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978-1-107-07052-3 - Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment

Brian P. Copenhaver

Excerpt

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCRUPLES OF J. G. FRAZER

Frazer is much more savage
than most of his savages.¹

1 SCAREHORSE

Where chariots raced in the stadium at Olympia, part of the track was called the Scarehorse – Taraxippos. Sometimes horses galloped past it, but sometimes they panicked, ending the race at that spot in a jumble of wheels and harness that no one could explain. Some said that a horse-whisperer was buried there. Some claimed that the tomb was empty, built long ago to atone for a murder. Others insisted that there was a corpse – of a man who had bad luck at racing and

became a malevolent spirit (*daimona*) jealous of the riders. A man from Egypt said that Pelops got the idea to bury something there from Amphion of Thebes.... This Egyptian thought that Amphion and also Orpheus from Thrace worked dreadful magic (*mageussai*) so that wild animals came to Orpheus when they chanted, and rocks built themselves into walls for Amphion.²

The spectators at the Games were humans – mortal men – and it was they who traded tales about the Taraxippos. Otherwise, the Egyptian is the only human identified in the story and not treated as dead. All the trouble may have started with a dead man, but one of the dead turned into a *daimôn*, a spirit of a higher order. Pelops, Amphion, and Orpheus – heroes of myth and legend – are also more than human.

Pelops is a local figure, however, while the others come from far away. The road to Thebes, Amphion's city, ran more than 200 miles from the stadium, which stood on the west of the peninsula named after Pelops.

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Figure 1. Chariot Racing: Panathenaic Amphora, 410–400 BCE.
(British Museum, 1866, 0415.24)

The nearest corner of Thrace, the land of Orpheus, was a journey of 800 miles. What did these strangers have to do with Pelops and the startled horses, and why should Amphion advise Pelops to “bury something” at a racetrack? Pausanias, who described the Taraxippos around 150 CE, does not say. His book is an immense *Description of Greece*, a survey of classical monuments and their uses – mainly religious and political.³

At other sites where horses used to race, archaeologists have found strips or sheets of metal inscribed with curses, like this one buried in ancient Beirut: “Oreobarzagra, Akrammachari, Phnoukentabaoth, Obarabau, you holy angels, ambush and restrain, ... attack, bind, overturn, cut up, chop into pieces the horses and the charioteers” – not all of them, just the teams that had to lose so another could win and bets could be collected.⁴ Did Amphion advise Pelops to bury such a curse tablet (*katadesmos*) at Olympia, making him the patron saint of everyone who ever tried to fix a race? A curse aims to harm someone, just as a prayer means to help. When people address prayers to non-human agents, such as angels, we call their behavior ‘religious.’ Since a curse is a prayer inverted, it would seem to qualify as upside-down religion, like a Christian excommunication: Faustus fears the sacred rite of “bell, book and candle” that will “curse Faustus to hell.”⁵

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Or perhaps cursing can only be irreligious, a transgression against religion. The Epistle of James, just a little older than Pausanias and the Beirut tablet, teaches that “it is not right for praise and cursing (*katara*) to come out of the same mouth.” And yet Jesus cursed a tree for not bearing fruit out of season. A day later, when Peter saw the tree, it had already dried up: “look, Rabbi,” he exclaimed, “the fig that you cursed (*katérasô*) has withered.” Since few doubted that a curse could kill, the nine words that Jesus spoke to the tree will have been enough: “may no one ever eat fruit from you again.” He asks no one else to blast the tree. His own words suffice. And the Gospel makes the incident an occasion for teaching about faith as the end of time approaches.⁶

Christian readers find the story plausible and its lesson apt. Since Jesus is God, he needs no help to destroy a tree and no one’s permission: the awful power of divinity explains the event to all those who believe. The Gospel curse sustains religion, in no way contradicting or threatening Christian faith. What about curse tablets if they do not address angels or other non-human persons? If all they say is “attack, bind, overturn,” who or what is the attacker? Perhaps no *message* at all is sent by words that are purely performative. The words themselves are agents of destruction – impersonal agents, unlike angels, gods, or the one God.⁷

The person in Beirut who scratched angry words on a lead tablet intended harm, knowing that he or she could not be its proximal agent. The words would do injury by themselves, if written correctly. Once the tablet had been inscribed and buried in the right way, the words would be effective just because those deeds had been done – *ex opere operato*. Likewise, for Roman Catholic believers, the words of eucharistic consecration also have an astonishing effect – turning wine into blood and bread into flesh – just because they are said by a priest, sinful or sinless, who intends to say them as sacramental. But no matter what the priest intends, if the words are not the right words, properly said, the wine and bread will remain as they were.

Which words of power are religious? Which words are magical? If they are on curse tablets, we can examine the words not only on the artifacts themselves but also in situations described by observers like Pausanias. In his day, the use of curse tablets in athletic competitions, business deals, courts of law, and affairs of the heart was common in the Mediterranean world. Racers or gamblers, angered or embarrassed by a bad day at the track, would rather complain about a curse than admit to backing a loser or driving poorly. Hence the Scarehorse at Olympia: what better way to cover bad judgment or a weak performance than a spooked track? And

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Figure 2. Lead Tablet with Latin Curse, First Century CE.
(British Museum; Collingwood [1935], p. 226)

who better to spook it than figures as mighty as Pelops and Amphion? When Pausanias mentions that “Pelops got the idea to bury something there from Amphion,” he wraps an ancient myth around contemporary practice.⁸

Should we call that practice ‘magic’? Pausanias thinks of it that way, describing Amphion as “working dreadful magic.” By the time he wrote the *Description of Greece*, the verb *mageuō* meant simply ‘do magic’ or ‘work magic,’ much the same as those English phrases. But behind the verb is a proper noun – *Magos* – first used centuries earlier as the Greek name for a tribe of Persians that specialized in religion, not magic. In that original application, *mageuō* would mean ‘Magize’ or ‘do what a Magos does,’ and that – from a Greek point of view – might be religious or perhaps something else. But when Pausanias talks about the Scarehorse, claiming that Amphion taught Pelops how to jinx a race, he is not thinking about the ancient Persia of Xerxes.

Egypt comes up twice, however. Pausanias – or his source, more likely – cites an Egyptian informant to confirm that Amphion advised Pelops “to bury something” and that Amphion and Orpheus performed

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amazing feats of magic. Egyptians may have specialized in producing the formularies from which makers of curse tablets copied their spells. From a Greek or Greco-Roman perspective, in any case, Egypt was a faraway place; farther even than the remote homelands of Amphion and Orpheus, it was an exotic locale where Greeks might expect magic and other wonders to be found.⁹

Pausanias writes in Greek about Olympia, however, and about the pan-Hellenic Games celebrated there. For the Greeks no place was more sacred, more charged with religion, more loaded with ritual and spectacle. If Pelops brought magic to Olympia from Amphion in Thebes, did foreign pollution defile the holy precincts, or is magic non-religious or even anti-religious in its nature, no matter where it comes from?

That Pelops “buried something” on the advice of a magician is just one among several accounts of the troublesome stretch of track at Olympia. Another explanation points to “a malevolent spirit (*daimona*) jealous of the riders.”¹⁰ In the first case, a curse tablet – an inanimate object – frightens horses because it has been buried, with the right words written on it, where the chariots will run. To make the horses collide, no one needs to read the words on the buried tablet or hear them: mute on a piece of metal, the words act on their own. Is the action magical just for that reason, because it is automatic and impersonal?

The jealous spirit of the competing explanation is a person, however, like the angels invoked by the Beirut tablet. But this spiritual person is also malicious, like *pneumata ponêra* or *akatharta*, the “evil” or “unclean” spirits whom Jesus and the apostles defeat, forcing competitors to cease their “strange practices” (*perierga*) and burn their books.¹¹ Tempted by legions of devils, Christians pray to good angels and dedicate churches to the archangel Michael, Satan’s great foe. Yet Christians may not pray to demons, all of whom are evil. Are prayers to demons bad religion or just magic, which is also always bad? In either case, prayers are messages. Persons send and receive the messages, whereas curse tablets that lack invocations transmit no message at all. If (A) messages to angels are religious and (B) curses without messages are magical, will (C) messages to demons be religious because they are like A and unlike B? Or must all messages of type C be magical just because they cannot be religious?

Such questions have long perplexed the specialists. Introducing an authoritative book on curse tablets, one expert warns that he has

avoided the use of the term ‘magic.’ ... Magic, as a definable and consistent category of human experience, simply does not exist....

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Even those definitions that speak of an overlap between magic and religion must presuppose them somehow to be distinct and definable entities.... The use of the term ‘magic’ tells us little or nothing about the substance of what is under description.¹²

The author of this statement – which is correct, as far as it goes – understands its limitations: mainly, that excluding ‘magic’ as useless for explanation *outside* the culture that produced it long ago and sustains it today does not require excluding it *inside* that same culture which, in the broadest sense, is Western and European, with roots in ancient Greece.¹³

The ancient Greeks coined a word, *mageia*, whose modern vernacular descendants are *magia*, *magie*, *magji*, ‘magic,’ and so on. When the Greeks used *mageia* and its cognates to talk about themselves and their non-Greek neighbors, their usage carried none of the theoretical baggage that confounds modern applications of the derived words. The baggage piled up quickly, however, as soon as Christians began to theorize about religion in late antiquity. The theorizing created categories used then and now to distinguish religion in general – and the approved Christian religion in particular – from a variety of beliefs and practices that seemed to need distinguishing: as ‘inside’ or ‘outside,’ for example, as ‘ours’ or ‘theirs.’

Hence, while *mageia* and its progeny have perfectly good – indeed, indispensable – uses *inside* a certain cultural framework, knowing how to tell the inside from the outside, at some time and place, became a contested issue because the framework itself was so fiercely contested: we study those contests in a long history of orthodoxies and heterodoxies, creeds and heresies, crusades, inquisitions, wars of religion, and so on, paralleled by a quieter history of theologies, philosophies, cosmologies, and other accounts of things that also bring ‘science’ into the dispute alongside ‘magic’ and ‘religion.’

This book focuses on the Renaissance, when Europeans worked to recover the ancient culture that had invented *mageia* and so much else. Because almost all the industrious scholars of the Renaissance were Christian, they inherited Christian preconceptions about magic, along with an earlier deposit of information about it that survived the Middle Ages. They had data and fixed ideas, but they also had the will to unfix their ideas by creating a critical discipline, philology, in its modern phase. When scholars recovered an old world from the stone and parchment ruins of classical antiquity, they also helped make a new world, where science and technology would eventually produce amazing novelties to challenge religion and other endowments of tradition – including magic.

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2 THE GOLDEN BOUGH

The triad ‘magic, religion, and science’ still rings loud in Anglophone ears mainly because of one person and one immense book: Sir James George Frazer and his *Golden Bough*. Bronislaw Malinowski published an essay in 1925 under the title “Magic, Science and Religion.” Andrew Lang had brought out his own *Magic and Religion* in 1901. Lang’s dislike for Frazer’s work was intense and obsessive. Malinowski was Frazer’s protégé. Both started where Frazer had taken them. And Frazer had started with Pausanias.¹⁴

Born in Glasgow in 1854, Frazer made himself a founder of British anthropology by spending his whole career as a classicist at Cambridge, where he died in 1941. The century between his birth and death was a heroic age for the new social sciences, and Frazer was one of the heroes, but only after establishing himself as a master of ancient Greek and Latin. Bentham, Comte, Mill, and Spencer, names that still shine from the textbooks, shaped part of his education, though W. H. Thompson,

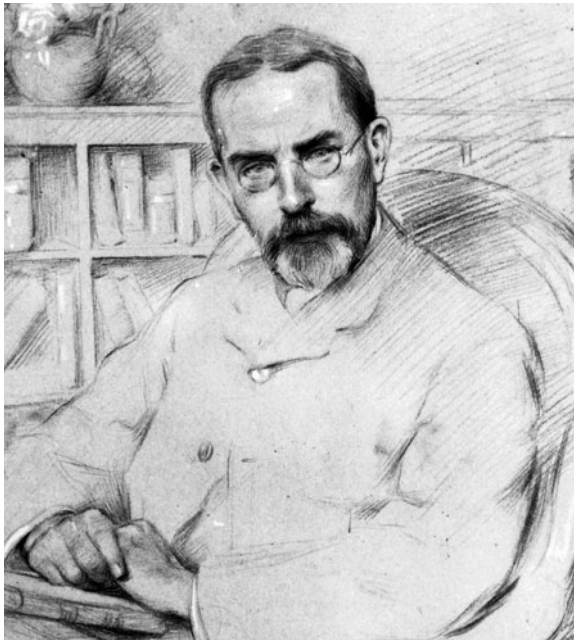


Figure 3. Sir James George Frazer in 1907
by Lucien Monod.
Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, through Bridgeman

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H. A. J. Munro, and Henry Jackson – no longer widely recognized – commanded more of his time and effort: all three taught him classics at Trinity College, where Frazer excelled.¹⁵

In 1879 he won a prize fellowship at Trinity and was joined there in 1883 by William Robertson Smith, who combined biblical philology with anthropology. To learn that new science, Frazer could read E. B. Tylor and other founders of the field, but his personal connection with Robertson Smith – also a Scot – was much stronger. As an editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Smith asked Frazer to contribute, and not just articles on the classics. He also wrote about taboos and totems, gathering material for a book (his first) that he published in 1887: *Totemism*. By that time, he had already started the much larger project that would become *The Golden Bough*, describing it as a book on “comparative mythology.”¹⁶

Frazer’s description of his monumental work is telling in both its words. The second says that the topic is *mythology*, traditionally the business of erudite classicists like his Cambridge teachers. For centuries they had tracked down every detail about heroes like Aeneas, who had been instructed by mysterious figures like the Sibyl to do strange deeds, like taking a golden branch from a tree in order to descend to the underworld. Frazer’s glistening prose takes us inside “the sanctuary at Nemi” to

a certain tree of which no branch might be broken. Only a runaway slave was allowed to break off, if he could, one of its boughs. Success in the attempt entitled him to fight the priest in single combat, and if he slew him he reigned in his stead with the title of King of the Wood (*Rex Nemorensis*). According to the public opinion of the ancients the fateful branch was that Golden Bough which, at the Sibyl’s bidding, Aeneas plucked before he essayed the perilous journey to the world of the dead.¹⁷

Vergil’s story alludes to an ancient rite of priesthood and kingship: that much is just philology decoding mythology, in the usual way. But Frazer makes the mythology *comparative*, thereby *universalizing* it. First he surveys *all* the Greek and Roman sources, collecting data about “a line of priests known as Kings of the Wood, who regularly perished by the swords of their successors, and whose lives were in a manner bound up with a certain tree in the grove.” This learned conclusion is incomplete, however: it does not “suffice to explain the peculiar rule of succession to the priesthood.” Frazer suggests “the survey of a wider field.... It will be long and laborious, ... a voyage of discovery, in which we shall visit many strange foreign lands, with strange foreign peoples, and still stranger