

CHAPTER 26

Magic, Curses, and Healing

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1. Polytheistic Context

The links between religion, eschatology, and magic are often strong. While it may seem obvious that the ancient Greeks were polytheistic for a large part of their pre-Christian history, this is important because Christianity has had a strong and distinctive attitude to magic which still in some ways pervades modern Western ideas. The classical Christian view is that humans are not themselves able to work magic in the sense of generating breaches of the laws of nature. If a human accomplishes something considered to be beyond nature, either God is working a miracle through that person, or that person is in league with the devil. On this view there can be no white wizards or white witches. There are miracles, or there is black magic. It is important to recognize then that in other cultures there is the view that humans are able to work magic unaided and for good purposes.

2. Natural Magic

In the modern West, magic is often characterized in two ways: “conjuring” or supernatural. When it is not really “magic,” but rather conjuring in some guise, magic can, in fact, be explained through the “magician’s” skill, by physical science, and social psychology. On the other hand, there can be a claim that it is “real” magic, and the supernatural or the paranormal are involved. It is important to recognize another possibility, which does not come easily to modern Western thinking, that of natural magic. There was a strong natural magic movement in the Renaissance. Giambattista della Porta, in his *Natural Magic* (1558), says:

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There are two sorts of magic; the one infamous and unhappy, because it has to do with foul spirits, and consists of enchantments and wicked curiosity, and this is called sorcery, an art which all learned and good men detest ... the other magic is natural, which all excellent wise men embrace, and worship with great applause. (cf. Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books Concerning Occult Philosophy* [1531]; Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life* [1489], etc.)

Elsewhere he says:

I never writ here nor elsewhere, what is not contain'd within the bounds of Nature. (1598, Preface)

Why is this important for Greek and Roman magic? Historically, the border between magic/non-magic was much fuzzier than for us. Further, what is considered magic undergoes historical shifts. Some phenomena which we consider magical were considered natural, or natural magic. Galen, for instance, was happy with the natural role of some amulets in healing (so Rufus, Fragment 90, believed amulets had natural effects, and Galen believed one amulet in particular had a natural effect: Lloyd 1979, 42–43). Some phenomena which we understand as natural were once deemed magical. Magnetism, at one point considered an occult subject and part of natural magic, is now part of mainstream physics (see, e.g., the list of subjects treated in della Porta's *Natural Magic*). A key idea for magic was sympathetic interaction, the classic statement of which is by the anthropologist Frazer (1917, 52):

First, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed.

Sympathy was used widely in Renaissance natural magic and in ancient Greece as a natural means of interaction. To quote Plotinus:

How is there magic? By sympathy, and that naturally there is a sympathy between like things and an antipathy between unlike things. (*Enneads* 4.4.40)

Magic in antiquity did not require a universal belief in what we would term the supernatural, although some versions did have such a belief. The terminology “laws of nature” was not used until the seventeenth century; thus, we avoid it here.

3. Extended World

One important concept for understanding magic is the idea of participation in an extended world. Some people believe that they live in a world which is richer in hidden powers, spirits, and other entities than our modern Western conception of the world. These people then participate in this world, employing what we would call magic, in order to access, manipulate, or petition this extended realm. Lévy-Bruhl (1979, 327) says:

The things that a man has used, the clothes he has worn, his weapons, ornaments, are part of him, *are* his very self, just like his saliva, nail-parings, hair, excreta, although to a lesser

extent. Something has been communicated to them by him which, as it were, a continuance of his individuality, and in a mystic sense these objects are henceforth inseparable from him.

Some believe that the dead have not definitively left us, but live an afterlife, perhaps still near us in spirit form, perhaps in another place. It may be possible for us to travel in spirit to the other place or for the dead, usually residing elsewhere, to come among us. Again, with this worldview one might employ magic in order to participate in it.

4. The Historiography of Magic

There has been considerable change in how magic has been treated both in itself and in relation to religion and science. We have moved beyond hierarchical developmental views typical of the nineteenth century, which stated that for humans first there was magic, then there was religion, and then there was science in ascending order of human intellectual achievement, each view superseding its predecessor. Nor do we view magic as failed science or the supposition of ideal connections for real ones, but often more fruitfully as a system of beliefs embedded in a specific social context (Tylor 1871; Frazer 1917). In the early and middle parts of the twentieth century, enormously important anthropological work has also been done on tribal magical beliefs, showing that they are coherent, often empirically based, and that tribes have means of navigating these magical beliefs and the worldview concomitant with them (Canon 1942; Lévi-Strauss 1963; Lévy-Bruhl 1979; see also Horton 1967, 1993). While they did not employ Western rationality, their means of navigation are effective within their belief systems. This has been important in breaking down the idea that all magical belief is simply irrational. Further, we must be careful in our use of terms like rational or irrational in this sort of context. “Irrational” ambiguously straddles the dividing line between “lacking reason” and “not conforming to the canons of (modern Western) rationality.” The latter does not entail the former. “Irrational” is also often taken as pejorative and frequently interpreted as “completely irrational.”

There has also been a move away from a bipolar characterization of magic and science, with no interaction or overlap, toward more complex models, paralleling developments in the historiography of science and religion (e.g., Fauvel 1989). So, for example, attempts to see science as rational, empirical, and progressive as opposed to irrational, metaphysical, static magic have broken down with the realization that magic was highly varied and could have interesting intellectual bases. The positivist rejection of magic tended to blur many fine distinctions between types of magic.

Greek Historiography

There has also been an important shift in attitudes to magic and rationality in ancient Greece. In *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Dodds did much to break down the idea that ancient Greek beliefs were generally rational. Dodds (1951, viii) posed a key question:

Why should we attribute to the ancient Greeks an immunity from “primitive” modes of thought which we do not find in any society open to our direct observation?

Indeed, there is no reason to exempt the ancient Greeks from such beliefs, and Dodds had gathered a large amount of evidence in support of his view. There are two aspects

of Dodds' approach. Firstly, that the Greek populace continued to have magical beliefs even though there was a supposed move away from such thought among the early philosophers. Second, that the presumed rejection of magic and the "irrational" by early philosophers allied with the idea that what exists is entirely natural was not as clear-cut as is often thought.

5. What Is Magic?

Readers may be expecting a definition of magic, but none will be forthcoming. Recent scholarship has come to doubt whether it is possible to give a single, comprehensive definition of magic (Collins 2008, 2). There are two reasons for this. First, any attempt to give an ahistorical, exhaustive definition of magic will be problematic as magic occurs in many different ways in many different social and religious contexts. Attempts to capture the commonalities are likely to be vacuous and, since magic changes significantly over time, anachronistic when applied to the Greeks and Romans. Modern Western conceptions of magic, based on a Christian heritage, would be hugely misleading in a Greek or Roman context. Second, there is no unanimous Greek or Roman definition of magic, which meant different things to different people in ancient Greece and Rome. I agree with Collins (2003, 17) that "it has always been easier to define ancient magic by contrasts than in its essence."

It is also difficult in a Greek and Roman context to make any sharp division between religion and science. In what follows, I will look at Greek and Roman terms for magic/magicians and try to contrast magical views with those of the natural philosophers. The lack of precise definitions and demarcations is in some ways a little problematic but typical of magic in many cultures and time periods. I appreciate in particular that some philosophers will find this frustrating—define magic they will say, so we know precisely what it is. However, not only is that not easy (which should not stop us), it is not, as generations of magic scholars have found, helpful, either philosophically or historically.

6. Greek and Roman Words

The usual Greek term for a magician is *magos*, derived from the Persian *magu*, priest. What the *magos* does is termed *mageia*, and there is also the adjective *magikos*. A second group of terms is *goētos* (sorcerer, wizard, juggler, cheat) and *goēteia* (witchcraft or jugglery). These terms may have derived from *goōs*, someone who lamented for the dead, a *goētos* then dealing with the dead. However, certainly in later usage, these groups of terms are largely synonymous. Neither term on its own tells us much about what Greek magicians did. In the existing sources, the terms are usually used derogatively, indicating a fraud or scoundrel. That may well say something about the status of magicians, at least among intellectuals, but one must always have reservations here about which sources have survived and whether magic and magicians had a better reputation among the populace. There is also the important term *pharmaka*, which usually means medicine, cure, or remedy in the orthodox sense, but in some contexts also having the sense of enchanted potion, charm, or spell (see PHARMACY).

7. Homer and Hesiod

The works of Homer and Hesiod provide an important reference point and intellectual framework for many ancient Greeks. While Homer and Hesiod were aware of some regularities in nature (see Lloyd 1991, 419), their gods were capricious, capable of intervening in human affairs and nature. Xenophanes' criticism that the gods of Homer and Hesiod are guilty of "theft, adultery, and deceiving each other" can hardly be denied (*TEGP* 29; cf. 30). So one might think of the repeating motif in Homer's *Odyssey*, where a ship is hit by lightning that was generated by a spiteful Zeus, a phenomenon which would not have occurred otherwise (e.g., 5.128; 7.249; 12.387, 415; 14.305; 22.330). In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Zeus employs his weapons of thunder, lightning, and thunderbolt against the Titans (690–712, 853–868). The classic contrast to this view is Anaximander, who gives natural explanations for all of these phenomena:

Concerning thunder, lightning, thunderbolts, hurricanes and typhoons.

Anaximander said that these come about because of wind. Whenever it is enclosed in a thick cloud and then forcibly breaks out, due to its fineness and lightness, then the bursting makes the noise, and the rent against the blackness of the cloud is the lightning flash. (*TEGP* 30)

In Homer we find intervention in the mental processes of humans as well. Dodds (1951, 10–11) comments that

The most characteristic feature of the *Odyssey* is the way in which its personages ascribe all sorts of mental (as well as physical) events to the intervention of a nameless and indeterminate daemon of "god" or "gods." These vaguely conceived beings can inspire courage at a crisis or take away a man's understanding just as the gods do in the *Iliad*.

The most famous example of this is in the *Iliad*, where Agamemnon, forced to return his own concubine, steals Achilles' lover and blames Zeus and the Erinyes for taking away his understanding (19.86–89; see Dodds 1951, 2–3; cf. Vlastos 1973, 13 for a discussion of Dodds on *atē*).

It should be evident that both Homer and Hesiod had extended worlds which would support the use of magic. While in Homer, although the dead do not live about us, the underworld is accessible under certain circumstances. So Odysseus in *Odyssey* 11.25–33 manages to summon the dead by digging a trench, around which he pours libations of milk, honey, wine, and water and sprinkles barley meal. He slaughters two sheep and allows their blood to run into the trench. In Hesiod's *Works and Days* 100–126, the first humans are the golden people who, after their death, live on as good spirits on the face of the earth, watching over mortals. Dreams are seen as important and prophetic and are often sent by gods.

On some more specific instances of magic or divine intervention, in both Homer and Hesiod, diseases are caused by the gods, the plague in the opening passage of the *Iliad* and Pandora's box in *Works and Days*. The *Iliad* begins:

Sing, goddess, the wrath of Achilles Peleus' son, the ruinous wrath that brought on the Achaians woes innumerable, and hurled down into Hades many strong souls of heroes, and gave their bodies to be a prey to dogs and all winged fowls; and so the counsel of Zeus wrought out its accomplishment from the day when first strife parted Atreides king of men and noble Achilles. Who among the gods set the twain at strife and variance? Apollo, the son of Leto and of Zeus; for he in anger at the king sent a sore plague upon the host, so that the folk began to perish, because Atreides had done dishonour to Chryses the priest. (1.1–12, trans. Leaf et al.)

While in Hesiod's *Works and Days* we get:

But for those who practice violence and cruel deeds far-seeing Zeus, the son of Cronos, ordains a punishment. Often even a whole city suffers for a bad man who sins and devises presumptuous deeds, and the son of Cronos lays great trouble upon the people, famine and plague together, so that the men perish away, and their women do not bear children, and their houses become few, through the contriving of Olympian Zeus. (238–245, trans. West; cp. 69–104, where Pandora and her famous box, full of diseases, are sent by Zeus as a punishment.)

There could be magical healing too, as in *Odyssey* 19.455–458, where Odysseus tells the tale of a boar-hunting accident in his youth and the treatment for a gore wound: the flow of blood was staunched by the singing of an incantation. In *Odyssey* 10.229–242, Circe uses drugs and a wand to transform men into pigs. The classic contrast to this is the Hippocratic insistence that all diseases have natural origins, and all diseases have natural cures.

In terms of magical practices, verses from Homer were used as healing incantations for a wide range of maladies (Collins 2008, 104–131), and the general use of incantations in healing was widespread. The idea of personal purification was also seen as important in combating disease. Those claiming foresight were also commonplace, as were people claiming to be able to interpret prophetic dreams. Ritual, diet, and prayer were employed in attempts to bring on such dreams (Kingsley 1995, 281–288; HEALING SHRINES).

8. Binding Magic and Curses

A common form of magic in ancient Greece and Rome was that of binding, particularly the binding curse (Graf 1997, 118–174; Dickie 2001, 17–18; Collins 2008, 64–103; Ogden 2009, 227–244). In Greek this was known as a *katadesmos*, a “binding down,” whose Roman variant was *tabella defixionis*, an “enchanted tablet.” Sixteen to seventeen hundred of these binding curses survive, from around the first part of the fifth century BCE through to the Roman era. Most were written in Greek, but we have many in Latin as well. There are precedents from other earlier cultures, notably the Egyptians.

Typically, these binding curses were in one of two forms. The binding spell could be written on wax or a piece of broken pot, but most frequently on thin lead. The lead was then rolled up and pierced with a nail. Some hair or scrap of clothing from the target might be included with the curse (see §3 above, for Lévi-Bruhl quote). Alternatively, one might use a doll, loosely resembling the person at whom the spell was aimed, made of fabric or wax, or perhaps clay such that the limbs could be bound. These dolls too

might have nails put through them. Although these are sometimes referred to as “voodoo dolls,” there are many important differences from the voodoo religion. In addition to the symbolic binding of the body, the binding curse could also mention parts of the target’s body to be bound, such as the hands, feet, and mouth.

The language for the binding spell was relatively standard, and the binding was often, though not always, thought to require the aid of divinities for it to work. So Greek binding spells would begin with “I bind,” and would then call upon a deity and mention the names of the people to be bound. The nature of the curses varied widely, from attempts to make an opposing litigant perform badly in court to curses against thieves or others who had seemingly wronged the curser, or with whom the curser had some business, love, or sporting rivalry. The curses could be phrased conditionally or indefinitely (if x does this, whoever stole from me). From differences in the quality of the handwriting, grammar, syntax, and spelling, it would seem that the use of binding magic was widespread.

Some curse tablets simply name those cursed, indicating perhaps that there was an oral or performative part of the ritual, that the nature of the curses was well known, or that the cursing was a general one. The names of those cursed were often written backward. We are not entirely sure why this occurred (though certainly this should be dissociated from modern demonic ideas: reciting the Lord’s prayer backward, etc.), and there were non-magical precedents on Greek vases, for example. Certainly in the Roman period, curse tablets had been prepared in advance for the curser simply to write in the name of the cursed. Binding magic often involved inflicting some form of ill health upon the target. Sometimes the curses entailed piercing body parts, perhaps also symbolized by piercing the rolled lead or a doll with nails. An example of a legal curse (reverse side) reads “I bind (*katadesmēno*) my opponent in court Dion and Grancios” (Ogden 2009, 211). The first side of this curse is interesting in terms of belief and paranoia:

If anyone put a binding spell on me, be it man or woman, slave or free, alien or citizen, from my household or from outside it, be it out of envy toward my work or my actions, if anyone put a binding spell on me before Hermes, be it Hermes *Eriounos* or Hermes Restrainer or Hermes Trickster, or before some other power, I bind in return all my enemies. (Ogden 2009, 211)

Not all binding magic involved curses. Some was amorous, intended to gain the target’s affection or sexual favor. Though used primarily by men, this sort of magic was also used by women. Wishes here could vary considerably, and they need to be contextualized according to contemporary sexual mores. Binding magic could also aim to force the target to do something, and some of this magic could be quite malicious (Collins 2008, 88–92). An example of Erotic magic in this context reads:

(I bind) Aristocydes and the women who show off to him. He is never to marry/have sex with another woman or with a girl/boy. (Ogden 2009, 228)

Binding magic was also used to attempt to help the dead. Typically binding magic and curses were placed in wells, or somewhere appropriate to the curse, such as on the graves of those who had died young or violently, whose spirits were thought to be restless on account of the injustice of their death (cf. Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.426–49). Here again we see the idea of an “extended” society including the dead and the gods invoked in the curses.

It is worth noting that the differences of these magical practices from Greek and Roman religion and prayer were far less apparent than with modern Christianity. The relation of human to non-omnipotent gods is distinct as is the nature of some modes of prayer.

9. Disease

In the ancient world, disease was often thought to be caused by the gods or some magical action, and it was also considered curable by the appeasement of the gods, purification, or magical action. The Babylonians believed that all diseases were so caused, and we have already seen the view of Homer and Hesiod. An important text in relation to magic and healing is the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease*, which discusses epilepsy, often taken as a clear case of possession or the intervention of the gods. The Babylonian view was that

If epilepsy falls once upon a person or falls many times, it is as the result of possession by a demon or a departed spirit.¹

On the Sacred Disease sets out to demonstrate that the causes of the sacred disease are no different from any other disease. The work opens thus:

Concerning the disease which is called “sacred.” In my view it is no more divine or sacred than any other disease, but has a nature and a definite cause. Men have called it divine due to their inexperience and great wonder, it being unlike other diseases. (1.1–3; cf. 5.1–4)

There is an attack on magical practitioners throughout:

In my opinion the first men to consider this disease to be sacred were like those we now call mages, purifiers, vagabonds, and quacks. These people claim for themselves great piety and much knowledge. They used the divine as a cloak, having no treatment or anything useful to offer, and in order that their lack of knowledge should not be evident, they called this condition sacred. (2.1–4)

The final lines of the book are as follows:

Anyone who knows how to produce in men dryness or wetness, cold or heat by means of regimen, can cure this disease as well, if he can distinguish the due times for treatment, without needing purifications or magic. (21.1–26)

Epilepsy and Goats

Goats were believed to suffer from the sacred disease as well, and the magicians and purifiers forbade any association with goats or their produces. *On the Sacred Disease* says:

They have instituted a mode of treatment which is safe for themselves, namely, by applying purifications and incantations, and enforcing abstinence from baths and many articles of food which are unwholesome to men in diseases ... And they forbid to have a black robe, because black is expressive of death; and to sleep on a goat’s skin, or to wear it, and to put

one foot upon another, or one hand upon another; for all these things are held to be hindrances to the cure. (4.21–35)

The author also relates an interesting experiment:

This is best seen with cattle who are attacked by the disease, especially goats. They are most commonly seized. If you cut open the head you will find that the brain is wet, full of fluid and foul smelling, so clearly one recognizes that it is not a god which is harming the body, but the disease. So too with humans. (14.11–19)

Denied the possibility of human postmortem dissection, the Hippocratics did what to them would have seemed the next best thing: they dissected goats which appeared to be suffering from epilepsy.

10. General Attack?

On the Sacred Disease launches a general attack on magic and magicians, and is important as the first known text to do so (Lloyd 1979, 19–27). Individual magicians had been attacked as incompetent, but not magic as a whole. Epilepsy has a natural cause, and so do *all* other diseases. That magical intervention does not work here is not an individual case or owing to an incompetent practitioner of magic; the whole practice is entirely unfounded. *On the Sacred Disease* (4.10–16) also says:

If a human by magic and sacrifice can bring down the moon, eclipse the sun, make storm and good weather, I will not call these things divine, but human, since the ability of the god is overpowered and enslaved by the knowledge of humans. (cf. 5.1–4)

This is interesting once more for its breadth of attack on magical claims and practices. The Hippocratic author continues thus:

But perhaps this is not true and these men, being in need of a living, fashioned and embellished many tales of all types, about many things and about this disease in particular, placing the blame for each form of this condition on some god. (4.16–21)

There has been some debate as to whether the Hippocratic rejection of magic was principled, or whether it was more of an *ad hominem* attack on rivals in the healing market (cf. Nutton 2013, 65). The generality of the attack would suggest that it was a matter of principle, though one should also be aware that the author of *On the Sacred Disease* (21.4–7) does not dismiss the divine entirely:

Therefore there is no need to distinguish this disease from others or consider it more divine, for they are all divine and all human.

Whether the divine is something apart from the natural, that is whether they held some form of pantheism, is then a key question for the Hippocratics. Whether they rejected all magical practices, or perhaps more pertinently, whether they rejected everything that they believed to be a magical practice is a further key question.

11. Macrocosm and Microcosm

A second important text in relation to magic and healing is the Hippocratic *On Regimen*. 1.10 tells us:

In a word, everything was arranged in the body by fire, in a manner suitable to itself, in imitation of the whole, small to large and large to small. The belly is the largest, a reservoir for water, both dry and moist, giving to all and taking from all, with the power of the sea, nourishing creatures suited to it, killing those not suited. Water, cold and moist, is arranged around this, a passage for cold breath and warm breath, an imitation of the earth, which alters everything which falls to it. Consuming and increasing it scatters fine water and aetheral creative fire, the visible and the invisible, separating from that which has been set together, in which things are brought into a state of clarity, each according to its destined role. In this fire made for itself three circuits bounded by each other internally and externally. Those towards the hold of the moist have the power of the moon, while those towards the outer circuits, towards the surrounding mass, have the power of the stars and those in the middle are bound internally and externally. The hottest and strongest fire, which controls all things, manages everything according to nature, it is imperceptible to sight or touch. In this are soul, mind, understanding, growth, change, diminution, separation, sleep, waking. This steers all things though all both here and there and is never still.

This is one of our earliest texts to invoke the macrocosm/microcosm relationship which became very influential in later magical thinking. One can also find Democritus (*TEGP* 193) saying that “Man is a small *cosmos* (*anthropos mikros cosmos*).” The macrocosm/microcosm analogy could involve some magical thinking, though this was not necessary. One might simply understand the *cosmos* as a large organism, or the body as a small *cosmos*, or one might believe that some form of sympathy or other magical relation existed between the two. It might also be the case that a benevolent creator/organizer (whether an element, principle, or god/Demiurge) might set up both the *cosmos* and the body so that they might relate as macrocosm and microcosm. Plato and Aristotle both employed macrocosm/microcosm analogies. The Hippocratics would seem to employ the third option here, and it is important to note that everything happens according to nature (*kata phusin*). The Hippocratics used their macrocosm/microcosm analogy for diagnosis by means of dreams. If patients dreamed of the stars in a disordered fashion, then their afflictions were close to the surface of the body; if they dreamed of the moon, afflictions were more internal, etc. Divination by means of dreams was taken seriously in ancient Greece. In *On Divination by Way of Dreams*, Aristotle asks:

Are then some dreams causes, and others signs, for example of what occurs in the body? At all events, even reputable doctors say that one should pay close attention to dreams. (463a 3–6, trans. Hankinson)

Aristotle gives a natural account of the origins of some true dreams, for example, those of thunder caused by our faint hearing of thunder during our sleep (*On Divination by Way of Dreams* 1). Aristotle also says:

Most [so-called prophetic] dreams are, however, to be classed as mere coincidences. (1, trans. Beare)

Aristotle is generally skeptical:

All those whose physical temperament is, as it were, garrulous and excitable, see sights of all descriptions; for, inasmuch as they experience many movements of every kind, they just chance to have visions resembling objective facts, their luck in these matters being merely like that of persons who play at even and odd. For the principle which is expressed in the gambler's maxim: "If you make many throws your luck must change," holds in their case also. (2, trans. Beare)

12. Prognosis and Prophecy

The Hippocratics were concerned with the relation of their art of prognosis with *mantikē*, prophesy, divination, or foresight. There were official *manteis* (diviners, seers, prophets) who worked with temples or armies, for example, and also unofficial itinerant *manteis* who worked for whomever would pay for their services. A similar division existed among the *kathartai*, the cleansers or purifiers, who might seek to heal either by spiritual or more physical methods.

Again, whether the objection is in principle or ad hominem in a crowded healing marketplace is open to question. Prognosis was important for the Hippocratics. *Prognostic* 1 begins:

It appears to me a most excellent thing for the physician to cultivate Prognosis; for by foreseeing and foretelling, in the presence of the sick, the present, the past, and the future, and explaining the omissions which patients have been guilty of, he will be the more readily believed to be acquainted with the circumstances of the sick; so that men will have confidence to intrust themselves to such a physician. And he will manage the cure best who has foreseen what is to happen from the present state of matters. (trans. Adams)

On Regimen in Acute Diseases 3 says:

In this respect, they might say that the art of medicine resembles augury, since augurs hold that the same bird (omen) if seen on the left hand is good, but if on the right bad: and in divination by the inspection of entrails you will find similar differences; but certain diviners hold the very opposite of these opinions. (trans. Adams. The diviner in Homer, *Iliad* 1.62 is a watcher of birds)

The Hippocratic view in general is that prognoses be made on the basis of observation and precedent. *Prorrhetic* 2.2 says:

I, however, will not indulge in this kind of prophecy; rather I record the things on the basis of which one must estimate which men will recover and which will die ... I hope in these and other cases to make predictions which are more within human capabilities than those which are reported. (trans. Hankinson)

Whether their objections to magical healing are entirely principled or not, the Hippocratics form an important contrast to the various magical ideas about the etiology and treatment of disease.

13. Shamanism in Classical Antiquity?

A shaman is someone who employs an altered or transcendent state of consciousness (whether through drugs, dance, or meditation) to access a spiritual realm and interact with spiritual entities, who may well include the dead. Shamans use such encounters in various ways, to influence these spirits or to inform, heal, or practice divination. Whether there was shamanism in ancient Greece and Rome, and in particular whether Pythagoras was a shaman has been a matter of debate. Dodds (1951, 143–145) has argued he was, followed by Burkert (1972, 162–163) and Cornford (1952), and recently Kingsley (1994) has argued strongly for this view. Huffman (1999, 73) and Zhmud (2012, 207–238) have rejected the idea. Much depends here on whether one wants to assert that Pythagoras was indeed a shaman and so had all the characteristics of a shaman (or vice versa), or whether he could reasonably be likened to a shaman. Much also depends on the definition of a shaman and shamanism. Walsh (1989, 2) declares:

The term itself comes from the word saman of the Tungus people of Siberia, meaning “one who is excited, moved, raised.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers this definition:

A person regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of good and evil spirits, especially among some peoples of northern Asia and North America. Typically such people enter a trance state during a ritual, and practise divination and healing. (cf. Shirokogoroff 1935, 269; Walsh 1989, 5)

More recently, discussions on the definition of shamanism have shifted in focus from the individual shamans to the cultures to which they belong. Jolly (2005) says:

The following could perhaps serve as a definition: cultures that can be classified as shamanic are those which, as a minimum requirement, possess religious functionaries who draw on the powers in the natural world, including the powers of animals, and who mediate, usually in an altered state of consciousness, between the world of the living and that of the spirits including the spirits of the dead. (cf. Klein et al. 2005)

The legend surrounding Pythagoras is rich and odd. He was said to have been seen in two different places at exactly the same time, to have stood in a theater and revealed that one of his thighs was golden, and to have been addressed by the river Kosas, many people hearing this (Aristotle, fragment 191). He is also supposed to have prophesied the coming of a white, female bear, to have killed a dangerous snake by biting it, and to have prophesied to his followers approaching political strife (Aristotle, fragment 191). Recent scholarship has moved away from the idea of Pythagoras as an expert in mathematics, geometry, or harmonics, or as someone who believed there was a harmony of the celestial spheres. Rather, Pythagoras is seen as an advocate for a way of life based on stringent dietary regulations and strict self-discipline, and as an expert on the observance of religious ritual. There is, however, no reliable evidence that Pythagoras entered trances or ecstatic states in the manner of a shaman. Pythagoras believed in metempsychosis, that the soul moves to a new body, possibly an animal one, on the death of the

old body. It is not clear, unless Pythagoras believed that one could transcend this cycle, that there was a world of the dead with which human could communicate. The Pythagoreans, nonetheless, formed a broad church with a wide diversity of views on the soul, magic, and numerology.

A further question which involves the definition of shamanism is transmission or ubiquity. The more tightly one defines shamanism around the initial Tungus example, the more likely one is to require a route of transmission for shamanism. Kingsley (1994) has made such a case for a transmission from Siberia to ancient Greece, citing a path through ancient Iran. However, Zhmud (2012, 212–215) has now cast considerable doubt on Meuli's view of transmission via the Scythians on the Black Sea coast. Zhmud shows that it is highly doubtful that the Scythians were in any proper sense of the word shamanistic. It is also possible, however, to take the view that shamanism, given a looser and more inclusive definition, is an ubiquitous phenomenon, appearing in many unconnected cultures throughout the world and whose clearest expression (in the history of Western anthropology) may be Siberian. If so, there is no need of a path of influence from Siberia to Greece (see Zhmud 2012, 210). KRS (229) argue as follows:

It is doubtful how far a historical case can be made for an influence upon Archaic Greece from Central Asian shamanistic cultures, or to what extent an institution central to the life of politically primitive nomadic peoples could in any case illuminate the activities of a Greek sage in the more complex society of a rich and powerful city state.

This may be too dismissive of shamanism as a ubiquitous phenomenon and of Dodds' injunction that we cannot simply assume that the Greeks were immune to such practices.

Empedocles as a Shaman?

There is a further debate as to whether Empedocles was a shaman. Dodds (1951, 146) has claimed:

Empedocles represents not a new but a very old type of personality, the shaman who combines the still undifferentiated functions of magician and naturalist, poet and philosopher, preacher, healer and public counsellor.

The passage which is critical to the debate is Empedocles *TEGP* 173, which says:

All the remedies (*pharmaka*) which exist as a defence against evils and old age
 You will learn, as for you alone will I accomplish all these things
 You will stop the might of tireless winds which over the earth
 Sweep and destroy fields with their gusts
 Then again, if you wish, you will bring on the requiting winds
 You will produce from a black rainstorm seasonal drought
 for men, and out of a summer drought you will generate
 Tree nourishing streams that dwell in the aether
 and you will bring back from Hades the strength of a man who has died.

The last line here has led some commentators to compare Empedocles to a shaman (Dodds 1951; Kingsley 1995). However, I would disagree with Kingsley (1995, 41), who comments:

There can be no possible justification for avoiding the literal meaning of this remarkable statement or trying to interpret it away allegorically.

It is possible to take this line literally, but given that Empedocles wrote in poetry and that other parts of his poem are clearly allegorical, we can at least consider other ways to interpret this line. Let us start with the magical interpretation. We might take *pharmaka* in the sense of a magical potion, “for you alone” as typical of privileged mage/adept relationships (Kingsley 1995, 221, note 13 for parallels with magical texts), weather working as magical (cf. Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease* 4.10–16; see above, §9), and the last line as literal. One might also look to the ideas of divination, cunning art, and healing as we get in *TEGP* 174 (below). Communing with the spirits of the dead is one thing that a shaman does. However, there is no mention of any sort of altered or transcendent state of consciousness in Empedocles or of how such a state might be attained.

The alternative approach to *TEGP* 173 is to explain *pharmaka* simply as medical remedies, “to you alone” as poetic emphasis (it would be odd to advertise privileged knowledge in a poem open to all!), weather working as enhanced natural knowledge, and the final line as an allusion to resuscitation or aiding recovery from some near-death experience where someone’s life force might be thought, poetically, to have departed for Hades. One might argue that this fragment begins and ends with something medical and mirrors the cyclical patterns and themes found elsewhere in Empedocles. Empedocles’ extensive medical works are now lost (cf. *TEGP* 3, 5, 13, 14). Empedocles also gives a strong natural account of cosmogony, zoogony, and the cosmological cycle in general. One can argue that this allows an interpretation of this passage in natural terms. Curd has commented:

In B111 (*TEGP* 173) Empedocles holds forth the promise of remarkable and seemingly supernatural skills, yet embeds this promise in the naturalistic account of the roots of all things, of the forces that combine and separate these roots and the consequent formation of the *kosmos* and living things. (2005, 13; cf. Longrigg 1993, 27)

TEGP 174 is also the subject of debate:

O Friends, who live in the great city of the yellow Acragas,
 in the highest part of the city, caring for good deeds,
 I greet you. I am a divine god to you, no longer mortal
 I go around honoured by all, as is fitting
 crowned with ribbons and festive garlands
 I am revered by all I come upon as I arrive at flourishing towns,
 men and women. They follow me
 in countless numbers, asking for a short cut to cunning art (*kerdos*),
 some eager for divination, some for diseases
 of all kinds seeking to hear an oracle of healing,
 for too long having been pierced by pain.

Empedocles' claim to becoming a god has been much debated. Who can become a god? *TEGP* 210 says:

In the end they are prophets (*manteis*) and minstrels and doctors and foremost men among those who dwell on earth, they then rise up as gods of highest honour.

I have translated *TEGP* 174 favorably for a magical interpretation. *Kerdos*, usually translated as “profit,” can also have a sense of “cunning arts, wiles,” which may fit with the references to divination and healing oracles. Of course, there are strategies for producing an interpretation of *TEGP* 174 which fits natural philosophy, based on alternative translations for some words and the idea that the key here is the crowd's perception of Empedocles.

14. Conclusion

Pythagoras and Empedocles make interesting cases in illustrating that it is not merely the Greek populace who are involved in questions concerning magic, but some of those who were considered natural philosophers as well. Empedocles is also interesting in that attempts have been made to marginalize *TEGP* 173. One commentator has denied it was genuinely Empedocles. Others, believing that Empedocles wrote two books, have tried to place it in “The Purifications” (*Katharmoi*) rather than in “Concerning Nature” (*Peri Physis*). They have then sought to privilege *Peri Physis* as the key work. Initially, when the first binding magic materials were found, there was doubt as to whether they were genuinely Greek materials. Magic and curses were an important part of Greek and Roman culture whether they fit into any idealized versions of those cultures or not. Both cultures also retained magical etiologies for disease and magical treatments for disease in competition with the Hippocratic tradition of natural etiology and treatment.

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NOTES

- 1 Tablet BM 47753, 25th or 26th tablet in a series known as *Sakikiu*, "all diseases," dated to the middle of the first Millennium BCE, trans. Wilson and Reynolds 1990. For the Christian view, Mark 9.14.