

Problems Related to the Use of the Category of Magic in the Writing of Greek and Roman History

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Abstract: The study of ancient magic is complicated by the fact that most of ancient Greek and Latin terms usually translated by “magic” or “magical” were used in different and contradictory ways. Approaches trying to reconcile rather than expose these different meanings can be divided in two large groups: the so-called essentialist approach, exemplified here by the work of H.S. Versnel and the sociological approach, represented here by the work of P. Bourdieu. Against these two approaches, it has also been argued that the modern term “magic” should be abandoned. Against this last position, I will first repeat – as Versnel and others already did – that we cannot represent alien (i.e. foreign or ancient) categories of thought without using our own categories. Finally, I will present Versnel’s methodology, its problems, and the solution that Bourdieu’s notion of the religious field can provide. While not without problems, it gives an idea of what could be gained by tinkering with common-sense notions rather than assuming that their definitions are self-evident.

The problem with the use of broad analytical concepts in historiography is that these concepts never simply represent the past. They give meaning to ancient or otherwise alien words, which, in turn, are preserved or transformed by the work of the historian. By explaining ancient words with modern ones, historians give to the latter a transhistorical or transcultural quality.¹ Historiography, whether it manipulates categories such as religion, magic or power, surreptitiously forces readers to comply with an implicit definition or redefinition of the main categories by which it apprehends the past.

This, in a nutshell, is the main methodological problem one encounters when studying ancient magic. In the following, I will first make the case that this so-called problem is a fundamental fact of the historiography of ideas. I will then present an overview of the use of the theories of magic in the last hundred years of research on ancient Greek- and Latin-speaking societies. Finally, I will pick up the problem of studying ancient magic where Hendrik S. Versnel left it and present Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the “religious field” [*champ religieux*] as a possible solution. My main message is that banning words from our vocabulary is not going to make our cognitive habits disappear. A more practical solution would be to define the concepts we use at the outset.

¹ By “category of thought” I mean the categories by which we classify known and newly discovered phenomena, and which gain credibility by being imbedded in a larger set of related categories.

Now for my own disclosure: it is true that magic is a loaded term that reveals one's own views and that its modern meaning – something like “the manipulation of extraordinary power through unexplained or pseudo-religious means” – is not well suited to represent what scholars usually perceive as magic in ancient Greek and Latin sources. For these reasons, some have questioned the use of the word or have requested that it be abandoned.² The anachronism and relative inaccuracy of the different modern concepts of magic, however, are irrelevant inasmuch as writing about ancient words always implies the use of modern words used to translate them. Abandoning the term magic will not change anything about the fact that individuals now identify certain religious-like phenomena in a specific class, which they call magic. If we abandon the word magic because it does not perfectly translate ancient Greek or Latin words, we might as well abandon the words religion and science in the study of Greek and Roman antiquity.³

Historiography is a form of discourse that produces truth-claims and which consequently generalizes personal view-points. We should not be surprised that descriptions of past ideas that have failed to convince appear anachronistic, ethnocentric or idiosyncratic. Disagreements over a theory are not sufficient to believe that a field of research is moribund. Since theories can always escape falsification by the addition of *ad hoc* rules, we should rather encourage scientific fields to foster different approaches to the same problem.⁴ In the

history of ideas perhaps more than in other historiographical domains, the past is never simply represented. It is rather translated and adapted. Both of the articles analysed below implicitly address this problem: Versnel suggests that “our” concepts might be similar to those of the ancient Greeks; Bourdieu, that similar social structures should obtain in societies in which the same level of division of labour was attained.

One popular and simple way to represent the task of distinguishing between ancient and modern words is to distinguish between the emic and etic stages of research. The emic stage would here consist in the study of words through categories current in the culture studied. The etic stage consists in the translation of these categories of thought into a model devised by the researcher. As Kenneth Pike originally argued, these two movements are practically inseparable.⁵ In theory, at least, it would be useful to be aware of the distinction between the emic lexical field of single ancient Greek and Latin words (*mageia*, *goēteia*, *katadeō*, *magikos*, etc.) we associate with magic and the etic lexical field of the words we use to translate them (magic, witchcraft, to bewitch, magical, etc.).

² See, e.g., Gager 1999; Otto 2011; Otto 2013 (see, however, Otto – Stausberg 2013); Hane-graaff 2012, 166–168.

³ See Otto 2013, 320–321, who, despite recognizing this, suggested that it would be more pragmatic to use a critical definition of religion and to abandon the concept of magic.

⁴ Feyerabend 1975.

⁵ Pike 1967, 8. 37–39.

Theories of Magic

In order to situate the positions of Versnel and Bourdieu, here is a concise panorama of the theoretical positions on the nature of magic that were held explicitly or implicitly in the study of ancient Greek and Latin sources during the last hundred years:

a) The view that magic is a primitive or inferior type of religion or of science is probably the oldest theory. It was widespread until the 1950's.⁶ Among scholars of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, one of the last to have explicitly held this position was Alfons Barb. Barb proposed to invert Frazer's evolutionary scheme and to see magic as a deteriorated form of religion.⁷

b) As Mauss and Durkheim argued, magic could be anti-religious and potentially anti-social inasmuch as it would consist in the appropriation of collective powers by the individual.⁸ This sociological approach should not be equated with its extreme version – called the “thesis of deviance” by Bernd-Christian Otto or the “functional” theory by Versnel – in which magic functions solely as a delegitimising label.⁹

Mary Douglas, for example, argued that those associated with magic are not simply the victims of disingenuous accusations. The fact that they are classified as magicians and sorcerers would also be dependent on larger correspondences between the structure of a given society and that society's cosmology. Magic would be “matter out of place” – like dirt, or like the animals that Leviticus rejects as impure for consumption.¹⁰

Jonathan Z. Smith's latest study on the topic classifies magical rituals along with associations, which, according to Smith's formulation, both correspond to the “religions of anywhere.” Following Smith's tri-partite scheme, “religions of anywhere” are marginal in comparison to the “religions of here,” which concern the domestic sphere, and the “religions of there,” which concern states and communities.¹¹ The “religions of anywhere [...] offer means of access to, or avoidance of, modes of culturally imagined divine power not encompassed by the religions of ‘here’ and ‘there.’ At times they might imitate, at other times they may reverse, aspects of these two other dominant forms of religion.”¹² Despite the use of geographical terminology, Smith's definition of the religions of anywhere is very close to Mauss and Hubert's sociological interpretation of magic.

Bourdieu proposed to see magic as a form of religion that has been dominated and proscribed not simply through brute political force but through the logical structure of a religious field. According to Bourdieu, this structure would have been formed according to processes of social differentiation (more on this below).

Similarly, Richard Gordon suggested that we consider ancient Greek and Roman representations of magic as a sub-category of the marvellous, which itself represents “the totality of perceived infringements of culturally-stated rules for normality.”¹³ What would distinguish the strange from the marvellous would be that the marvellous is imbedded in discourses of truth and power.¹⁴

⁶ See Styers 2004.

⁷ Barb 1963, 101. See, however, Jordan 2008, 6–9.

⁸ See, e.g. Mauss and Hubert 1902–1903.

⁹ See Otto 2013, 313–316.

¹⁰ See e.g. Douglas 1966, 95–114. For an application of this theory and another counter-example to the idea that the sociological approach

equates magic with accusation, see Brown 1970.

¹¹ Smith 2003.

¹² Id., 30.

¹³ Gordon 1999, 168.

¹⁴ Id., 169.

These are several examples showing that approaches linking the concept of magic to the creation and maintaining of cultural norms are not reducible to the idea that magic is the sole product of libels and of self-interested accusations.

c) According to Hendrik Versnel, view b) is misguided because it attempts to explain all data according to the phenomenon of accusation.¹⁵ Versnel recognizes that the so-called functionalist view has made advances but argues that evidence rather shows that writers usually described magical actions according to a single set of non-exclusive characteristics (more on this below).

d) Against all of the above, others have claimed that the use of the word magic in modern historiography is misleading.¹⁶ This view is perhaps more popular among scholars who are not mainly concerned with ancient Mediterranean cultures.¹⁷

e) Taking all of the preceding positions in consideration, it was also suggested that magic be kept as a label for a research domain, or that we replace this label by different “patterns of magicity” (e.g. the fact that certain words are assumed to exert a certain power), by which we could classify similar activities or ideas.¹⁸

Of all the views presented above, Versnel’s and Bourdieu’s present the two most explicit methodologies and their studies occupy as it were the two most extreme methodological positions on the study of magic. Acknowledging that the past is necessarily apprehended from our own perspective, Versnel suggested that we compare “our” own concept of magic with that of “the Greeks”

and see what happens. The expected result, as suggested at the end of his 1991 paper, is that our concept of magic (and perhaps our culture as a whole) is very close to that of the ancient Greeks. In the case of Bourdieu, whose work on religion has been described as the blueprint for his concept of the “field” [*champ*],¹⁹ the notion of religion and magic stand as one example of several “symbolic systems” giving meaning to behaviours by putting them in a self-referential network of oppositions. Bourdieu’s article was an attempt at reconciling approaches that see religion as an instrument of communication and learning with those that rather emphasise the political function of religious ideology. Magic, in this theory, is what stands outside of religion but which compete with it by providing similar “religious goods” [*biens religieux*]. The stark contrast between the two articles frames an important methodological question: whether the history of ideas should take up the common-sense use of words (Versnel) or should strive to give them new ones (Bourdieu). The difference is major: while the first discusses religion as a set of psychological dispositions pertaining to theological concepts and assumes a shared *mentalité* with his object of study, the second discusses religion as a social structure and rather assumes to share similar social structures with the societies studied.

¹⁵ Versnel 1991.

¹⁶ See, e.g. Gager 1999; Otto 2011 and 2013; Wax – Wax 1963.

¹⁷ See, e.g. Hanegraaff 2012; Otto 2011.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Otto and Stausberg 2013, 10–11.

¹⁹ See Dianteill 2002.

Religion and Magic from a Theological Perspective

In order to define magic, Vernsel proposed to stick to relatively common characteristics. Magic would be: 1) instrumental, 2) manipulative/ coercive, 3) mechanical/ procedural, 4) non-personal, with short-term, concrete and often individual goals. By contrast, religion would 1) not be “primarily purpose-motivated” and it would 2) view “man as dependent upon powers outside his sphere of influence.” Moreover, 3) its results would not be “dependent upon a professional specialist” and would depend “solely and exclusively on the free favour of sovereign gods.” Finally, 4) religion would have “positive social functions,” i.e. it would be “cohesive and solidarizing.”²⁰ Vernsel defined magic and religion with theological concepts, and one can assume, by attributing theological dispositions to those performing religious and magical acts.

a) According to Vernsel’s version of the sociological approach, which he called the “functionalist” approach, *magia*, *mageia*, *goēteia* and similar terms only worked as delegitimizing labels.

b) On the contrary, Vernsel pointed out, the use of words such as *magia*, *mageia* and *goēteia* followed general patterns. Since these patterns were common to ancient Greek- or Latin-speakers we can conclude that the words *magia*, *mageia* and *goēteia* were not simple slander. In other words, activities categorized as *mageia*, *goēteia* and *magia* shared formal criteria, and these criteria were part of Greco-Roman “common sense.” Vernsel concluded that the functionalist approach he described cannot explain why the activities denoted by these words share a certain family resemblance.

²⁰ Vernsel 1991a, 178–179. 186.

c) One might simply refuse to use the word magic. Studying the same material but in smaller categories (such as prayer, sacrifice, amulets, curse tablets, and so on) would be “unworkable.” Vernsel did not explain why this should be so.

d) As a way out of this dead-end, Vernsel proposed to reformulate the approach of early ethnographers (which he called either “substantialist,” “substantivist” or “essentialist”) by formulating a definition of magic according to a loose collection of “common sense” features. He called this type of category “polythetic” or “prototypical,” by which he meant categories in which every element shares a “family resemblance” with the others without necessarily having the exact same characteristics.²¹ “Just like religion,” Vernsel wrote²²:

‘magical’ practices or expressions may share some though not all family resemblances. This means that we may accept a ‘broad, polythetic or prototypical’ definition of magic, based on a ‘common sense’ collection of features, which may or may not, according to convention and experience, largely correspond to the items listed in the first part of this introduction: instrumental, manipulative, mechanical, non-personal, coercive, with short-

²¹ This view is often attributed to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein, however, does not appear to have coined the expression “family resemblance” to produce a new type of definition by which one could reduce the meanings of a word to the meanings of other words, e.g. reduce magic to a set of characteristics (“instrumental,” “coercive,” “performative,” etc.). He rather seems to have attempted to reduce all enunciations to language-games, i.e. according to Wittgenstein, words do not primarily signify, they are tools used to fulfil certain goals (see Wittgenstein 2009, §363). To define is one of many possible language-games, and it consists in making analogies. It is the game of saying “x is like y” (see Wittgenstein 2009, §7–13. §69. §654–655). For a proposal to consider the most basic cognitive acts as analogical acts, see Hofstadter (2001).”

²² Vernsel 1991, 186.

term, concrete and often individual goals etc., and employ this as a provisional ideal-typical standard, coined by *our* cultural universe, and just see what happens.

e) These observations have important methodological consequences for Versnel's project:²³

It may be more rewarding to inquire whether non-Western cultures do or do not recognize a distinction between categories *we* introduce and, if they do not, ask why not (*and* why we do), than discard *a priori* our own conceptual tools, a psychological *tour de force* which many scholars believe to be an illusion in the first place.

f) In the conclusion, Versnel supports his use of the label of magic and of religion to distinguish between two types of curse tablets by referring to the polythetic classification scheme just described. What he does in fact simplifies the distinction between religion and magic to a single set of opposed characteristics: divine impassibility vs. the coercible nature of the divine. Versnel drew attention in several articles to a recurring group of characteristics present on some tablets suggesting a different type of curse writing. He argues that there are two types of curse tablets: some that can be classified as magical, which he calls *defixio(nes)* and some that can be classified as religious, which he calls "prayers for justice" or "judicial prayers." While writers of *defixio(nes)* often appear to have thought themselves able to compel divinities to, writers of prayers for justice typically supplicate divinities. The difference in the wording of curse tablets, following Versnel, would mirror the polythetic classification scheme he laid out earlier in the article. In other words, the difference in wording (but also in the place of deposition, as Versnel

argued elsewhere) meant that those who used prayers for justice did not see as proper to command divinities (or perhaps, to command a certain kind of divinity). Rather characteristically, the author of prayers for justice, 1) makes him- or herself known, 2) justify his plea for justice before the divinity, and 3) supplicates rather than command the divinity. One can, note however, that even though Versnel still uses a polythetic definition when defining a prayer for justice, only one of the four main characteristics by which he defined magical action correspond to the characteristics by which he defines a *defixio*: they coerce divinities (No. 2 above). The distinction between religious and magical curse tablet, then, would boil down to the principle of divine impassibility, since prayers for justice, although "religious," are also "purpose-motivated" (1), they follow certain procedures (3) and they are "motivated by personal goals" (4). As far as curse tablets are concerned, the wording of the last part of Versnel's article imply that magic could be defined as a rite performed by somebody lacking the theological disposition to respect the principle of divine impassibility. To focus on this theological principle to define one's own category of magic is not anachronistic but it cannot explain all instances in which *magia*, *mageia* and cognates could be used. In other words, it is not a definition that applies to all ancient phenomena usually understood now as belonging to the category of magic. The problem faced here is fundamental: the different uses given to words we translate by magic considerably varied in antiquity. The *Apology* of Apuleius is a well-known case in point. On one side, as Versnel argued, the specific accusations against Apuleius suggest that certain activities could be singled out as pertaining to *magia* and recognized as such in a Latin-speaking

²³ Versnel 1991, 185.

courtroom in second-century CE Libya.²⁴ Apuleius, however, also showed that Greek *mageia* and Latin *magia* could both refer to the venerable cult of the Persian *magi*. If that were the case, he claimed, there would be no reason for judicial proceedings.

This is just one example of the impossibility to derive one single definition of “ancient magic” from all known uses made of the words *mageia* and *magia* without ignoring some of these uses. To summarize the problem presented by Versnel’s paper: if the “functionalist” approach cannot explain why Christians and non-Christians (for example) could agree that certain ritualistic characteristics were essentially magical, the old essentialist approach of Frazer – and the new one of Versnel – cannot explain why the same practices (e.g. a prayer, a divinatory practice) were sometimes considered as *mageia* or *magia* and sometimes not.

This means that if we are to succeed in defining ancient magic, we must develop a criterion of some sort that could account for entirely contradictory and exclusive uses of the word *mageia*.

Religion and Magic from a Sociological Perspective

The approach of Bourdieu to the question of religion can theoretically solve this issue.²⁵ Rather than suggesting that our category of magic (and religion) might be shared with those we study, Bourdieu took up a radically etic perspective and gave meanings to “religion” and “magic” that are far from representing current common sense. As far

²⁴ *Apology*, 25–65: looking for specific species of fish; private divination; a secret offering to a friend’s household gods; the celebration of nocturnal rites involving birds; the possession of an “ugly,” “skeleton-like” statuette which Apuleius would have called his king.

²⁵ Bourdieu 1971a. See also Bourdieu 1971b; Dianteill 2002; Verter 2003.

as the field of ancient history is concerned, it admittedly raises issues but also provides an interesting solution to the problem just exposed:

a) One could summarize Bourdieu’s notion of the religious field as the meeting of several theories. Bourdieu took over Weber’s socio-historical analysis of the division of “religious labour” [*travail religieux*; also called *gestion du sacré/ des biens du salut/ des biens religieux*].²⁶ This division of labour, correlated with urbanisation, would have produced a specialized class of workers, which Bourdieu called the “body of religious specialists” [*le corps de spécialistes religieux*]. Bourdieu also combined Durkheim’s idea of the social origin of categories of thought with this hypothesis. The combination of the two theories forms the religious field, a social arena in which actors compete for certain goods according to rules following a logic specific to the field.²⁷ As with other fields, Bourdieu proposed to see a correspondence between the religious symbolic systems, social structures and mental structures:²⁸

Religion contributes to the (hidden) imposition of the principles of structuration of the perception and thinking of the world, and of the social world in particular, insofar as it imposes a system of practices and representations whose structure, objectively founded on a principle of political division, presents itself as the natural-supernatural structure of the cosmos.

b) Religious specialists manage the distribution of specific goods. These religious goods are soteriological in the sense that they are meant to save from death but also from anxiety, illnesses, and

²⁶ Bourdieu 1971a, 312.

²⁷ *Id.*, 295–300.

²⁸ Bourdieu 1991, 5 (= Bourdieu 1971a, 300).

suffering in general.²⁹ Religious goods, however, are also meant to justify one's specific form of existence, that is to say, one's position in society. Bourdieu saw the basis of the need for religious goods in the "religious interest" [*intérêt religieux*], which includes the psychological need for safety as well as a justification for one's particular place in society.³⁰

c) Religious specialists can only appear in societies in which religious labour was sufficiently divided, systematized and moralized.³¹ The religious specialists theoretically exert a monopoly over the management of religious goods. This monopoly is directly challenged by those represented by the ideal-type of the "prophet," who can change the logic of the field and consequently oust its specialists. Religious specialists are also indirectly challenged by those who operate outside of the logic of the field and who offer competing religious goods. This is the role of the "sorcerer, the petty independent entrepreneur, hired on the spot by the people and exercising his office part-time and for money."³² Merely by virtue of his role, the sorcerer delegitimizes the religious specialist's monopoly over the religious field.³³

d) The domination that the religious specialist exerts over the religious field at the expense of the non-specialist is at the origin of the distinction between the legitimate and the illegitimate manipulation of religious goods, i.e. between religion and

magic. This domination and delegitimation cannot be simply explained by the religious specialists' conscious attempts at eliminating concurrence. Actors in the religious field are bound to its logic inasmuch as they have invested labour in the field. As Bourdieu remarked, legitimating processes remain invisible to the dominant themselves, who "transfigure" their political interests into religious interests.³⁴ Rather than being the product of disingenuous accusations, the concept of magic takes its origin in the competition inherent to the religious field, and, consequently, in the division of religious labour that formed it. In turn, this division of labour enabled religious specialists to systematize religious knowledge and practices to an extent that had not been reachable by those who had been previously busied with other forms of labour. In that sense, magic would be a symbolic system that has been outclassed by another on a politico-economic level as well as on an organisational level (i.e. in what regards its internal coherence):³⁵

Given, on one side, the relation that links the degree of systematization and moralization of religion to the degree of development of the religious apparatus and, on the other, the relation that links progress in the division of religious labor to progress in the division of labor and urbanization, most authors tend to accord to magic the characteristics of systems of practices and representations belonging to the least economically developed social formations or to the most disadvantaged social classes of class-divided societies. Most authors might agree that magical practices aim at concrete and specific goals, both particular and immediate (in opposition to the more abstract, more general, and more distant ends that would be those of religion); that they are inspired by an intention to coerce or

²⁹ Bourdieu 1971a, 299. 312.

³⁰ Id., 310–318.

³¹ Id., 300–304. Bourdieu ties these processes to urbanisation. While quite broad in scope, Bourdieu's theory of religion was not meant to be applicable to all societies. See Dianteill 2002, 13–14.

³² Bourdieu 1991a, 30 (with correction, the original "contre rémunération" was mistranslated as "without remuneration").

³³ Bourdieu 1971, 308–309. 326–327.

³⁴ Id., 316–318.

³⁵ Bourdieu 1991a, 13 (= Bourdieu 1971, 309).

manipulate supernatural powers (in opposition to the propitiatory and contemplative dispositions of “prayer” for example); or that they live enclosed in the formalism and ritualism of *do ut des*. This is because all these traits – which originate in conditions of existence dominated by an economic urgency prohibiting all distancing from present and immediate needs and unfavorable to the development of competent scholars in the field of religion – are, obviously, more often found in societies or social classes more impoverished from an economic point of view and thus predisposed to occupying a dominated position in the relations of material and symbolic power.

Assuming the existence of a reciprocal relation between symbolic and social structures, Bourdieu looked for a correlation between the division of religious labour and the creation of a field possessing its own internal logic and enabling monopolistic claims. For Bourdieu, the symbolic systems that we call by the name of religion do not simply respond to “religious needs” (the protection from death, anxiety and suffering in general). They respond to “religious interests,” through which religious systems legitimize and naturalize economic and political domination.³⁶ Conversely, the same politico-economical divisions explain the fact that religious specialists do not consider certain religious goods as such and that these religious goods are consequently considered magical by all those recognizing the monopoly of the specialists.

This is where Bourdieu’s model can explain why magic can be recognized by its formal characteristics (the “essentialist” definition of Frazer and Versnel) and that it can also be deduced by the analysis of social structures (the so-called “functionalist” or sociological approach). If “common sense”

dictates that we find magic primarily in mechanical, *do ut des* rites, for example, it is not only because centuries of Presocratic, Platonic and Christian polemics have ruled against these rites. It might also be due to the fact that what we usually call magic “originates in conditions of existence dominated by an economic urgency.” In other words, we recognize magic in an offer of “religious goods” that has survived despite the fact that it was delegitimized by changes in a given religious system, or by the imposition of a new system of religious symbols (e.g., through military or economic colonisation) and of a new class of religious specialists.

It is obvious that Christianity, and Catholic Christianity in particular, looms large in Bourdieu’s understanding of religion. This might not be too problematic for those studying the Late Antique world. As Versnel suggested at the end of his 1991 article, “our” concept of magic might be very similar to the ancient Greek one. Indeed, some of us continue to hold to some of the ways by which ancient Greeks and Romans recognized magic. In fact, the sociological approach to magic could also be said to have a pedigree as ancient as that outlined by Versnel. The idea that magic connotated social exclusion can be found in the work of Augustine of Hippo³⁷ and it could also be traced further back.³⁸ It is thus not only Frazer and his contemporary epigones that could be said to have held a Christiano-centric or “western-biased” position; Mauss’s (and, to a lesser degree, Bourdieu’s) theory of magic, do seem to follow Augustine’s notion of *magia*: the making of “demonic pacts” in an alien language implying the identification of the speaker

³⁶ Bourdieu 1971, 310.

³⁷ Dufault 2008.

³⁸ See Stratton 2007.

with a different society, the society of demons.³⁹

The idea that engaging in magic is to alienate oneself from society can be found again in the works of 19th century ethnographers such as Frazer, who defined magical thought as alien, irrational and non-Western. It is also probably the association between “magick” and the anti-social that attracted the attention of Aleister Crowley and other fin-de-siècle occultists. In the last century, a host of people, starting at least with Gerald Gardner in the 1950’s, have described their practices as magical or have tied their origins to European witchcraft.⁴⁰ To the mid-twentieth-century witches and Wiccans, we could also add the writers, artists and activists who, throughout the twentieth century and beyond, have made use of the idea of magic in explicit or implicit critiques of their societies: e.g. William Boroughs, Brion Gysin⁴¹ and Hakim Bey a.k.a. Peter Lamborn Wilson.⁴² It is not surprising that the *Dictionary of Gnosticism and Esoterism* stated that Crowley influenced “new religious movements of a magical and neo-pagan bent despite his bad reputation.” To have a “bad reputation,” especially in the eyes of the conservative, might rather explain why the figure of Crowley was and still is attractive.

The question of finding what magic was for “the Greeks,” as Versnel wrote – and which implies the existence of a uniform concept as well as that of a *mentalité* that can “think” the concept uniformly – also obscures other problems, such as that by which language orthodoxy forces the dissimulation of

differences in social origins, and, conversely, how certain person can be alienated from their main language community because of social or physical differences.⁴³ In other words, asking what was magic “as the Greeks saw it” (rather than asking “what was the term *mageia* used for, and in which context?”) smuggles the problematic concept of *mentalités* into our work.

Were “the Greeks,” as Versnel writes, “prototypically modern-Western biased rationalists *avant la lettre*?” Perhaps, but some of them also appear to have been proto-sociologists with a flair for social distinctions. As Versnel pointed out, if we begin by rejecting terms at the onset, we will not be able to answer them. Similarly, if we only authorize certain questions and certain definitions, we run the risk of only finding what we already know.

³⁹ See Markus 1994 with August. doct. Chr. 2, 20 (*pacta quaedam significationum cum daemone placita atque foederata*). 2.24.37.

⁴⁰ Ginzburg 2004; Hutton 1999.

⁴¹ P-Orridge 2003.

⁴² Bey 2003.

⁴³ It is curious, for example, that Philostratus made almost no mention of sophists from Egypt or Syria, even though we know through epigraphy that Alexandria and Antioch, to name just two “Oriental” Greek cities, produced plenty of them (see Bowersock 1969, 21–22).

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