

# MAGIC IN WESTERN CULTURE

From Antiquity to the Enlightenment

Brian P. Copenhaver



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## MAGIC IN WESTERN CULTURE

The story of the beliefs and practices called ‘magic’ starts in ancient Iran, Greece, and Rome, before entering its crucial Christian phase in the Middle Ages. Centering on the Renaissance and Marsilio Ficino – whose work on magic was the most influential account written in pre-modern times – this groundbreaking book treats magic as a classical tradition with foundations that were distinctly philosophical. Besides Ficino, the pre-modern story of magic also features Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, Aquinas, Agrippa, Pomponazzi, Porta, Bruno, Campanella, Descartes, Boyle, Leibniz, and Newton, to name only a few of the prominent thinkers discussed. Because pictures play a key role in the story of magic, the book is richly illustrated.

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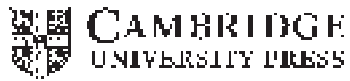
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ENLIGHTENMENT

**BRIAN P. COPENHAVER**

University of California, Los Angeles



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A MJBA,  
IL MAGO MIGLIORE,  
DA BPC,  
UN APPRENDISTA





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## PREFACE

RESEARCH FOR THIS BOOK STARTED IN 1967, WHEN I CHOSE SYMPHORIEN Champier as the subject of my dissertation, which eventually became Copenhaver (1978a): see the bibliography. Over the next forty years or so, I continued to read and write about the ‘occultist tradition’ mentioned in the title of that book, while changing my views about it. The results can be seen in Copenhaver (1978b), (1984), (1986), (1987a), (1987b), (1988), (1990), (1991), (1992a), (1992b), (1992c), (1993), (1994), (1998), (2000a), (2000b), (2006), (2007c), (2009a), (2010a) and (2010b). All of this has been re-examined, corrected, revised, synthesized, and reorganized to form the core of this book, augmented by completely new material and up-to-date documentation. Because of their narrower content and specialized form, the studies preliminary to this book could not, one by one, sustain its larger claims, which address this question: why did European intellectuals – philosophers especially – repudiate magic in the Enlightenment, after having previously accepted it for more than two millennia?

*Mega biblion, mega kakon*: an even bigger nuisance, however, would have come from my original plan to include Giovanni Pico’s Kabbalah and make the story more complete – though much too long. For now, see Copenhaver (1977), (1980), (1999), (2002a), (2002b), (2007a), (2007a), (2007b), (2011) and (2012). Preparing a companion volume – *Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico’s Oration in Cultural Memory* – constantly reminds me that Pico and Kabbalah, whose place in the current book is small, deserve much larger attention.

Meanwhile, I hope that this book has some virtues of its defects – its scope especially. Since I begin with rumors of a murder in ancient Greece and end with a real murder in today’s India, my story can only be selective and episodic, but macro-stories need telling as much as

micro-stories. On the topics discussed, I have tried to be responsive to current scholarship, though not always at the same depth, relying on secondary literature more for some topics than for most: on J. G. Frazer's career, for example, I have not gone far beyond Ackerman's excellent book; likewise for Hanegraaff on Lazzarelli, Perrone Compagni on Pomponazzi, Sturlese on Bruno's *De umbris*, Kahn on the French Rosicrucians, and Newman and Principe on alchemy in England. Also, having read some of the primary texts long before the best current editions were available, I have not always adapted my citations to the new versions: this is true for Bacon and Boyle, for example.

Translations from Greek, Latin, and vernacular languages are mine unless otherwise indicated. Many of the images used in this book are taken from other books, most of them published long ago. Otherwise, for images that require permissions, I am grateful to the British Museum; British Library; Bibliothèque National de France; Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford; Warburg Institute; J. Paul Getty Museum; Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana; Biblioteca dell'Accademia dei Lincei; Mary Evans Picture Library; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague; University of Oslo Library; Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana, Siena; Museo Nazionale Romano, Terme; Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna; Art Institute of Chicago; Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

To friends, critics, and colleagues a great many debts have been compounding for decades, but two are paramount: to Kathleen Copenhaver, my beloved wife, and to Michael Allen, my beloved friend and psychopomp. Crucial inspiration, support, advice, and criticism have come from Joseph Almog, Susanne Beiweis, John Carriero, Gregory Copenhaver, Rebecca Copenhaver, Dan Garber, Tony Grafton, Jim Hankins, Moshe Idel, Jill Krave, Fabrizio Lelli, Ed Mahoney, John Monfasani, Calvin Normore, Ingrid Rowland, Charles Schmitt, Nancy Siraisi, Perkin Walker, Bob Westman, and Frances Yates. Sabbatical leaves from UCLA and grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society, the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (Fulbright), the Getty Research Institute, and the Guggenheim Foundation have supported my research.



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PART I

INTRODUCTION



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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE SCRUPLES OF J. G. FRAZER

Frazer is much more savage  
than most of his savages.<sup>1</sup>

### 1 SCAREHORSE

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



- [A "Gravity's Rainbow" Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel here](#)
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