nor does he speak to Theosebeia (or other addressees) as if trade guilds were the social location of their interactions.

Rather, he uses terminology of philosophy and religious ritual to characterize his own expertise and authority, as well as to describe the learning of Theosebeia and others, warning Theosebeia not to let anything distract her from the search for the divine and referring to magicians like Membres (Jambres) and Solomon.

Offer sacrifices to them [the demons], not those that nourish and entice them, but rather the sacrifices that repel and destroy them, those of which Membres spoke to Solomon the king of Jerusalem, and especially those that Solomon himself wrote as the product of his own wisdom. So doing, you will obtain the genuine and natural propitious [tinctures]. Do these things until you perfect your soul.

The spiritual man, one who has come to know himself, need not rectify anything through the use of magic, not even if it is considered a good thing, nor must he use force upon Necessity, but rather allow Necessity to work in accordance with her own nature and decree. He must proceed through that one search to understand himself, and, when he has come to know God, he must hold fast to the ineffable Triad and leave Fate to work what she will upon the clay that belongs to her, that is, the body.¹⁰

Zosimus himself rejects the label of magician, however, and locates himself as a spiritual philosopher who stands outside the common herd, knowing himself in the Platonic way and

⁹ Grimes 2018, 75. The account of Dufault 2019 does more to contextualize Zosimus within an elite philosophical context, but Dufault argues that Zosimus must have been a dependent client scholar, rather than an independent craftsman.

¹⁰ Zos., *Final Reckoning* 8 CAAG II.244.24–245.7. Zos., *On the Letter Omega* 7 = MA 1.54–64.

seeking the divine regardless of what happens to his material shell.¹¹

It is worth noting that the earliest alchemical manuscripts come from the same cache of Egyptian papyri as the Greek Magical Papyri; indeed, the same scribal hand that penned the so-called Eighth Book of Moses also created the codex collections of alchemical recipes known as the Stockholm and Leiden Papyri.¹² The procedure that lets you know the secret name of God so that you can do anything, including crossing the Nile on a crocodile, is also of concern to those compiling procedures for dyeing stones and changing the colors of metals. So this ancient collocation of alchemy with magic indicates that the place of alchemy within the discourse of magic is not merely a modern one. Although Zosimus rejects the label of magician for himself and his work, the way Zosimus identifies himself and his works within his texts presents all the cues of efficacy, performance, ends, and social location to fit within the discourse of magic.

James Davila: *Sefer ha Razim* and the Rabbis

The same sort of question of self-identification arises in James Davila's paper on the *Sefer ha Razim*. I am delighted that Davila has found the criteria I developed in my book useful for analyzing materials that are well beyond my own competence; this is just the sort of thing I had hoped for from my work, and I look forward to getting better acquainted with this fascinating text from his forthcoming translation. After surveying the range of practices in the text, Davila

¹¹ Cp. Edmonds 2019, 309 with reference to Zos., *On the Letter Omega* 7 = MA 1.54–64.

¹² P. Holmiensis and P. Leid. J 397 were written in the same scribal hand as PGM XIII, as Brashear 1995, 3402–3404 notes. Another magical papyrus, PGM Va, which contains a single page with a spell for a direct vision from Helios was found among the leaves of P. Holm, and PGM XII.193–201 contains an alchemical recipe for making a gold tincture. All of these texts may have come from the same cache, known as the Anastasi hoard.

suggests that the rabbinic sages might well have labeled the *Sefer ha Razim* as magic, while the composers of the *Sefer ha Razim* would have protested that it was not. So it is worth seeing how the *Sefer ha Razim* fits within the discourse of magic and which cues might have been most important for the different perspectives.

The text certainly claims extraordinary efficacy; even in the one example Davila provides, we can see the claim that the divinatory procedure has unlimited results: “Ask it and it will tell you whatever you seek.”¹³ Likewise, the performer is promised: “do everything in purity and you shall succeed.”¹⁴ The relatively high coefficient of weirdness in the performance also marks the rite as extraordinary. It is not performed in the ordinary times or places, nor are the preparations standard.

Go out on the first day onto the seashore or on the bank of the river in the third hour of the night and be wrapped in a new robe. Do not eat any small cattle or anything that emits blood, and do not drink wine. And take myrrh and pure frankincense and put (them) on glowing coals of fire in a new earthenware vessel.¹⁵

But Davila suggests that it is the ends that would not only most trouble the rabbinic sages, but that are marked in the text as problematic, since these spells do not invoke the supreme God of Israel but only lesser divinities. What is this “dirty work best not associated with the angels or the God of Israel”? Erotic binding spells often raise concerns, but necromancy provides the clearest example of a procedure that is always non-normative.

The dubious nature of these rites, however, is mitigated in the text by strategies that seek

¹³ §112.

¹⁴ §114.

¹⁵ §110..

to portray the practitioners and their rites as normative. The invocation for the divinatory spell Davila quotes shows how references to canonical scriptural texts help to legitimate the ritual and validate it within normative practice.

“I adjure you by Him who measured (the) waters in the hollow of His hand (Isa 40:12) and rebuked the waters so that they fled from before Him (Ps 114:3), and who made flitting spirits in the air, the attendants of His Presence, an igniting fire (Ps 104:4). He rebuked the sea and it dried up (Nah 1:4), and the rivers He made into a desert (Ps 107:33).¹⁶

Even the necromantic rite is validated and normalized by a biblical quotation, despite the fact that the context of the quotation condemns such necromancy. The authors of the *Sefer ha Razim*, by their performance in making use of canonical authorities, try to show that they are like the rabbinic sages, steeped in the knowledge of the holy scriptures. From their perspective, their social location is not that of marginal outsiders but of sages like the rabbis they imitate.

Gregory Shaw: Iamblichus and Porphyry

Gregory Shaw’s analysis of Iamblichus’s attempt to differentiate himself from the magicians raises similar issues of identity and social location. I am indebted to Shaw for helping me form my own understanding of theurgy, and I find his questioning the differences between the rites of the Greek Magical Papyri and Iamblichus here very productive. Again, it is worth considering, in Iamblichus’s account of his theurgy, which cues are most valid for him—and for opponents like Porphyry. Iamblichus’s response suggests that Porphyry flagged elements of the performance, the threats to the gods and the weirdness of the *voces magicae*, as aligning theurgy with magic

¹⁶ §111.

(*goetia*) in claiming extraordinary efficacy.

Iamblichus, however, does not deny the similarities, just the significance that Porphyry attributes to them.

Through the power of ineffable symbols (*apporetōn synthemātōn*), the theurgist commands cosmic entities no longer as a human being or employing a human soul, but, existing above them in the order of the gods, uses threats greater than are consistent with his own proper essence . . . using such words to instruct the cosmic powers how much, how great and what sort of power he holds through his unification with the gods, which he gains through his gnosis of the ineffable symbols (*apporetōn symbolōn*).¹⁷ For Iamblichus, it is the ends, not the means, that matter most. “Theurgists do not address the Divine Intellect over trifling matters but only concerning things that pertain to the purification, liberation, and salvation of the soul.”¹⁸ Anyone who seeks other ends cannot be a theurgist, but a magician who perverts the knowledge of the cosmic system in ways that are doomed to bring disaster (and the analogy with Alcibiades seems very apt here!).¹⁹ While Eunapius does attribute miracles to Iamblichus that might not appear to strictly concern “the purification, liberation, and salvation of the soul,” the hagiographer is just showing that his definition of legitimate ends is slightly broader than Iamblichus; the wondrous feats that Iamblichus performs are still far from the kinds of effects achieved by the practitioner of the Eighth Book of Moses or other spell books of the Greek Magical Papyri.²⁰

¹⁷ Iambl., *Myst.* 246.12–247.5.

¹⁸ Iambl., *Myst.* 293.5–8

¹⁹ Iambl., *Myst.* 293.5–8. Cp. Iambl., *Myst.* 194.3–7. If someone who understands this divine influence and tries to draw certain parts of the cosmos to other parts in a perverse way, the parts are not the cause of the perversion but the audacity of men and their transgression of the order in the cosmos, perverting things which are beautiful and lawful. Iambl., *Myst.* 182.13–16. If anyone takes the things that contribute properly to the perfection of the universe and diverts them to another purpose and illegitimately achieves something, the damage from what he has evilly used will fall on him personally.

²⁰ Eunapius, *Vit. Soph.* 458 (levitation); 459 (evocation, as well as the ability to sense impurity when he turns aside from a road along which a funeral procession is coming); 457 (Porphyry’s exorcism, which Eunapius claims to have heard about in a book by Porphyry himself). Iamblichus himself mentions levitation in *Myst.* 3.5 112. Cp. the list of

For Iamblichus, the identity of the performer determines the ends. The theurgist, as a properly initiated and purified philosopher, keeps her soul in congruence with the divine order, so any ends she seeks must be in accord with that order, whereas the magician simply manipulates cosmic sympathies, so the ends he seeks are not in accord. For Iamblichus, therefore, the ends and the social location of the performer come together as the key factors: whether it is illegitimate magic or authoritative theurgy depends on who is doing it. The theurgist could never seek ends that are incongruent with the cosmic order, so anyone who seeks other ends must not be a theurgist or an authentic member of the elite cadre of Platonic philosophers.

Naomi Janowitz: The Problem of “Love Magic”

Naomi Janowitz’s paper likewise highlights social location as the most valid cue when considering the materials that have been lumped under the rubric of “love magic.” The problem with the category, as she quite rightly points out, is that any act is more likely to be labeled deviant or non-normative in the ancient Greco-Roman world if performed by a woman than if performed by a man. The criterion of performance is not strongly valid, because the same act of using song (*epaoide*) or substance (*pharmakon*) or device (*iunx*) is more likely to be labeled magic if done by a woman. A *iunx*, however, is still an erotic device, even when used by a respectable male philosopher like Proclus to manipulate the cosmic balance; the Chaldaean Oracles describe the *iungges* as the connectors, the things that create the bonds of eros that hold together the

cosmos, an idea that ultimately stems from the description of eros in Plato's *Symposium*.²¹

This may be a fairly esoteric sense of the erotic, but, as Janowitz points out, “love magic” is not just used for matters that directly involve sexual activity; the ends may vary. Again, however, the perspective of the labeler is crucial. Proclus's use of the *iunx* may be acceptable to his hagiographer Marinus, but Marinus also indicates that Proclus's practices were not acceptable to others in the community (vultures, he calls them).

He had made use of the communions of the Chaldaeans and the encounters with the gods and the ineffable spinners. . . . The philosopher, having been purified by Chaldaean purifications, consorted with the self-manifesting luminous images of Hekate. He moved the rain clouds, spinning a certain whirligig [*iunx*] in the appropriate way, and miraculously freed Attica from droughts. ... And once having been tested in circumstances with certain opponents like vultures, he left Athens, as he was, and made a journey into Asia.²²

As Johnston and Lewis have shown, the miraculous works of the female theurgist Sosipatra are handled much more circumspectly than those of her male counterparts, precisely because the slippery slope from theurgy to magic is even more hazardous for women than for men.²³

Janowitz rightly notes that female erotic agency, of any kind, is disturbing to the patriarchal order because of the ways it upsets the power balance. Females exercising power over males, whether through deceptive ruses that confuse male agency or through extraordinary power that controls male agency, is thus always non-normative to some extent in such a system. However, as I argue about the label of magic as a whole, there are at times reasons to self-label

²¹ Damascius, *In Parm.* 59.24 = *Chaldaean Oracles* fr. 76. Since there are not only three whirligigs (*iungges*), but many. For the god says in the oracle: “All these many leaping forth stand on the shining worlds.” Cp. Plato, *Symp.* 202e.

²² Marinus, *Vit. Procl.* 28.677–679; . 15 370–373.

²³ Johnston 2012 and Lewis 2014.

as non-normative. Frankfurter, Dieleman, and Moyer have discussed “stereotype appropriation” by the subaltern Egyptians in dealing with Greeks and Romans, which, like Obeyesekere’s “self-primitivization,” becomes a way to turn negative non-normativity to positive, to stand out as extra-ordinary in a good or desirable way.²⁴ Thus, the stories about the female stratagems do not only give us insights into the social frameworks, they also help us understand the daily behaviors of people within that system, since we can see evidence of this kind of stereotype appropriation as a strategy for the exercise of power within the society. Such exercise is of course heavily circumscribed, but we can see the particular ways that individuals chose to act within those limits, turning a marginal social location into an asset.²⁵

Conclusion

Social location thus emerges as the most significant factor and the most valid cue in all these examples; *who* is performing is more important (at least to the ones making the definitions) than *how* it is done, or even *why*. The validity of this cue, however, still varies from example to example and with the perspective of one’s labeling. Zosimus is very concerned about how things are done; the performance of alchemical procedures with the proper method is what distinguishes him from the common herd. However, Zosimus also critiques those whose ends he sees as unphilosophic. The authors of the *Sefer ha Razim* are also concerned with ends, because they are

²⁴ Frankfurter 1998, 198–237; Dieleman 2005, 185–284; Moyer 2011, 248–273. “Self-primitivization” in Obeyesekere 2005, 120, appears as a particular form of such stereotype appropriation.

²⁵ The woman in the Hellenistic period who chose to wear the magnificent gold earrings with dangling Erotes holding *iungges* was surely marking herself outside the norm, flaunting her extraordinary erotic attractiveness, a power like the magic of the *iunx*. Earrings BM 1877, 0910.17: see Edmonds 2019, 93–94 with figure 5 and plate 5.

responding to the critiques of the rabbinic sages on those grounds. Iamblichus's response to his critics likewise shows us that the strangeness of performance is a valid cue for other philosophers like Porphyry.

In every case, the claims for the extraordinary efficacy of the acts are what prompt the debate over the normative status of the actions. *What* is done, the particular act in itself, does not qualify that act as magic, but particular examples of how certain acts are depicted and discussed gives us, as modern scholars, a better sense of the contours of the discourse of magic in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

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