

Greek Magic, Greek Religion¹

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What ordinary parlance terms “magic”—the use of spells, charms, and other artificial means to enlist the support of supernatural powers in the furtherance of one’s aims—was a normal and ubiquitous part of everyday life in the ancient world. This is an undeniable and important fact; it is hardly surprising that it once formed the starting-point for the investigation of Greek religion. Classicists lost sight of it for a while; among anthropologists, by contrast, its role in primitive societies has always been in the center of discussion. Recently, however, interest among classical scholars has been revived; a spate of publications has forcefully brought to our attention the sheer magnitude of the phenomenon in ancient life.² Once

¹ The basis of this paper is a public lecture delivered on 18 February 1994 at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, and on 24 March 1994 at McMaster University. I am grateful to audiences on those occasions for their interest and helpful comments, as well as to C. G. Brown, R. Drew Griffith, B. MacLachlan, and W. J. Slater. Particular thanks to Robert Parker and Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, who by no means share all the views expressed here and offered vigorous and salutary criticism. My paper is intended as an orientation and general survey (if a tendentious one) for the non-specialist, though I hope specialists will find points of interest here too; as such it might be considered alongside Jan Bremmer’s excellent *Greek Religion*, Greece & Rome New Surveys in the Classics 24 (Oxford 1994), in which magic receives only brief mention on p. 93. In a discussion as broad as this, a synchronic perspective is unavoidable; I hope the effacing of some of the finer diachronic distinctions will not invalidate the conclusions.

² G. Luck, *Arcana Mundi* (Baltimore 1985); German tr. with revisions, *Magie und andere Geheimlehren in der Antike* (Stuttgart 1990); D. R. Jordan, “A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora,” *GRBS* 26 (1985) 151–97; idem, “Inscribed Lead Tablets from the Games in the Sanctuary of Poseidon,” *Hesperia* 63 (1994) 111–26, esp. 116 ff., with bibliography at 116 n. 8; H. D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago 1986; 2nd ed. 1992); C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (New York and Oxford 1991); H. S. Versnel, “Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion,” *Numen* 38 (1991) 177–97; H. Parry, *Thelxis: Magic and Imagination in Greek Myth and Poetry* (Lanham, MD and London 1992); J. G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York and Oxford 1992); N. Robertson, *Festivals and Legends: The Formation of Greek Cities in the Light of Public Ritual*, Phoenix Suppl. 31 (Toronto 1992); C. A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Myth and Ritual* (Oxford 1992); M. García Teijeiro, “Religion and Magic,” *Kernos* 6 (1993) 123–38; F. Graf, *La magie dans l’antiquité gréco-romaine* (Paris 1994); and others. Among earlier contributions, note J. de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA and London 1975) 11 ff., and E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1951).

more the question arises of what relation this material, and the attitudes and beliefs it entails, had with the mainstream of Greek religion.

Although the definition of magic is notoriously difficult,³ for heuristic purposes its often-noted tendency to be oriented towards the achievement of specific goals (enhancing fertility, securing the attention of one's beloved, etc.) may serve to focus discussion. In what follows I will suggest that this tendency is also found in some important Greek rituals that are not normally thought of as magical, and that, consequently, the distinction between "magic" and "religion" does not lie so much in the substance of the ritual acts as in their social context. The second half of the paper will explore the implications of this realization for further study, in the light of the history of the question up to the present day.

It will be useful first to establish the premise, that magical activity was extremely prominent in ancient life. The magical papyri afford a convenient starting-point. Recently Hans Dieter Betz has made available a comprehensive translation, a book of over 300 pages with spells for every conceivable ailment and crisis.⁴ Spells and curses from papyri and leaden tablets have also been published by John Gager, selecting from a corpus of over 1,500 items.⁵ The spread of dates and findspots of this material shows that, extensive though it is, it represents but a fraction of the ancient reality.

The commonest type of magical spell is known as a "defixio," or "binding spell," by which the practitioner seeks to "bind" or incapacitate an enemy. Such spells were normally written on a metal tablet and buried in a secret place. They were employed for all manner of purposes: to bankrupt a business rival, incapacitate a rival lover,⁶ blight someone's crops, cripple an athlete, or silence an orator in a crucial court case. Of this last (very useful) kind of spell, 67 Greek examples and some 46 Latin examples are attested in the archaeological finds, and in literature instances are known from Aischylos and Aristophanes in the fifth century B.C., Cicero in the first, and

³ Though it might seem a logical priority to define the term "magic" before discussing its relation to religion, the problem of definition is so intractable that treatment must either become a paper in itself or simply be suspended in favor of a plunge *in medias res*. For a brief survey, see the Excursus below.

⁴ See above (note 2).

⁵ Gager (above, note 2). See also the additional material in R. W. Daniel and F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum* I-II, *Papyrologica Coloniensia* 16.1-2 (Opladen 1990-92); R. Merkelbach and M. Totti, *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri religiösen und magischen Inhalts* I-III, *Papyrologica Coloniensia* 17.1-3 (Opladen 1990-93); W. Brashear, *Magica Varia* (Brussels 1991); R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae. Part I. Published Texts of Known Provenance*, *Papyrologica Coloniensia* 22.1 (Opladen 1994). Two earlier publications worthy of note are C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor 1950) and A. Delatte and P. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes* (Paris 1964).

⁶ For a study of these, see J. J. Winkler, "The Constraints of Eros," in *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2) 214-43; longer version in *The Constraints of Desire* (New York and London 1990) Ch. 3.

Libanios in the fourth century A.D.⁷ Demosthenes himself is cursed on one surviving defixio; other famous politicians were not exempt.

To dwell for a moment on the defixiones, a common feature, apart from the keywords "I bind" (or some other reference to binding or restraining), is their negativity: An individual seeks to harm another or make them do something against their will. The practitioner takes no account of rights or wrongs, and proceeds in secret, perhaps precisely in the awareness that what he or she does is reprehensible.⁸ Secrecy is also necessary to obviate the possibility of counter-charms. Other kinds of spells, curses, and imprecations have been found, like the defixiones, on tablets buried in out-of-the-way places, but, lacking the key reference to "binding," they should not be classified technically as defixiones; however, they share many other features with the defixiones. Some are just as negative in conception, but others appeal to justice, inflicting their curses in the belief that the punishment is deserved.⁹ We find imprecations against people who break laws, defile a sanctuary, commit perjury, or pollute a grave, amongst other things. Moreover, the sense of justice allows these curses to emerge into the light of day, so that they may be found carved on gravestones (like Shakespeare's "curst be he that moves my bones"), set up in public squares, or enshrined into law.¹⁰ The language of these curses, and indeed of the less savory defixiones, is often closely similar to the traditional language of good and pious prayer; for instance, they may remind the god of some service rendered in the past, with a strong suggestion that he is thereby obliged to help in the present crisis as well. The procedure is exactly the same as Chryses' in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, where the priest reminds Apollo of his piety on many occasions, so that the god may feel the readier to punish the Achaeans for their blasphemy.¹¹ The point will be important later in our discussion.

Tablets inscribed with magic formulae to guarantee a favorable reception in the next world were sometimes placed in graves with the

⁷ C. A. Faraone, "Aeschylus' ὕμνος δέσμιος (*Eum.* 306) and Attic Judicial Curse Tablets," *JHS* 105 (1985) 150–54; idem, "An Accusation of Magic in Classical Athens (*Ar. Wasps* 946–48)," *TAPA* 119 (1989) 149–61; idem, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells," in *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2) 3–32, at 15 f.; Cic. *Brut.* 217, *Orat.* 128–29; Liban. *Or.* 1. 245–49.

⁸ See Versnel (following note) 62 f.

⁹ H. S. Versnel, "Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers," in *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2) 60–106.

¹⁰ Curses of this kind are studied by J. H. M. Strubbe in Ch. 2 of *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2). See, for instance, the Teian curses (ca. 470 B.C.), in R. Meiggs and D. Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford 1969) no. 30 (Strubbe 37 f.). For the similar activity of public oath-swearing, and magical activities connected with it, see C. Faraone, "Molten Wax, Spilt Wine and Mutilated Animals: Sympathetic Magic in Near Eastern and Early Greek Oath Ceremonies," *JHS* 103 (1993) 60–80.

¹¹ Faraone, *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2) 6, 17 ff.; Versnel, *Magika Hiera* 92; cf. also F. Graf, "Prayer in Magic and Religious Ritual," *Magika Hiera* 188–213.

corpse. The celebrated Orphic tablets are merely a special instance of this practice. From the salvation of the dead we move to the healing of the quick. Ancient doctors were remarkably learned in the lore of herbal medicine, and often knew very good recipes for headaches and other things that ail you; some modern discoveries have proceeded from such wisdom, for instance the heart drug digitalis, which originated in the purple foxglove. But ancient doctors were careful to mix in a healthy dose of incantation, like the two sons of Autolykos in the nineteenth book of the *Odyssey* (19. 457), who healed Odysseus' wound from the boar. Sokrates in Plato's *Charmides* (155e) reports a headache remedy in the form of the leaf of a certain plant, which he assures us is useless without the accompanying magic words.¹² To prevent sickness on a daily basis, or to encourage good health and luck generally, the use of amulets and charms was universal.¹³

These instances may suffice to show that magical practices were very common occurrences in ancient life. I have not even touched on things like voodoo dolls, love potions, astrology, witchcraft, necromancy, instructional books, purifications,¹⁴ and so on. The ever-present fear of these dark forces is sufficiently attested by the ancient foundation of Roman law, the Twelve Tables, which specifically outlawed the use of charms to harm the crops. The admonition is repeated in the codes of Theodosius and Justinian in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. From one end of antiquity to the other, then, and in every walk of life, magic was ubiquitous. Almost everybody used it, in every conceivable situation, and constantly, in such a way as would oppress and suffocate us could we go back in time and live in that environment.

In the past, scholars have denigrated magical activities as the domain of the superstitious, and therefore not worth the attention of serious students of religion.¹⁵ They are the sort of thing you expect to find on strange papyri,

¹² See R. Kotansky, "Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets," in *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2) 107–37, at 108 f. The combination of medicines and incantations is of course well known to anthropologists; see, for instance, E. E. Evans-Pritchard's classic *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford 1937) Part IV.

¹³ Further material in G. Lanata, *Medicina magica e religione popolare in Grecia fino all'età di Ippocrate* (Rome 1967).

¹⁴ Rituals for purification of bloodguilt are dramatically illustrated in a new inscription from Selinous: M. H. Jameson, D. R. Jordan, and R. D. Kotansky (eds.), *A Lex Sacra from Selinous*, GRBS Monographs 11 (Durham, NC 1993; reference from Robert Parker). The date is 460–50 B.C. The editors discuss the widespread evidence for such regulations and rituals, and conclude their discussion of the term ἀλάστορες by saying (120) "Archaic and Classical Greece, one is led to think, was a more violent and spirit-infested world than is usually supposed."

¹⁵ Cf. Gager (above, note 2) 3. Wilamowitz spoke of the "wüste[r] Aberglaube der Zauberpapyri" replacing the "alte Religion" at *Der Glaube der Hellenen*, 2nd ed. I (Berlin 1955) 10. Cf. G. Murray, "Memories of Wilamowitz," *AuA* 4 (1954) 9–14, at 12: "On Greek religion also he confessed himself 'altmodisch'; he did not approve of Jane Harrison's *Themis*, which I had sent him. He has a respect for Jane Harrison but is not disposed to 'explain the perfect structure by the embryo nor Plato by the probable superstitions of his grandmother.'" Murray here paraphrases letter no. 55 (17 Sept. 1912) in A. Bierl, W. M. Calder III, and R. L. Fowler, *The Prussian and the Poet: The Letters of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff to*

or used by the lower classes. It is true that philosophers developed rarefied notions of religion, but they were not at all typical. The universal and commonplace acceptance of magic, among all classes, is easily proved from the evidence. In such a world it is on general grounds not likely that magic was compartmentalized, and its mentality abandoned when the people partook in rituals more readily recognized as "religious" by the modern scholar. The phenomenon of magic, in fact, cannot be separated from any serious understanding of ancient religion. That it tends to be separated in the minds of students is the result of the historical development of the discipline rather than of any inherent necessity. The second half of the paper will trace this development and support this assessment. First, however, let us see whether the general expectation is confirmed in practice—whether magic is merely a self-contained phenomenon, or whether its practices and attitudes are apparent across a broader spectrum of sacred doings. We shall find that public ritual and private magic, though not identical, often overlapped in both style and substance, and that the difference between them should accordingly be interpreted as one of context and social attitudes rather than as a difference in kind.¹⁶

Some of the examples of magic cited above can certainly be recognized as fringe activity even in the ancient world, and at first blush the contention that magic is not important to an understanding of real religion appears justified. On closer examination this view cannot be maintained. The form of curses, as has already been pointed out, is often indistinguishable from ordinary forms of prayer. In the whole gamut from the most vicious defixiones to the most sanctimonious public denunciations, there is much fluidity of boundaries and much similarity of language and technique. Any attempt to distinguish magic from religion in curses and prayers founders at once.

The writings of the doctors afford pertinent material for thought. The most famous of the Hippocratic writings from the fifth century B.C., *On the Sacred Disease*, is justly celebrated for its rationalistic rejection of spells and other magical procedures. It heaps scorn upon charlatans who claim to be able to cause eclipses of the sun or make it rain. Surely, one might say, this is proof that magic was beginning to be regarded merely as the activity of unenlightened, superstitious peasants. Yet this same doctor is quite willing to believe that sleeping in the sanctuary of Asklepios can cure you, and the writers of these treatises elsewhere display a willingness to call upon divination, dreams, and other quite irrational resources to work their

Gilbert Murray (1894–1930) (Hildesheim 1991) 111. See also A. Henrichs, "'Der Glaube der Hellenen': Religionsgeschichte als Glaubensbekenntnis und Kulturkritik," in W. M. Calder III, H. Flashar, and T. Lindken (eds.), *Wilamowitz nach 50 Jahren* (Darmstadt 1985) 263–305, at 279.

¹⁶ It will be clear that the phenomena are being viewed at this stage from the outside; to an insider, differences in context and social attitudes might count as a difference in kind. See the Excursus below.

wonders. Moreover, in the place of what they reject, they offer the wildest speculations about the human body, which there was not the slightest reason to believe. Rationality in science is sometimes a chimera, and the border between magic and science is easily crossed; it depends on attitude, information available, and context.¹⁷ Isaac Newton still devoted much study to alchemy,¹⁸ and science in his day had far to go before its results could always be confidently differentiated from the mysterious and the magical.¹⁹

As for our ancient doctor's contempt of rain-magic, one presumes he refers to individual, unapproved magicians rather than the rain-making rituals carried out on behalf of whole cities in many parts of Greece.²⁰ The doctor would also be condemning the great Mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis, which included at their center agrarian magic, as the participants looked to the sky and shouted ὕε, "rain," and then poured water into the earth crying κύε, "conceive." If the author of *On the Sacred Disease* meant to include these publicly sanctioned examples of magic in his contempt, he would have been in a distinct minority of determined and anti-social skeptics such as Diogenes the Cynic. But his book does not strike such a pose; indeed, it implicitly allows for the possibility of divine miracles. Moreover, his attitude towards individual, free-lance practitioners can easily be paralleled, whereas the condemnation of the same activities in the public arena cannot. Almost everyone in ancient Greece believed in the efficacy of oracles, provided that one consulted them in the approved manner. But let an unlicensed oracle-monger appear, and watch him be pilloried by the comic poets for a fraud. The Pythia of Delphi is allowed to hear the voice of god; but let a Sokrates claim to hear it, and see what happens to him. Yet these private activities differ not at all in substance from the public ones. Context and social approval make all the difference.

The magical or goal-oriented aspect of some rituals is indeed readily acknowledged by scholars, if not always put front and center in discussion.

¹⁷ G. E. R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience: Studies in the Origin and Development of Greek Science* (Cambridge 1979) Ch. 1; idem, *The Revolutions of Wisdom: Studies in the Claims and Practice of Ancient Greek Science* (Berkeley 1987) 11 ff.; idem, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge 1990) Ch. 2.

¹⁸ H. D. Betz, "Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri," in *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2) 244–59, at 247.

¹⁹ See K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London 1971); J. Neusner, E. S. Frerichs, and P. V. M. Flesher, *Religion, Science, and Magic in Concert and in Conflict* (New York and Oxford 1989); S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge 1990).

²⁰ For rain-magic in Greece, see J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed. I (London 1911) 309 f.; J. E. Harrison, *Themis*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 1927) 76 ff.; W. Fiedler, *Antiker Wetterzauber* (Stuttgart 1931); L. Radermacher, *Mythos und Sage bei den Griechen*, 2nd ed. (Baden 1938) 321 f., 369 f.; A. B. Cook, *Zeus III* (Cambridge 1940) 296 ff.; M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, 3rd. ed. I (Munich 1967) 110 ff., 116 f., 396 ff. (with further references); R. L. Fowler, "The Myth of Kephelos as an Aition of Rain-Magic," *ZPE* 97 (1993) 29–42.

The rain-making of the Eleusinian Mysteries was mentioned above; this was not the only agrarian connection of the ritual. Another readily granted example is the Thesmophoria for Demeter, the most widespread religious rites in Greece; these involved throwing a dead pig into the earth, to be excavated later, chopped up, and mixed in with the seed corn of every family participating. The pig is Demeter's fertile animal, and this is simple fertility magic; making the crops grow was a very important purpose of the festival, if not the main one. Although this aspect is usually recognized, modern interpreters normally place more stress on the social function of the festival in providing women an opportunity to express solidarity in the face of oppressive Greek men. This was of course an important part of the festival, but to distribute the stress so may tell us more about our own times and preoccupations than about ancient reality.²¹

Other examples will readily be conceded once pointed out, though they are rarely introduced simply as instances of magic. Scapegoat rituals, by which the evils of a whole city are transferred ceremoniously on to the head of an animal or some unfortunate human, who is then driven beyond the bounds of the country, thus purifying the city, can hardly be described by any other term but magic. Sacred marriages, by which the copulation of humans is ritually performed in the belief that it will enhance the fertility of the crops, are an obviously magical business.²² The complete destruction of an animal in full view of an enemy army prior to joining battle is another elementary piece of sympathetic magic.

In addition, there are cases in which the magical/instrumental aspect has been quite overlooked.²³ First, the Panathenaia. This festival of all Athenians on Athena's midsummer birthday involved a spectacular parade through the city up to the Akropolis, where oxen were sacrificed and a new robe, the peplos, was presented to Athena in the form of her ancient statue in the Erechtheum. Modern discussions of the festival stress its social function in uniting all classes, and make much of its location at the beginning of the civic year.²⁴ It is, beyond doubt, a New Year's festival of

²¹ A recent article which strikes an instructive balance is H. S. Versnel, "The Festival for the Bona Dea and the Thesmophoria," *G&R* 39 (1992) 31–55; expanded in *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne 1993) Ch. 4.

²² At *ZPE* 97 (1993) 35 n. 16 I argued (with many scholars) for a broad application of the term "sacred marriage," against those who would restrict it to reenactments of the wedding of Zeus and Hera such as were celebrated at the Samian Heraia. The broader definition is a modern construct, but corresponds to something real. I have since been able to see A. Avagianou, *Sacred Marriage in the Rituals of Greek Religion* (Bern etc. 1991), who argues for the restricted definition; but the few festivals to which she will allow the term to apply show, significantly, little homogeneity, and in the case of the Amphitryon myth she has overlooked the revealing Egyptian parallel and probable source of the story (cf. *ZPE* 97 [1993] 36 n. 23).

²³ It is prudent to stress again that the magical or the goal-oriented aspect is not the whole of the ritual, merely an important function that deserves to be recognized alongside others.

²⁴ E.g. J. Neils, in *Goddess and Festival: The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens*, ed. by J. Neils (Princeton 1992) 23 ff.

renewal and reintegration. But it is something else too. Scholars who write on the Panathenaia naturally mention the peplos, but seem to regard it merely as a pious gift. Yet it is much more than this. The peplos of ritual is the aegis of myth, Athena's impenetrable armor won in the battle of the Giants, those older, monstrous forces of chaos who threatened the orderly and just government of the Olympian gods. The aegis rendered Athena invulnerable. The ancient statue of Athena on the Akropolis was a talisman upon whose preservation the safety of the city depended, like the Palladion of Troy which had to be stolen by Odysseus and Diomedes before the city could be taken. The goddess who protects the citadel, housed in the king's own palace, is a figure already in Mycenaean religion; this statue is Athena. Putting the peplos on the talisman was an act of simple magic. In its fabric was always woven one theme, and one theme only: the battle of the Giants. The message could hardly be plainer: To give Athena a new robe was to secure the protection of the city.²⁵ In the fifth century B.C., this was surely an important purpose of the proceedings; one can imagine the fears of the citizens were anything to go wrong with the presentation.

Secondly, the Arrhephoria. This curious ritual involved two specially chosen girls, who served Athena for some time on the Akropolis, being given a special chest which contained mysterious and secret items, and into which they must not look under any circumstances; the aetiological myth told of the madness and death of the first two naughty girls who did so. They carried this dread burden down from the Akropolis in the dead of night to a sanctuary of Aphrodite; in return they received another, equally mysterious burden, which they returned to the Akropolis. The ritual has been interpreted as a rite of initiation for these pubescent girls. The myth said that the chest originally contained a child, born of an amorous mishap between Hephaistos and Athena; the god's semen fell to the earth, so Athena's virginity was preserved, but the child that Earth conceived and bore was adopted as her own by Athena and entrusted to the daughters of Athens' first king, Kekrops, for safekeeping. The myth speaks of sex, the rite involves girls being separated from their community for months and returning after doing their sacred duty; these slim indications, and a passage in Aristophanes that speaks of the Arrhephoria as a kind of marker of a certain stage of one's growth on the way to adulthood, seem to offer support for the idea that we are dealing with an initiation rite.²⁶ Of course, any social activity will engender the acclimatization of those involved in it, and if they are young, they will learn something about the ways of their elders; but this is not an initiation or a rite of passage as anthropology understands

²⁵ R. L. Fowler, "AIF- in Early Greek Language and Myth," *Phoenix* 42 (1988) 95-113, at 106 ff.

²⁶ H. Jeanmaire, *Couroi et Courètes* (Lille 1939) 264 ff.; W. Burkert, "Kekropidensage und Arrhephoria. Vom Initiationsritus zum Panathenäenfest," *Hermes* 94 (1966) 1-25 = *Wilder Ursprung: Opferritual und Mythos bei den Griechen* (Berlin 1990) 40-59; and many others. The passage in Aristophanes is *Lys.* 641.

the term. It is a very curious initiation indeed if only two girls a year out of the whole city are allowed to participate. The real purpose of this ritual may never be known, but the endpoint, the safe delivery of a newborn child who will grow to be king of Athens, suggests that in general the purpose of the annual rite, if properly carried out (and obviously the point of the myth is that everything depends on that), was to secure the prosperity of the city and (in olden days) its king.²⁷ In other words, the ritual has a specific, concrete goal. Consider also the general character of all these goings on on the Akropolis, involving as they do secret burdens, dark doings in the dead of night, pure young children, and strict rules about the procedure; the ritual has much in common with magical rites, and it would be very hard to maintain any essential difference between them.

Finally, the Arkteia for Artemis at Brauron.²⁸ Young girls played the part of bears and honored the virgin goddess of the hunt. We can infer from the offerings revealed by the excavation of the site that far more girls participated in these rites than did in the Arrhēphoria, but whether they involved a majority of Athenian girls or were compulsory cannot be shown. Let us assume for the sake of argument that as many girls as possible participated, and that their parents thought it a highly desirable part of their upbringing.²⁹ Several hints, stronger this time, suggest that this was an initiation ritual: separation from the home; extended service to the goddess in a remote setting; alteration of the normal state (or adoption of "liminality") by acting the role of animals; return to normalcy thereafter; hints of sexuality in the proceedings, including nudity; the passage of Aristophanes already cited. One can readily admit that the cult assumed

²⁷ Fowler (above, note 25) 105 ff.

²⁸ For a good orientation, see H. Lloyd-Jones, "Artemis and Iphigeneia," *JHS* 103 (1983) 87–102. The most detailed and sensitive discussion is C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Studies in Girls' Transitions: Aspects of the Arkteia and Age Representation in Attic Iconography* (Athens 1988); see the same author's "Ancient Rites and Modern Constructs: On the Braurion Bears Again," *BICS* 37 (1990) 1–14, criticizing R. Hamilton, "Alkman and the Athenian Arkteia," *Hesperia* 58 (1989) 449–72; "Lire l'Arkteia – Lire les images, les textes, l'animalité," *DHA* 16.2 (1990) 45–60. See also P. Vidal-Naquet, "Le Cru, l'enfant grec et le cuit," *Comment faire l'histoire* 3 (1974) 137–68 = "Recipes for Greek Adolescence," in R. L. Gordon (ed.), *Myth, Religion, and Society* (Cambridge 1981) 163–85; L. Bodson, "IEPA ΖΩΙΑ: Contribution à l'étude de la place de l'animal dans la religion grecque ancienne (Brussels 1978) 129–44; J.-P. Vernant, "Artemis and Rites of Sacrifice, Initiation, and Marriage [1983]," in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. by F. I. Zeitlin (Princeton 1991) 207–19; S. G. Cole, "The Social Function of Rituals of Maturation: The Koureion and the Arkteia," *ZPE* 55 (1984) 233–44; R. Osborne, *Demos: The Discovery of Classical Attika* (Cambridge 1985) 154–72; P. Brulé, *La fille d'Athènes: La religion des filles à Athènes à l'époque classique. Mythes, cultes, et société* (Paris 1987) 218–61; idem, "Retour à Brauron. Repentirs, avancées, mises au point," *DHA* 16.2 (1990) 61–90; idem, "De Brauron aux Pyrénées et retour: Dans les pattes de l'ours," *ibid.* 9–27; K. Dowden, "Myth: Brauron and Beyond," *ibid.* 29–43; R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Life: From Conception to Old Age* (Ithaca 1990) 187–91; S. H. Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion* (Baltimore 1993) 171–93; R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* (Oxford 1994) 306–09.

²⁹ On the number of participants, see Sourvinou-Inwood, *Studies* (previous note) 111 ff.; E. Simon, *Festivals of Attica: An Archaeological Commentary* (Madison 1983) 86.

some initiatory aspects in classical times, at least as an expected or desirable service of a certain age-class, which was therefore bound to provide opportunities for social acclimatization; and since it must be foolhardy to distinguish between a ritual with initiatory aspects and an initiation ritual pure and simple, the common assessment of the Arkteia may be accepted, however controversial or difficult the interpretation of some details of the initiation may be.

But was this all the ancient girls were doing? To imitate a bear is a most peculiar way to prepare for marriage. To say that it was done for the vague and abstract reason that it seemed a good way to symbolize liminality, or because the bear symbolized the "untamed" nature of the virgin, seems to be a common explanation, but it is one that the present writer has always found unsatisfactory, at least as a complete explanation. A religion made only of such ingredients as these is thin spiritual fare, and methodologically (see the second half of this paper) there are grounds for uneasiness when an interpretation stands or falls on a structural relationship alone. Now, the goddess in question is the goddess of the hunt, of childbirth, and the young. The primeval hunting background should be prominent in any discussion; and, by good fortune, we know that a sacred hunt of some kind did in fact form part of the worship of Artemis Brauronia.³⁰ In the context of hunting, imitating bears makes immediate intuitive sense, whereas in the context of preparation for marriage it does not. In the context of hunting, young girls are the appropriate instrument for the propitiation of the goddess and the securing of her favor. They are pure and virginal like her; the closer they come to puberty, the more sexually attractive they become—like her. The association of the chase of the hunt and the chase of sex is an anthropological commonplace. This is a better place to look for the explanation, in the first instance, of the sexuality in the proceedings, than to Athenian ideas about marriage. One does not preclude the other; indeed, because of the first, the second is easily grafted on to the ritual.

The aetiological myth, which we fortunately possess and which must give us the clue, confirms this analysis of the balance of motifs and impulses.³¹ The myth does say that the girls must perform the ritual before they are married, thus supporting the interpretation as a rite of passage (since "before they are married" is an otiose elaboration of a fact already implicit in the designation *παρθέναι*);³² but the main stress of the story lies elsewhere. It speaks of a gentle bear that was wrongly killed, of Artemis'

³⁰ Liban. *Hypoth. Dem.* 25; Dein. 2. 12.

³¹ W. Sale, "The Temple-Legends of the Arkteia," *RhM* 118 (1975) 265–84; C. Montepaone, "Il mito di fondazione del rituale munichio in onore di Artemis," in *Recherches sur les cultes grecs et l'occident I*, Cahiers du centre Jean Bérard 5 (Naples 1979) 65–76.

³² In the *Suda* s.v. ἄρκτος ἢ Βραυρωνίσις and the related Ravenna scholion on Ar. *Lys.* 645 some authority has elaborated this hint into the strong statement that no girl could marry unless she had served as a bear—by decree of the assembly. Such elaborations are suspicious.

anger and a deadly plague, and of her demand to be appeased. It is that obligation that is most important here, not learning about marriage. If young girls are earnestly appeasing an angry Artemis, the natural assumption is that they are appeasing her in her function as the *kourotrophos*, the goddess in whose hands above all the gods rested the health and vigor of girls.

The age of the participants—from five to ten years old—has never been easy to explain for those who stress the initiatory aspect to the exclusion of others. A typical summary asserts that the girls “entered a temporary state of savagery so as to return prepared for the civilized state of marriage”;³³ when one thinks that this is meant to apply to five-year-old girls, hardly more than babies, one is inclined to withhold credence. But propitiation of the *kourotrophos* can never start too early; nor can one do it enough. So uncertain was the survival of the young in the ancient world. Artemis the *kourotrophos* was also the goddess of childbirth, the most dangerous of life’s experiences, more dangerous than battle, as Medeia knew; more spirits attended this function than anything else in the everyday religion of the Greek world.³⁴ Should one fail to honor the *kourotrophos*, one’s children will not be *ἰφίγενεῖς*, “strong-born.” This is what the heroine Iphigeneia, the “strong-born one,” is doing at Brauron.³⁵ In the same sanctuary the clothes of women who had died in childbirth—not a small number—were dedicated to Artemis. The fact illustrates the nature of the goddess, and her cult, well enough.

Robert Garland points out fairly enough that “lowering the age-requirement of a rite of passage is widely attested by anthropologists,”³⁶ and what seems appropriate to our notions of human nature can be a deceptive guide. Nonetheless, a putatively original rite of puberty, subsequently modified to include girls of many different ages, must lose some of its focus. Why was the age lowered—not just lowered, but modified to *exclude* pubescent girls? The Brauronia were penteteric, so a range of permissible ages had to be set for practical reasons; but why set the upper limit at an age when the menarche was still some distance away?³⁷ A simpler explanation

³³ R. Seaford, *JHS* 108 (1988) 122.

³⁴ Garland (above, note 28) Ch. 2; T. Hadzistelou-Price, *Kourotrophos: Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities* (Leiden 1978); for a related kind of activity, see J.-J. Aubert, “Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic,” *GRBS* 30 (1989) 421–49.

³⁵ C. Calame, *Les chœurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque* (Urbino 1977) I 292 n. 234.

³⁶ Garland (above, note 28) 190.

³⁷ P. Brulé, “Retour à Brauron” (above, note 28) 82, acknowledges the difficulty, but suggests that physical readiness for conception was not part of the Greeks’ notion of nubility. Such an amazing conclusion needs more support than Brulé gives it in his brief remarks. Sourvinou-Inwood (above, note 28) regards the initiation as one from childhood to the period that leads to and culminates in menarche, but the distinction between “period leading to menarche” and “menarche” is one that is often effaced in her own discussion. The difficulty was already acute for Jeanmaire (above, note 26) 260. Incidentally, though Jeanmaire is normally mentioned as the father of this line of interpretation, Lewis Farnell in 1896 advanced

sees these rites as originally and *appropriately* performed by children of any age up to puberty, rather than originally performed by pubescent children and subsequently modified for unknown reasons. It is worth recalling that worship on the site, which was inhabited in prehistoric times, is probably far older than the polis, which is the necessary context of the prevailing interpretation.³⁸ As the Athenian polis became more cohesive and bourgeois in the late archaic and early classical ages, the desire to teach the young about their obligations as citizens and wives of citizens can reasonably be expected to have intruded upon older rites such as the Brauronia, because of the age of the participants. New dimensions were added. But the explicit concerns of the worshipers, as attested by the myth, remained straightforward: The goddess of pristine nature and of the young is angry and unless the children do her dance a plague will strike them dead.³⁹

So much for our more argumentative examples. Whether or not these interpretations recommend themselves in all particulars to the reader, the general assessment may be allowed to have some validity. Magical activity was commonplace, ubiquitous, and instinctive. It is most improbable that the mass of ordinary people, who did not have the benefit of two hundred years of Enlightenment and modern science, and who were steeped from birth in the kinds of magical doings of which I spoke at the outset, somehow put aside this frame of mind when they gathered together for the most important festivals of the gods. Instead, they re-directed these same attitudes and impulses and gave expression to them in a different setting. The difference between the “magical” and the “religious” acts is thus one of social context and attitude: One is approved, the other almost always is not.

* * *

Where to go from here? We have taken one frequently touted characteristic of “magic”—that its practices are goal-oriented—and found that it crops up repeatedly in “religion”; the exercise could be repeated with other characteristics. If the distinction between magic and religion must vanish

it without ado: *Cults of the Greek States II* (Oxford 1896) 437, with reference to W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) 304, 309, for parallels in other societies for initiation ceremonies involving bears. To be sure, Farnell devotes the bulk of his discussion to a totemistic interpretation.

³⁸ See A. Antoniou, “Minoische Elemente im Kult der Artemis von Brauron,” *Philologus* 125 (1981) 291–96; B. C. Dietrich, *Tradition in Greek Religion* (Berlin and New York 1986) 60.

³⁹ There is the question of how closely related the activities at Brauron were to those of Mounychia; speaking of the latter, W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, tr. M. E. Pinder and W. Burkert (Cambridge, MA and London 1992) 73 ff., thinks that the festival may have originated in a magical rite by which a pestilence was removed; by the classical period, its nature had changed, so that like other festivals of Artemis it had an “aura” of girls’ initiations. This is a progression very much like the one I have posited for the rites at Brauron.

like a soap bubble at the merest touch, it seems fruitless to go past the heuristic stage with any pretense of keeping them separate in point of theory. In purely practical terms, however, there is a well-recognized set of phenomena we all think of in connection with the term "magic"; it is becoming increasingly clear that this huge body of material must be kept in mind when considering the total phenomenon of Greek religion. And heuresis can take one a long way. The preceding section yielded the understanding that ritual, in broad terms, is twofold: It often entails a straightforward, substantive goal; but as all ritual must inevitably have a place in a social nexus, it will have social purposes, and its forms will be susceptible of reading as a system of signs.⁴⁰

This understanding seems innocuous enough when so expressed, but it is by no means orthodoxy, and brings with it a surprising number of theoretical implications. In the past sixty years, classical scholars have tended to play down magic as a part of Greek religion, and to underestimate the goal-oriented aspect of ritual.⁴¹ Anthropologists do not. Three reasons may be suggested for this state of affairs. Firstly, anthropologists, unlike classicists, have the societies they study before their very eyes and can hardly ignore the patently magical aspects of demonstrative public ritual. A second reason may be snobbery—something of the Frazerian or the Wilamowitzian still lingering; although in a post-Christian age we have found ways to take the Olympian gods seriously, our modernity has subconsciously prevented us from extending this courtesy to the manufacturers of voodoo dolls. A third part has to do with the way discussion of the myth/ritual problem has developed in this century.

In the beginning, which is to say in the days of Jane Harrison and her ritualist followers, the relationship of myth and ritual was thought to be straightforward: The myth was the plot of the ritual, the text that backed up the action. For instance, the main ritual action of the Thesmophoria, the burying of a pig underground, was "explained" by the story of a swineherd who happened to be swallowed up in the chasm created when the lord of the underworld carried off his bride Persephone. Most myth, the ritualists thought, was aetiological in this way. Most ritual, they thought, originated in magical acts, especially those of fertility magic.

The problem of magic and religion also played a vital role in the work of James Frazer. His background lay in nineteenth-century anthropology, which had placed much emphasis on the origins of social customs and the concept of evolution. It was natural for Frazer to see magic as an early and

⁴⁰ I find Versnel making the same point in the introduction to his new work, which incorporates several articles I have drawn on frequently in the preparation of this one; see Versnel (above, note 21) 12 f.

⁴¹ The influence of W. Burkert's great work, *Greek Religion*, tr. J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA 1985; Germ. original 1977), would be hard to overestimate; it devotes but one paragraph to magic, with a clearly polemical intent to deter anyone who might wish to pursue the topic further.

primitive stage of religion, which gradually evolved into a higher stage, characterized not by superstition but by morality, not by attempts to coerce the gods but by a spirit of humble worship and supplication. Christian notions of true religion, and those of the Enlightenment, are easy to detect in this scheme.⁴²

Frazer's views on magic and religion have long since been abandoned. In not much time too the views of Harrison on myth and ritual were also seen to be simplistic. A great deal of Greek mythology has no attested connection with ritual, and such myth as does relate to known rituals often has a relationship that is more complex than the ritualists seemed to suggest. To take a simple example, one of the more successful structuralist analyses, that of the Prometheus myth, demonstrates that while the strictly aetiological part is straightforward—Prometheus wrapped the bones in fat, and so do we—the *kind* of story Hesiod invented to account for this central rite of Greek religion is much more significant. Surely many other stories were possible besides this one with its motifs of deception, the jealousy and hostility of the gods, their departure from earth and the implied end of the Golden Age.⁴³ Greek views of the gods and life generally are revealed by prying a little bit below the surface of the myth.

In time the pendulum swung fully in the opposite direction. Statements such as "myth and ritual do not correspond in details of content but in structure and atmosphere" were typical.⁴⁴ The summation is remarkable when one thinks about it. Such clearly attested myth/ritual complexes as we do possess from Greece do not bear this claim out; myth and ritual, wherever we can test their relationship, correspond (albeit imperfectly) in *both* content *and* atmosphere.⁴⁵

The problem is that the number of attested myth/ritual complexes is distressingly small, and scholars desperately want a method that will allow

⁴² On Jane Harrison and the Cambridge Ritualists, see W. M. Calder III (ed.), *The Cambridge Ritualists Reconsidered*, ICS Suppl. 2 (Atlanta 1991); R. Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York and London 1991); on Frazer, see also Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge 1987). Ackerman points out that Frazer's ideas (insofar as they were consistent) changed with time; in particular, he came to disallow the religious element in magic, regarding it merely as religion's precursor, since in his view religion had to have a reflective element. He deliberately distanced himself from the ritualist position in the 1920s.

⁴³ J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (Paris 1965) 19–47 = *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (London etc. 1983) 3–32; cf. *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, tr. J. Lloyd (Brighton and Atlanta Highlands 1980; Fr. original 1974) 168–85; G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge, Berkeley, and Los Angeles 1970) 233.

⁴⁴ F. Graf, *ZPE* 55 (1984) 254. In his later work Graf has been less incautious; contrast *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*, tr. T. Marier (Baltimore and London 1993) 110 ff.; idem, "Römische Aitia und ihre Riten. Das Beispiel von Saturnalia und Parilia," *MH* 49 (1992) 13–25; below, note 46.

⁴⁵ On the correspondence of myth and ritual at the Eleusinian mysteries, the best known example, see R. Parker's excellent orientation, "The Hymn to Demeter and the Homeric Hymns," *G&R* 38 (1991) 1–17.

them safely to reconstruct rituals from myths alone, thus creating more of these complexes for them to study. With the advent first of structuralism then of semiotics a key seemed to have been provided. These approaches seemed to offer hope because similar structures and signs shared by two myths will allow the scholar, if a ritual connection is known for one of the myths, to infer a ritual connection for the other one, even if its surface content is quite different.⁴⁶

The hazards of this procedure are obvious. To take an example that is pertinent to the myths and rituals discussed earlier: One of the commonest structural motifs used to infer the existence of an initiation ritual behind a given myth is that of separation (for instance leaving one's home and going into the country); this is to produce "liminality" or "marginality," a well-documented aspect of initiation rituals. It is astonishing how often the word "initiation" occurs in the literature these days, and how many myths are suspected of being vestigially connected with such rituals, on no better grounds than the presence of the separation motif.⁴⁷ But almost any myth, given enough subtlety of vision and hard arguing, will conform to the desired pattern. As P. M. C. Forbes Irving has pointedly argued, there is usually no independent evidence for the existence of the rituals.⁴⁸ H. S. Versnel astutely observed how often practitioners of this method, recognizing the weakness of the link between myth and ritual in their schemes, must assume that the myth is a distorted relic of some earlier myth, so that only the keenest of scholarly bloodhounds, with noses attuned to the initiatory scent, can detect the connection.⁴⁹ The assumption of relics is of course exactly how Frazer and the ritualists uncovered fertility rites

⁴⁶ Cf. F. Graf's comments in his learned and valuable *Nordionische Kulte* (Schweizerisches Institut in Rom 1985) 5: it is "unmöglich, zu einem ohne Ritual belegten Mythos im komparatistischen Rückgriff auf verwandte Mythen, deren zugehörige Rituale bekannt sind, ein unbekanntes Ritual sozusagen extrapolierend zu erschliessen; wo wenigstens Andeutungen zum Ritual vorhanden sind, kann aber doch auf Stimmung, Struktur und Funktion des Rituals geschlossen werden, wenn auch nur mit grösster Behutsamkeit und im vollen Bewusstsein, wie hypothetisch das Ergebnis ist." The nuances and caution of this outline are easy to forget in practice.

⁴⁷ See especially K. Dowden's lively and interesting book, *Death and the Maiden: Girls' Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology* (London and New York 1989); further the same author's *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London and New York 1992) 102 ff.

⁴⁸ P. M. C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (Oxford 1990) 50 ff.; cf. F. Graf, *HZ* 253 (1991) 697–99. At *ZPE* 97 (1993) 39 n. 39 I pointed out how easily, and how erroneously, the myth of Kephalos and Prokris could be interpreted as an initiation aition. Dowden, to his credit, is genially frank about the lack of evidence, though by the end of his book the joy of discovery has made him look on it as a strength: "In fact, it is one of the pleasures of our inquiry that rituals and a way of life that cannot otherwise be recovered can be discerned in the mythology" (190). Compare also his remarks in "Myth: Brauron and Beyond" (above, note 28) 36 ff.

⁴⁹ H. S. Versnel, "What's Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander: Myth and Ritual, Old and New," in *Approaches to Greek Myth*, ed. by L. Edmunds (Baltimore 1990) 23–90, at 50 ff. = *Transition and Reversal* (above, note 21) 58 ff. See also C. Grottanelli's remarks in *HR* 29 (1989–90) 63. A. Moreau, "Initiation en Grèce antique," *DHA* 18.1 (1992) 191–244, offers a reply to Versnel, but appears scarcely to have grasped the import of his arguments; his article goes on to claim practically the whole of Greek mythology as initiatory.

behind so many myths—a different set of bloodhounds, and differently trained noses.

Yet the problems identified by Frazer and others remain even if their solutions do not. The huge and impressive bulk of data on magical practices also remains and has to be explained. The successors to Frazerism and ritualism have been principally two: structuralism and semiotics. The admirable Ferdinand de Saussure in his famous *Cours de linguistique générale* (published by pupils after his death in 1913) first declared that language is a system of arbitrary signs, none of which has meaning in itself but only insofar as it contrasts or relates to other signs. Structuralism has made many interesting uses of this insight, but semiotics transferred this tenet about language to other social acts: All social conventions, in fact, form a system of signs like that of language, conveying messages to their users; and in this system, there are no natural signs, only arbitrary ones. The conventional behavior of society, in turn, expresses its values. The tendency, therefore, is to say that values too must be arbitrary. Now this is suspiciously congenial to our Zeitgeist. Claims to absolute truth advanced in this century of ideological nightmare have become deeply and justifiably suspect; semioticians' argument that all social values are artificially constructed has therefore found ready assent. The idea that a moral value might be either grounded in nature or defensible in metaphysics is instinctively rejected, if not derided by most contemporary scholars. Instead, they argue that the values of any society are merely the product, however complex, of particular historical circumstances. Human nature is not a constant; indeed, there is no such thing as human nature.

Anyone steeped in this manner of thinking ought to be especially alive to the differences in societies, and wary of importing modern ideas into the reconstruction of the past. One school of thought, to be sure, has been especially sensitive to this requirement; the "new historicism" has been with us for some years now. But there is a seductive danger in semiotics. Its object of investigation is social signs; since such signs can only convey social information, on semiotics' own assumptions, it is inevitable that such meaning as the signs convey will only be *about* social relations (or, in a particularly desperate version, about other signs, so that meaning is endlessly "deferred"). The danger, therefore, is that one is apt to overemphasize the sociological aspect of ritual and ignore what the participants themselves think they are doing—trying to achieve some substantive goal.⁵⁰ Instinctively we recoil from taking *that* seriously; to do

⁵⁰ The most famous statement of the practical purpose of religion is made by Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue (14b): prayers and sacrifice σφζει . . . τοὺς ἰδίους οἴκους καὶ τὰ κοινὰ τῶν πόλεων· τὰ δ' ἐναντία τῶν κεχαρισμένων ἀσεβῆ, ἃ δὴ καὶ ἀνατρέπει ἅπαντα καὶ ἀπόλλυσιν. This is the original meaning of σωτηρία. Many other passages could be quoted; this one is especially important because of the literary context—Euthyphro is meant to be the best possible representative of ordinary, traditional piety. Of course (it should be added at

so might imply we actually believe, for instance, that the crops will grow better if we chop up a pig. Yet it is the attitude of people who do believe that we must see from the inside. It is the same with modern religion; any believer would regard a purely sociological description of their religion as wholly inadequate.

We are particularly apt to overemphasize that aspect of modern society which most preoccupies us at the moment, one might almost say obsesses us: the nature and roles of the sexes. To the semiotician, gender, like everything else, is a social construct.⁵¹ Gender seems the most important social fact to us; ergo, it must have been to the Greeks. Initiation ritual is the prime means whereby early societies pass on the gender-construct to the next generation; ergo, the Greeks must have had lots of these, and myths that talk about the sexes must be the aetiological myths for initiation rituals. Yet to realize the paucity of independent evidence for these rituals is to suspect at once that the widespread assent these interpretations enjoy is itself culturally determined, a product of late twentieth-century predilections.⁵²

The tendency of recent years, exactly opposite to the tendency of a century ago, has been to deny the universal aspects of human experience, to deny and even ridicule the concept of human nature, and to develop methods for reconstructing ancient realities that rely as little as possible on

once) passages can also be found that stress the social advantages of religious life in terms of forging and maintaining links between individuals and groups.

⁵¹ For some important criticism of this notion, see J. Thorp, "The Social Construction of Homosexuality," *Phoenix* 46 (1992) 54–61. It may be of interest to compare the trenchant reaction of a conservative Catholic in 1937 to a similar, if not identical proposition: "'Works of art are produced by artists.' Mr [Anthony] Blunt begins his essay; 'artists are men; men live in society and are in a large measure formed by the society in which they live. Therefore works of art cannot be considered historically except in human and ultimately in social terms.' By 'social' Mr Blunt, as all his colleagues [in *The Mind in Chains*, ed. by C. Day Lewis], means 'economic.' It would be equally true and fair to say 'Men live on the earth, etc. Therefore works of art cannot be considered historically except in geographical and ultimately in meteorological terms.' A metaphysician would have little difficulty in demolishing Mr [Edward] Upward's elementary statement of the origin of life in a material universe." *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. by D. Gallagher (London 1984) 199.

⁵² A famous and influential article in this category, P. Vidal-Naquet's "The Black Hunter" of 1968 (reprinted with corrections most recently in *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World* [Baltimore 1986] 106–28; see also "The Black Hunter Revisited," *PCPS* 32 [1986] 126–44), depends entirely on an uncritical acceptance of certain ancient reports that the myth of Melanthes and Xanthios was the aition for the service of Athenian epebes; but it is nearly certain that the connection with the Apatouria is an arbitrary invention of Hellanikos designed to bring the Neleids of Pylos in line with Athens' claims to be the mother of Ionia. The myth of Melanthes and Xanthios therefore has nothing to do with Attic epebeia. See further my forthcoming article, "Herodotos and his Contemporaries." The point was already implicit in Jacoby's comment on *FGH* 323a F 23; it has since been stressed by N. Robertson, *GRBS* 29 (1988) 205 ff.; cf. *AJP* 109 (1988) 284–85. Robertson's vigorous defence of the importance of magic is to be found in numerous articles of recent years, but most provocatively in a review of several influential works on Greek religion in *EMC* 9 (1990) 419–42 and 10 (1991) 57–79; see now also his *Festivals and Legends* (above, note 2). Robertson's eye-popping interpretations of myths have not won wide assent, but his reminder of the central position of magic is timely.

our own instincts or common-sense assumptions. The methodological implication seems unobjectionable. Yet the linguistic philosophy underlying all semiological study is anything but invulnerable to criticism and not necessarily more reliable than the imaginative intuition of the learned, patient, sensitive, and intelligent scholar. It is certainly often a good deal less interesting. Although importing modern preconceptions into interpretations of the ancient phenomena is obviously wrong in point of method (as all scholars of all schools since the early nineteenth century have recognized), this is not an argument for abandoning our instincts and common-sense assumptions, since the greatest part of human experience is broadly comparable in all times and places of our history. The basics of life are after all pretty straightforward. Birth and survival; disease, drought, famine, the failure of crops; the pursuit of happiness, the fear of death, the desire for immortality; helplessness in the face of superior, unknown, and hostile powers—these are not social constructs, and they are the very stuff of religion everywhere in human history. To further or hinder them is the goal of goal-oriented ritual. This is why Tylor, Mannhardt, Frazer, Harrison, and the others started where they did; it seemed natural, and *is* natural.

The shortcomings of the Frazerian and ritualist models are plain enough, and progress since then has been spectacular. But there are difficulties in the current models, and the way forward might lie in combining the best of the new with the best of the old. The positive theoretical framework would take a book to work out; but some negatives can be briefly identified. We ought to be suspicious of the one-sided: Any interpretation of a myth that relies exclusively on structure, just as any interpretation that arbitrarily decodes the surface content by assigning specific referents to its details (for instance—an old instance—saying that a hero represents the rising sun), without any external evidence in either case, must be regarded as no more than an interesting speculation.⁵³ If myth and ritual are not attested together, extreme caution is called for when arguing from one to the other. A reading of ancient religious experience that is insufficiently aware of the contingencies of ancient life is as weak as one that thinks there are only contingencies in human life.

A fruitful approach might be to investigate magic and other broad categories of ancient religious experience, perhaps from a phenomenological perspective; the time might be ripe for a revival of this branch of philosophy. Other categories can readily be suggested; “sacrifice,” “prayer,” and even “god” spring to mind.⁵⁴ With respect to magic, it seems an urgent need to investigate the deep-level links that must have existed between the part of religious activity normally designated

⁵³ My interpretation of the myth of Kephalos (above, note 20) is meant as no more.

⁵⁴ R. Parker’s *Miasma* (Oxford 1983) is an outstanding example of this kind of categorical study.

“magical” and the rest of religion. If the differences between the two are mainly contextual, much careful attention needs to be devoted to the description of these contexts. What exactly about Sokrates’ connection with the god of Delphi so provoked people in 399 (and not before)? Why are the oracle-mongers’ books acceptable in Rome but not in Athens (at least in some circumstances)? What makes the public scapegoat, repulsive and disgusting though he is, so deeply satisfying, but the private act of spiteful revenge so morally repellent? In what circumstances would a city call in an Epimenides? In what circumstances were individuals allowed to say with impunity that traditional religion is the work of charlatans—to call it, in effect, nothing but “magic”?

The connections, as I said, are deep-seated; they might find an explanation in psychology and biology as much as in sociology. The interplay of religion, experience, and rationality cannot be adequately studied from any one point of view. Philology, philosophy, and anthropology all have a contribution to make. But the thing is lifeless if we do not at bottom think we are studying ourselves. There is little joy in studying some alien species constructing its own alien reality. The thrill is in the recognition; they are *Menschen wie Du und ich*. The historian of religion, like the historian of politics and any other human endeavor, studies universal human urges as they are manifested in the particular social patterns of the ancient world; and the purpose of that study is to achieve through the imaginative revitalization of our ancestors’ mental universe a better understanding of, precisely, human nature.

Excursus on the Definition of Magic

The problem of definition is clearly central. The bibliography is already ample.⁵⁵ I can hardly begin to discuss the problem and its many solutions.

⁵⁵ A selection: O. Petterson, “Magic-Religion: Some Marginal Notes to an Old Problem,” *Ethnos* 22 (1957) 109–19; J. Goody, “Religion and Ritual: The Definition Problem,” *British Journal of Sociology* 12 (1961) 142–64; M. and R. Wax, “The Notion of Magic,” *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963) 495–518; D. Hammond, “Magic: A Problem of Semantics,” *American Anthropologist* 72 (1970) 1349–56; H. Gertz, “An Anthropology of Religion and Magic,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975) 71–89; K. Thomas, “An Anthropology of Religion and Magic II,” *ibid.* 91–109; M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York 1978); D. E. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” *ANRW* II.23.2 (1980) 1507–57; A. B. Kolenkow, “Relationships between Miracle and Prophecy in the Greco-Roman World and Early Christianity,” *ibid.* 1470–1506; M. Winkelmann, “Magic: A Theoretical Reassessment,” *Current Anthropology* 23 (1982) 37–66; C. R. Phillips III, “Magic and Politics in the Fourth Century: Parameters of Groupings,” *Studia Patristica* 18.1 (Kalamazoo 1985) 65–70; *idem*, “The Sociology of Religious Knowledge in the Roman Empire to A.D. 284,” *ANRW* II.16.3 (1986) 2677–2773 (2711–32 on “Magic and Religion”); J. Middleton, “Theories of Magic,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* IX (1987) 82–89; H. D. Betz, “Magic in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” *ibid.* 93–97; A. Segal, “Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition,” in *Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity* (Atlanta 1987) 79–108; the authorities listed above (note 2); and several articles in A. D. Nock’s *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Oxford 1972), especially “Paul and the Magus” (I 308 ff.).

Obviously magic can be defined at the very outset as different from true religion. Definition and conclusion are here one. The strict differentiation of the two inevitably involves the view that religion is a higher order of activity than magic, whether it succeeded the other by evolution or not. Modern believers in various religions will share this view. Yet the skeptic is apt to look on the whole apparatus of modern religion as so much mumbo-jumbo, seeing no distinction between, say, the healing rituals of the Azande and the Catholic practice of exorcism. To call this rite "superstition" must seem offensive to the faithful Catholic. Protestantism, on the other hand, prides itself on having discarded such rituals. Yet there can be few good Protestants who would not feel anxious for an unbaptized child's prospects of salvation, particularly their own, and it is precisely in the realm of Protestantism, with its emphasis on faith, that the miracle-working cults of modern times have thrived. The skeptic will point out these considerations; the more skeptical the point of view, the more "magic" will be equated with "religion."

Many scholars have simply given up. In his contribution to *Magika Hiera*, Roy Kotansky quotes ([above, note 2] 123 n. 1) J. E. Lowe's *Magic in Greek and Latin Literature*, who already in 1929, on page 1 of his book, declared: "Many definitions . . . have been attempted: none, perhaps, is wholly satisfactory. The word connotes so much, the boundary line between it and religion is so hazy and indefinable, that it is almost impossible to tie it down and restrict it to the narrow limits of some neat turn of phrase that will hit it off and have done with it." More recently, Gager ([above, note 2] 24) asserts, ". . . it is our conviction that magic, as a definable and consistent category of human experience, simply does not exist." Others could be quoted to like effect.

Intrepid souls have not been deterred. At various times scholars have explored the validity of a magic/religion distinction based on attempted compulsion vs. supplication of the divine; secret powers and knowledge vs. throwing oneself on the mercy of the gods; a system aiming at the achievement of immediate goals vs. more general spiritual satisfaction; absence or presence of some kind of theology; or private and individual vs. public and group practice. Exceptions can readily be found to any of these formulations. Magic too has its theology. Religion can be directed towards the attainment of practical goals, and it can appropriate many of the devices of magic.⁵⁶ There are groups of magicians who regard their activities as religious. Magic in early societies is ubiquitous in any case; even if magical acts are predominantly done by individuals, since they are done by practically all individuals it is futile to separate this activity out from the

⁵⁶ In his book on magic, Graf (above, note 2) devotes a chapter to the manifold interplay between magic and the mystery religions; the same connection allowed Smith to write his book *Jesus the Magician* (previous note), surely one of the few books by a classicist to have earned its author a death threat.

general religious consciousness of the public. There are, moreover, many private and individual religious acts. There are many parts of public religion that depend on a private practitioner performing ritual acts with no witnesses. Compulsion is often found in public religion, especially in such rites as public cursing, or the public use of voodoo dolls.⁵⁷ Compulsion, or at least the expectation of an obligation on the part of the deity in return for pious service, is still an element in modern religious feeling; it accounts for the instinctive outrage people feel on having Calvin's doctrine of predestination explained to them.

It being impossible to state one characteristic that magic always has in all places as opposed to religion, several scholars have tried a different approach: Magic does not differ in essence from religion; it differs only in the degree of social approval it enjoys, or does not enjoy.⁵⁸ This position is congenial to the one espoused in the present paper. Walter Burkert, in an illuminating article on the γόνις in the Greek world,⁵⁹ traces the ambivalent status of this figure—often abused, but sometimes integral to the mainstream of religion, particularly in the various mysteries. His explanation for the origin of the *goes*' bad reputation, however—that it began in the context of the Greek polis, which had the effect of clarifying and solidifying what was acceptable to the members of the society in the way of religion—needs a broader perspective, for all societies do this. Deprecation of magic is found already in the Old Testament.⁶⁰ “Bad magic” vs. “good (religiously sanctioned) magic” is a well-documented anthropological distinction. When Lucius in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (11. 15) was initiated into the mysteries of Isis, he became proof against black magic by virtue of the powers of the goddess; but when the world converted to Christianity, the rites of Isis became black magic in their turn.

In a word, one man's magic is another man's religion. In such circumstances the contexts in which denunciations of magic occur, and the criteria by which the denouncer hopes to persuade his peers that the charge is founded, become more interesting and revealing than what is actually called magic. In a similar way, the criteria for detecting quacks laid out in the treatise *On the Sacred Disease*, discussed earlier in this paper, are more

⁵⁷ C. Faraone, “Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of Voodoo Dolls,” *CA* 10 (1991) 165–220; idem, *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2) 9, with other examples of public magic.

⁵⁸ E.g. A. A. Goldenweiser, *Early Civilization* (New York 1922) 348, quoted by the Waxes (above, note 55) 496; E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols of the Greco-Roman Period* (New York 1953) II 159, quoted by Phillips, “Sociology” (above, note 55) 2729; Thomas (above, note 55) 92; Aune (above, note 55) 1545; Phillips, “Magic and Politics” (above, note 55) 67; Luck (above, note 2) 8; Betz (above, note 2) xli; cf. Nock (above, note 55) I 315; Graf, *Magika Hiera* (above, note 2) 196; Versnel (above, note 2).

⁵⁹ W. Burkert, “ΓΟΝΙΣ. Zum griechischen ‘Schamanismus’,” *RhM* 105 (1962) 36–55. On the term μάγος, see also Graf (above, note 2) 31 ff. The very word, being foreign, designates the outsider.

⁶⁰ V. I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton 1991) 18.

important than the alternative theories advanced by the Hippocratic doctor, which are mostly bluff.⁶¹ Or again, when Christianity was sweeping the pagan gods from the field, it is most instructive to see what kinds of sorcery were permitted in the new context, and why. The sign of the cross to this day will keep evil at bay.

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⁶¹ G. E. R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience* (above, note 17) 57.