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Book Review: Magic in Ancient Greece and Rome by Lindsay C. Watson

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Watson, Lindsay C., *Magic in Ancient Greece and Rome*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Watson's book joins an expanding community of scholarship on magic in antiquity, specifically Greece and Rome, but is not focused on theoretical distinctions. Nor does Watson focus the material cultural archeological evidence as much as do recent works (e.g.) by Boschung and Bremmer (*The Materiality of Magic*, 2015) and Houlbrook and Armitage (*The Materiality of Magic: An Artefactual Investigation in Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs* 2015). Some readers like Adam Parker (*BMCR*, 2020.03.28] may wish that Watson struck more of a balance between drawing upon both the literary/textual and the archeological records as Radcliffe Edmonds aims to do in *Drawing Down the Moon*.

A strength and value of the book is its focused close readings of literary structures and idioms of Greek text in the original. This linguistic detail, rare in an age dominated by material and visual culture, as analytical measurement of the value of Watson's contribution may tax the classical philological fluidity of some, but be seen as a refreshing close focus on linguistic agility by others.

A large part of the book is devoted to various magical practices. Seven chapters clearly demarcate the specific aims of magical practices under the following classifications: (1) amatory magic, (2) Defixiones or curse magic, (3) herbal magic, (4) the role of animals in magic, (5) representation of witches in literatures, (6) human sacrifice in ancient magic rituals.

Chapter 2 examines the spells by which magicians can reduce a person to a condition in which they will yield to the spell casters desire. The latter include spells to fetch, bind, and make drunk with desire the target body of lust. Watson may be criticized by some for overly generalizing the various forms of love spells as leading to a kind of violent sado masochism. The erotic passion described in ancient Greek and Latin texts need not be described as violent but *apres la lettre* as also merely Romantic and certainly the subject of comedy as in Aristophanes *Lystrata*. In many cultures besides ancient Greek and Latin such amatory spells are common folkloric elements and comparison may have enhanced an interdisciplinary scope.

chapter 3 deals with curses. These spells can injure and kill the perpetrator measure for measure. Watson notes the linguistic formulaic structure employing the phrase "I bind X." directed against the hexed target. For those who have wronged the curser, the ability to achieve the death of the offender is enabled by binding spells employing the term "katadesmoi" [from the verb *katadein*, to bind down implying constrain (*katechein*)". Sometimes metal lead is tagged to "I bind down (*katadeo*) x. in a bond of lead [to the subterranean inferno) and deposited in cemetery graves placed at the right hand of corpse, as a form of necromancy. Again Watson might have proved more interesting if he had compared such acts of cursing with those in Jewish practical Kabbalists such *פולסא דנורא* whereby the onerous is cursed with incantations of *mikubalim* circling a grave yard and conjuring death upon the offender, in the form of fiery lashes of stroke.

Chapter 4 deals with herbal magic and the use of plants in ancient rituals. The attention to detail is clearly a great strength as in all the chapters. But particularly in this chapter. The detail reveals the reason and logic behind folk medicinal herbal magic use of plants in ancient ritual and on the nature of sympathy and etymological *nomen omen* in forming conceptual relationships to healing practices. Again multicultural comparison may have proved insightful as many cultures contain such variegated notions

such as in Judaism where on Rosh Hashanah the custom of eating certain fruits and vegetables as omens to illicit a good upcoming year (Babylonian Talmud Tractates: Kriasas daf amud beth and Horoyot daf yod beth amud aleph).

Chapter 5, written by Watson's partner, although no accreditation is given, treats the role of animals in magic. It also investigates the use of animal ingredients in witches potions, and, amulets (camea), and examples of magical recipe books. Again comparison with other ancient cultures could have widened the ken of coherence found in other ancient civilizations such as when Rabbi Akiva in the Talmud (Makkot 24b) when he saw a fox emerge from the destroyed Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple laughed because he saw this as a sign that the Temple would be rebuilt as a fulfillment of an earlier Biblical prophecy.

Chapter 6 addresses literary representations of witches such as Circe who was able to turn Odysseus' men into swine. Other witches treated include Medea, Theocritus' third century sorceress Simaitha, Lucan's Erichtho [Pharsalia book 6), Horace's Canidia, who has books with knowledge of how to detach and draw down stars (Epod 17.4-5), figuring the witch to ride on Horace's shoulders (17.74), and Apuleius' Pamphile, etc. This is the strongest chapter due to the author's deep understanding that life is stranger than fiction, or art holds a mirror to nature containing deep insights to the human condition, and that these literary figures have their correlates in real life (p.41). The Babylonian Talmud contains belief in the theurgic efficacy of kishuf believed by many living in cities like Nehardya, Pumbedita, and Sura where the Babylonian Talmud was redacted during the period of the amoraim. Numerous sugyot testify to the existence of witchcraft such as in JT Hagigah 2:2 (77d), Mishnah Abot 2:7, Berakhot 53a, Erubin 64b, JT Abodah Zarah 1:9 (40a), JT Kiddushin 4 (66c), Sanhedrin 67a, Sifre on Deut. 11:25 sect. 26, Rosh Hashanah 2:8, Sanhedrin 100b, Sanhedrin chapter 7, halakhah 13, BT Sanhedrin 67a, BT Shabbat 75a, Pesachim 110a, Yoma 83b, BT Hullin 105b, Sotah 22a, Gittin 45a etc. Rabbinic texts of the Talmudic era such as Harba de Mosheh and Sefer HaRazim, involve kishuf. Sanhedrin 67b notes that sorcery (kishuf) "serves to draw on the powers of divine agencies" which the Torah forbids as shituf.¹

The concluding chapter 7 looks at the unsettling documented cases of the sacrifice of children for divinatory or initiatory purposes. Watson might have noted that examples are not limited to Bachists in the second century or the Catilinarian conspirators in the first, who practiced human sacrifice, accompanied by blood drinking, and sexual free-for-alls. At this time the Aztecs actively practices human sacrifice

One caveat of reservation of the book is the utter abhorrence of child sacrifice expressed by Hebrew culture in the episode of [the "binding of Isaac"](#) (Gen 22). If the author for instance like Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* had juxtaposed Greek culture with the binding of Isaac novella in Genesis 22, more insights could be derived on the differences between the two cultures. Avraham as a representative of [ethical monotheism](#) found repugnant the Moloch cult that practiced human sacrifice. Yet a whole tractate in the Talmud called *Avodah Zarah* is at the same time repelled and fascinated by other cultural acts of forbidden worship.

Watson argues "By the time of the early Roman Empire there was plainly a two-way traffic in ideas between the Graeco-Roman and Egyptian worlds. One can therefore speak of the 'internationalization'

of magic, or of a 'pan-Mediterranean' tradition of magic limited only by the borders of the known world" (p. 17). One might wish that Watson had expanded on this line of research by widening and broadening the scope in the comparative interdisciplinary comparison of other cultures hosted by Greek and Roman *paideia* [παιδεία].

Recommended

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Unpublished NOTE

[1] The Torah forbids kishuf in any form in numerous places including: (1) Deut. 18:10-12 "There shall not be found among you any one that uses divination or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer, for all that do these things are an abomination unto the L-rd., (2) Lev. 19:26 states, "You shall not eat any thing with the blood; neither shall you use enchantment, nor observe times", (3) II Kings 21:2 with regards to Menasseh, "He did that which was evil in the sight of the L-rd, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the L-rd cast out before the children of Israel" and his sins are enumerated as follows (5-6): "He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the L-rd. And he made his son pass through the fire, and observed times, and used enchantments, and death with familiar spirits and wizards. He wrought much wickedness in the sight of the L-rd, to provoke Him to anger.", (4) Ex. 22:17 "You shall not suffer a witch [mekasefa] to live.", (5) regarding the witch of Endor who divined using the Ob in I Sam. 28 we learn that Saul visited the woman in Ein Dor who raised up the prophet Shmuel which rationalist follower of Rambam, Rabbi David Kimhi interprets that the woman deceived Saul into believing that the prophet Shmuel had spoken to him. (6) of the wicked Jezebel, the daughter of King Sidon in II Kings 9:22 we read, "the whoredoms of your mother Jezebel and her witchcrafts are so many." (7) Nahum 3:4- Nahum compares Ninevah to the "well favored harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that sells nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcraft" thereby linking sexual immorality with witchcraft; (8) Ezekiel 13:17-23 prophesized against Jewish women who dealt with witchcraft and magic, to kill people or to resurrect people, said to be occupations common to women"; The link between sexual immorality and witchcraft is also seen in Lev. Rabbah 23:7 where the sages of the Canaanites are said to be guilty of sexual immorality and witchcraft. see Bar Ilan, Meir at <https://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/articles/publications/publications0038.html> in H W. Basser and Simcha Fishbane (eds.), Approaches to Ancient Judaism, New Series, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993, V, pp. 7-32. For demystification of sorcery by the modern field of psychology see Levy, D. B. (2017). [Review of the book realizing the witch: Science, cinema, and the mastery of the invisible, by R. Baxstrom and T. Meyers]. Configurations, 25(4), 553-556. At <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/675656>