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MAGIC, DISCOURSE, & IDEOLOGY

Round about the cauldron go;
In the poison'd entrails throw.—
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Swelter'd venom, sleeping got,
Boil thou first i'th'charmed pot.

MACBETH 4.4–9

In their nocturnal howling, conjuring chaos around a cauldron, the three weird sisters encountered by Macbeth exemplify a type recognizable to almost everyone. Their strange countenances and vile activity connote witchcraft or magic in the Western imagination, where disheveled old women, diabolical cooking, and mischievous manipulation of the human will constitute attributes of magic. But where did this portrait come from, and has it always existed?

This book illuminates the emergence of powerful and enduring stereotypes in Western cultural history: namely, the magician and witch. It argues that these stereotypes were constructed over several centuries through repeated representation and coincide with the development of ideas about ritual deviance and illegitimate access to sacred power emerging at the same time. It traces the development of a new discourse of alterity that emerged in Greece in the fifth century BCE and persisted as a marginalizing strategy until the modern period. In fact, it continues to operate in modern discussions of foreign cultures and beliefs, where it serves as a foil for notions

like rationality, religion, and science.¹ In its origin this discourse employed a combination of terms designating foreign, illegitimate, subversive, or dangerous ritual activities and integrated them into a powerful semantic constellation. Through the repeated combination of these terms with each other, the discourse drew on and amplified connotations of each term so that the use of one could harness or invoke a network of meaning created by association with the others. I designate this constellation with the English term *magic*. In modern parlance magic is most often associated with fatuous sleight-of-hand tricks or with esoteric rituals to harness occult power. Both conceptions reflect, to some degree, ancient aspects of this discourse, which included terms designating charlatans and frauds as well as terms for subversive ritual practices that undermine social order and legitimate channels of divine favor. In order to understand better how these terms function individually and in combination I will close this chapter with a discussion of ancient terminology (Greek, Latin, and Hebrew) and the development of the semantic constellation I label *magic*. This discussion will also serve to introduce readers to the key terms that appear throughout the pages of this book. Unfortunately, the modern understanding of magic carries conceptual baggage as well, yet, despite its imprecision, I employ *magic* as the best approximation to this ancient discourse.²

This book will consider the particular shape that representations of magic take in different cultural contexts. By concentrating on the *differences* that emerge between these patterns of representation, it reveals the degree to which magic was a discourse; it was dynamic, twisting, and contorting to meet the ideological needs of various situations. This book does not, therefore, concentrate on the *actual* practice of “magic” in antiquity, nor does it try to define objectively what that practice might have been. Rather, it examines how a discourse that includes stereotypes, accusations, and counterlegislation, as well as certain types of ritual practices, emerged and functioned in the ancient world. In the chapters that follow I examine representations of the jilted wife, who uses herbal potions to win back the affection of her husband, and contrast this with depictions of lascivious old hags (apparently unmarried) who stop at nothing—even infanticide—to manipulate and magically control hapless young men whom they desire. These two stereotypes, while distinct, both profile women as practitioners of magic arts. Yet men could also be identified as magicians: namely, the charlatan swindler who uses magic to cajole credulous onlookers and seduce witless women. While these depictions show magic to be constructed negatively in the ancient world, magic could also exhibit *positive* attributes

in some contexts, demonstrating authority and superiority. Certain rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud, for example, are represented as *excelling* at magic arts.

Each of these representations emerges as dominant at a different social and historical moment, demonstrating that the *understanding* of what constitutes magic is culturally determined and subject to change. Yet, these differences demand that we ask what accounts for them: why does one particular stereotype dominate in a certain culture or historical context? What is the connection between social contexts and patterns of representation? In order to address these questions, each chapter examines a pattern of representation against its historical setting and in light of cultural configurations, thereby illuminating the ways in which depictions of magic function in the social drama of which they are a part. I demonstrate that the particular shape magic assumed in each case reflects the particular issues at stake in that context and, especially, for those deploying the stereotype. This is not to assume, however, that particular representations of magic or the larger stereotypes upon which they draw simplistically derive from the psychological complexes or personal struggles of individuals. Rather, I explore how representations of magic operate within an entire cultural system, which affords their meaning and semantic sense. Individual instances of magic accusation or labeling draw on but also reinscribe the existing body of knowledge that defined and delimited the parameters of what was considered *magic* in that culture. As we will see, what the ancients regarded as magic does not always correspond with common modern definitions, which is why I adhere to ancient designations whenever possible.

Understanding where these stereotypes come from and how they developed can illuminate contemporary acts of Othering as well. While seemingly remote in time and social context, these representations nonetheless continue to figure in demonizing accusations that marginalize certain people, such as, for example, assertive women and communities with different religious practices or beliefs. Contemporary uses of these stereotypes do not necessarily involve accusations of practicing magic, although they can,³ but they do draw on vilifying images and associations that evolved part and parcel of magic discourse in antiquity. Thus assertive women are frequently portrayed as lustful and domineering witches, while foreign religions are commonly painted in terms familiar from ancient representations of magic as threatening and uncivilized. Furthermore, modern conceptions of magic as irrational have played an important role in justifying colonial and imperialist policies on the grounds that “primitive” religious practices resem-

ble magic and therefore need to be elevated through rationalist, scientific knowledge brought by Europeans; rationality as construed by European thinkers constituted a prerequisite for self-government.⁴ Even our modern identity is defined partly in opposition to constructed notions of what constitutes magic. Randall Styers persuasively argues that definitions of magic formulated over the past few centuries contributed to the construction of ideas about modernity by acting as a foil for the conceptualization of distinctly modern concepts such as science, religion, and rationality.⁵ It therefore becomes ever more pressing to understand the origins of this enduring concept and how magic, variously construed, has emerged as one of the most compelling and powerful strategies of difference in the Common Era, contributing to the construction of identity and maintenance of social control. In order to consider the emergence of these stereotypes and their deployment in various social contexts, it is necessary, first, to address the problem of defining magic, which for over a century has confounded scholars of anthropology, classical history, and comparative religion. It continues to do so today.

MAGIC

The modern academic study of magic has revolved largely around oppositions perceived to exist between magic and other aspects of human culture: namely, religion and science. Following Sir Edward Tylor's discussion of magic in his two-volume anthropological survey, *Primitive Culture*, the common conception of magic has posited an opposition between religion, on the one hand, and magic and science, on the other.⁶ Tylor conceived human culture to be evolutionary. It developed through stages from savagery to barbarism and finally to modern educated life (27).⁷ Since earlier forms of human culture, Tylor thought, persist as "survivals" in primitive or savage cultures as well as, to a certain degree, in European folk culture and superstition (72), studying ethnography was a way to understand the developmental history and origins of human civilization (24).

According to Tylor, magic constituted one of the most primitive forms of belief: it was "one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind" and "belongs to the lowest stages of civilization and to the lowest races" (112). Despite this extreme opprobrium, Tylor perceived magic to rely in essence on rational functions (115–16). Like science, magic perceived connections to exist between events:

Man, as yet in a low intellectual condition, having come to associate in thought those things which he found by experience to be connected in fact, proceeded erroneously to invert this action, and to conclude that association in thought must involve similar connexion in reality. He thus attempted to discover, to foretell, and to cause events by means of processes which we can now see to have only an ideal significance.

(116)

Magic thus constituted a “pseudoscience,” which mistook ideal connections for real ones (119).⁸ Religion, on the other hand, Tylor defined minimally as “belief in spiritual beings”—animism constituted the most primitive form of religion and the root from which all religions developed.⁹

Following Tylor’s lead, Sir James Frazer postulated an evolutionary scheme that incorporated magic, religion, and science in a developmental framework according to which religion superseded magic and science superseded religion. Magic could be distinguished from science by its faulty grasp of cause and effect and from religion by its domineering attitude toward the supernatural. It constituted a “spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art.”¹⁰ According to Frazer, magical theory claimed that properly conducted spells could alter the course of events automatically or mechanistically.¹¹ Like science, therefore, magic presumes the existence of universal laws of nature that can be manipulated to attain specific ends. Religion, in contrast, involves humble submission to the divine. It worships and propitiates powerful forces that are considered to be beyond human understanding or control.¹² While magic does sometimes resemble religion in its use of spiritual beings, Frazer distinguishes them by claiming that magic attempts to coerce or constrain the deity through rites and sacrifices, treating the divine as an impersonal force that can be manipulated to achieve automatic results.¹³ This distinction between magic and religion has become axiomatic in the fields of religious studies and anthropology.¹⁴ It continues to figure in debates over definitions and terminology—cropping up tacitly even in studies that try to avoid use of the term *magic* altogether.¹⁵

Frazer’s approach to understanding magic has dogged the heels of scholars ever since. While some scholars continue to operate within Frazer’s magic/religion categories, others challenge the oppositional bifurcation altogether.¹⁶ Marcel Mauss, for example, attempted to break down both sets of oppositions in his *A General Theory of Magic*. According to Mauss,

magic resembles scientific techniques in its practical aspects and in the “automatic nature” of its actions.¹⁷ It resembles religion in that both are based on communal belief in “mystical forces” and rely on those forces in daily life.¹⁸ Bronislaw Malinowski similarly challenged these Frazerian categories. First he rejected the view that “savages” misunderstood causal connections. He proposed instead that magic was a way to reduce anxiety in situations where human skill and technical knowledge were insufficient to ensure success. Malinowski grouped magic with religion as sacred activities and distinguished it from science, which, he firmly believed, the Trobriand Islanders possessed.¹⁹ Despite this early endeavor to eliminate the breach perceived to exist between magic, religion, and science, the debate has continued until the present day.²⁰ The latter part of the twentieth century, for example, saw interest concentrated on resolving the magic/science debate, specifically addressing the conceptualization of rationality and irrationality upon which this distinction is founded.²¹

Much of that debate was sparked by the work of anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who, like Bronislaw Malinowski, looked for an explanation of magical beliefs that honored the rationality of his subjects. Evans-Pritchard describes belief in “witchcraft” as a “natural philosophy”—it explained events and relationships, provided a means of reacting to such events, and regulated human conduct.²² Certain antisocial behavior, he noticed, attracted suspicions of witchcraft and might lead to accusations.²³ By shifting the focus onto *accusations* of witchcraft and their social motivation, Evans-Pritchard’s research radically changed the study of magic, contributing not only to anthropological studies of magic but also to historical studies, including those of the classical world, and to philosophic discussions of rationality and relativism.²⁴ These studies tended to treat magic as a symptom of social tension and sought to explain it by discovering the social factors that contributed to generating conflict. They succeeded to the extent that they turned a lens on and illuminated sources of social tension that may have gone unnoticed or been smoothed over in the “official” versions of history. They have been subject to criticism, however, for failing to explain why magic, specifically, served in those instances to function as *the* strategy of social control or marginalization when others might have been available as well.²⁵

More recently the debate has focused on resolving the equally tenacious distinction between magic and religion.²⁶ In 1933 Nock explored the history and meaning of the term *magos* in Greek writings and determined that the word had a number of connotations and uses: originally, it designated

priests of the Persian religion, but later acquired the meaning of religious charlatan, quack, or impostor. He proposed, therefore, that accusations of magic in the New Testament may not actually represent the true activities of those accused but instead reflect a contest over religious authority—those accused of magic in Acts of the Apostles, he argues, were actually contemporary religious figures who competed against the early apostles and missionaries.²⁷ Accusing them of “magic,” Nock claimed, was a way to delegitimize their religious authority: by drawing on the second, derogatory meaning of *magos*, Luke portrayed them as quacks and swindlers. With this article, Nock opened a decades-long debate over the “real” nature of magic accusations in ancient literature. Increasingly, scholars began to question the basis of these accusations and the assumption that early Christian and other antique writers accurately depicted the world around them. Instead, accusations of magic were seen to be part of a marginalizing strategy, whose deployment indicated the presence of competition and contest rather than the practice of either magic or “superstition.”

Alan Segal, for example, addresses this issue in his seminal essay, “Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition,” where he challenges the commonly held Frazerian distinction between magic and religion. By examining ritual descriptions from self-professed magical documents,²⁸ Segal undermines the perceived differences between magical activities and religious ones: certain rituals in the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (hereafter *PGM*),²⁹ for example, seek the same results as initiations into the mystery religions or baptism in the Pauline churches. They demonstrate the degree to which different Hellenistic religions, including Christianity, shared the same cosmological framework, the same religious goals, and the same religious language as so-called magical texts.³⁰ Thus, the designation *magic* in ancient (or modern) texts does little to inform us about the actual rites being practiced. Segal notes that in a climate where each religion claimed to be exercising divine power any competing charismatic or miraculous activity needed to be dismissed as fraud or demonic agency.³¹

Harold Remus draws similar conclusions from his analysis of terminology for *miracle* and *magic* employed in ancient documents.³² Like Segal, he notes that *context* largely determined whether a particular practice or activity was considered to be magic or not:

With respect to the Greco-Roman world, part of the difficulty, however, lies in the materials themselves. “Miracle” is not a univocal term. Neither is “magic.” Practices that ancients label with a term associated with what they call “magic”

may in another context be ascribed to divine power, i.e., regarded as “miracle.” The criteria put forward by moderns to distinguish magic from miracle or from religion often reveal little more than the fact that “magic” has many “religious” elements, and vice versa, and that “your magic is my miracle, and vice versa.”³³

By examining the criteria that distinguished *miracle* from *magic* in second-century writings, Remus discovers that the distinction emerged most often in polemical situations where the consciousness of *we* and *they* was at play.³⁴ In his thoughtful and exhaustively researched article, applying sociology of knowledge to ancient religion, C. R. Phillips similarly argues that “a charge of magic represented a persuasive way to denigrate one’s theological opposition: the opposition would have to ‘prove’ that its alleged powers derived from the ‘right’ cosmic forces.”³⁵ Susan Garrett reinforces this view of magic accusations in her study of magic in the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles. She writes, “In the Graeco-Roman world, accusations of magic typically occurred in situations of social conflict. Because the use of magic was regarded as socially unacceptable, labeling someone a ‘magician’ was an effective way to squelch, avenge, or discredit undesirable behavior.”³⁶ Garrett demonstrates that the depiction of Simon as a magician in Luke-Acts functions not so much to reveal anything about Simon’s actual practices but rather as a foil for demonstrating the superior power of the Holy Spirit and Christian authority over Satan in the postresurrection period.³⁷ Garrett’s research further underscores the extent to which magic operated as a trope in ancient writings, revealing less about people’s actual practices than about the author’s desire to delegitimize and denigrate some person.³⁸

As a result of this and similar research, many scholars began to move away from use of the term *magic* to describe certain types of ritual, employing instead emic definitions that derive from and, it is argued, reflect better the context and conceptions of the culture under study. This approach appeared to avoid the problem of using paternalistic definitions, such as magic and superstition, to describe other people’s ritual practices. Because the concepts magic and religion evolved to make Protestant Christianity more palatable in an age of reason and science (as well as to justify imperialist policies and colonization), neither term, it was argued, accurately applies to ancient or foreign cultures.³⁹ Among classical scholars, who possess precise technical vocabulary to describe a variety of ritual practices (often in original languages), descriptive terms such as *sacrifice*, *libation*,

binding spell, *curse tablet*, and *incantation* became preferred. These terms do not carry the pejorative baggage (ancient and modern) or misleading opposition to religion and science that the broader term *magic* does. Furthermore, they more precisely characterize the practice under discussion without falsely dichotomizing it, allowing for the fact that many of these practices (e.g., libation, sacrifice, curse, and prayer) occur both in officially sanctioned rituals (commonly designated *religion*) and in marginal or illicit rituals (usually labeled *magic*).⁴⁰ Numerous books and articles in the past decade and a half have consequently tended to follow this approach, eschewing the term *magic* wherever possible.⁴¹

The pendulum, however, seems to have swung back in the other direction: many new publications argue for reintroducing the term *magic* into scholarly discourse.⁴² H. S. Versnel, for example, argues that scholarship can *only* be undertaken in etic terms. The attempt to employ emic terminology not only falsely proposes that scholars can shed their own cultural knowledge and ways of thinking but that they can empathically assume those of the culture they study as well.⁴³ Furthermore, Versnel argues, it is impossible to do cultural research without the aid of broad, prototypical definitions, which serve, at the very least, as models of contrast. Instead of rejecting terms such as *magic* and *religion*, Versnel suggests that we employ polythetic definitions, which involve a long list of characteristics. When a specific case matches a majority of the characteristics stipulated in the definition, it can be said to “fit.”⁴⁴ This approach recognizes that not all aspects of the definition will apply to each and every case under study but that most of the time a majority of the characteristics will fit well enough to allow application of the label. Neither magic nor religion exist, Versnel admits, except as concepts in the minds of scholars and, as such, they are helpful for scholarly analysis.

C. A. Hoffman similarly endorses the use of *magic* as a comparative term. He notes, first, that many ancient sources define magic along lines equivalent to Frazer, demonstrating that this definition is not so anachronistic after all: Clement of Alexandria, for example, “posited coercion as a distinguishing feature of magic in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*.”⁴⁵ Sources as far ranging as the Hebrew Bible and Pliny the Elder, he argues, conceptualize magic as a form of “performative utterance”—that is, words with the power to accomplish deeds, corresponding to Frazer’s notion of auto-effectiveness.⁴⁶ Hoffman also criticizes various efforts to avoid the term *magic* by using alternative terminology. More specialized terms such as *divination* or *execration*, he argues, are just as subject to Western history

and prejudices as *magic*. Furthermore, he proposes that in their specificity they should be considered “species” within the larger genus *magic*. Other attempts to supplant *magic* with euphemisms such as *ritual power* or *un-sanctioned religious activity* merely repackage Frazerian notions in different language; they suggest that the traditional dichotomies between coercion and supplication or private versus public continue to define *magic*—even when called by another name.⁴⁷

Jonathan Z. Smith characteristically complicates this scholarly debate by illuminating problems inherent both in using the term *magic* and in avoiding the loaded designation altogether. First, he criticizes use of *magic* as a “substantive term in second-order, theoretical, academic discourse” when more precise and useful categories for comparison exist, such as “healing,” “divining,” and “execrative.”⁴⁸ *Magic* is too broad and too amorphously applied to be useful, he complains. To demonstrate the problem, he points to shifting fads in scholarly taxonomy that obfuscate real understanding of phenomena under consideration. “Shamanism,” for example, was “the very type of ‘magic’” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies, but later became rehabilitated as “religion” (16).

Smith also critiques the exclusive adherence to native vocabulary as equally obfuscating; it at best provides *lexical* definitions that inhibit comparison and display “little explanatory power” (20). Such narrow use of emic terminology prevents the comparative treatment of phenomena with “the *stipulative* procedures by which the academy contests and controls second-order, specialized usage” (20). The importance of retaining a theoretical definition of *magic*, Smith argues, derives from the fact that “every sort of society appears to have a term (or terms) designating some modes of ritual activities, some beliefs, and some ritual practitioners as dangerous, and/or illegal, and/or deviant” (17). While Smith questions whether native terminology for such deviant or dangerous ritual activity can be adequately conveyed by English terms such as *magic*, *sorcery*, or *witchcraft*, he remains committed to finding a “substantive, theoretical definition of ‘magic’” (17).

Smith also takes aim at social explanations for *magic* that “shift attention away from the act and actor to the accuser and the accusation” (18). Such approaches, which understand *magic* solely in terms of the accusation, Smith notes, look for explanations in the *relationship* between the accuser and the accused. “While the accusation of ‘magic’ may well be a power ploy that marginalized the accused, the accusation may equally well be between members of elite groups, or directed by the marginal against the

elite" (19).⁴⁹ Such social explanations, Smith argues, also ignore the possibility that magic can be considered a source of power or prestige in a given society and the fact that "'magic' is just one possible option in any given culture's rich vocabulary of alterity" (19).⁵⁰ Smith's approach represents one of the most sophisticated and nuanced within magic studies—recognizing magic's social function, on the one hand, while endorsing the search for a cross-cultural heuristic definition of magic, on the other.

None of these theories, however, adequately considers the degree to which magic is *constructed* through shared belief: once the concept exists in a particular culture, it acquires power, forever altering the way certain practices or people are viewed. This new classification consequently changes the way people respond to each other and to those practices, places, animals, and objects that are identified to some degree with the constructed notion. The resulting expansion, through these associations, reinforces the concept's influence and reality in the minds of people in that society. It also opens a new avenue for people to access power by *embracing* those practices identified now as *magic*. In a different culture or at a different time, the same practices may *not* be labeled magic. Such is clearly the case when previously accepted practices are suddenly forbidden after a regime change or when foreign practices imported into a society are regarded as unacceptable because of their origin. The practices themselves are neutral. They defy a positivist or universal definition of *magic* that is based on types of ritual activities (coercive or automatic) or social locations (marginal or unsanctioned). Certain practices become magic only by the shared definition or understanding of people in that society. It is important to emphasize that no definition of magic is universal. The construction of magic varies from culture to culture; furthermore, magic does not appear in every society.⁵¹ Once an idea of magic does exist, it wields social power—it becomes "real" for people who believe in it. Marcel Mauss comes closest to this understanding of magic when he states:

Legends and tales about magic are not simply exercises of the imagination or a traditional expression of collective fantasies, but their constant repetition, during the course of long evening sessions, bring about a note of expectation, of fear, which at the slightest encouragement may induce illusion and provoke the liveliest reactions. The image of the magician grows from story to story.⁵²

Later, he elaborates: "It is public opinion which makes the magician and creates the power he wields."⁵³ Mauss suggests in these passages that magic is both real—to the extent that people believe in and practice it—and a

social construct—to the extent that people believe in and practice it. In other words, magic becomes real when the concept of it exists and people in that society live and act in such a way as to realize that concept through their actions. This includes not only rituals performed by people who understand their activities to be a form of magic but also accusations and persecutions that concretize magic in the form of social control or repression.

Mauss's work indicates that the search for a broad heuristic definition of magic must also take into consideration the social drama in which magic functions. This is to say that attention should be paid to emic definitions since what is or is not magic is largely defined by how a particular society understands and classifies certain people and practices. Magic is fundamentally a social phenomenon and needs to be understood in these terms.⁵⁴

HOW I DEFINE THE TERM *MAGIC*

As both Versnel and Hoffman emphasize, magic is not merely a modern construct, reflecting Frazerian biases and colonialist sentiments, but existed as a concept in the ancient world as well. The English word *magic*, in fact, derives from ancient Greek and Latin terms: *mageia/magia*. Furthermore, much of what constitutes common sense definitions of magic in the modern period mirrors conceptions expressed by ancient writers. These include the sentiment that magic coerces rather than supplicates the divine.⁵⁵ Magic employs demonic rather than divine forces.⁵⁶ It seeks individual goals in private rituals rather than communal goals in public celebrations.⁵⁷ Magic was practiced for personal gain whereas legitimate priests practiced as an act of devotion or public service.⁵⁸ Magic sought to harm or constrain another person and was consequently treated as a form of invisible physical assault comparable to poisoning.⁵⁹

While these observations are true and may point toward the existence of a broad polythetic definition of magic, as Versnel and Hoffman suggest, the observations of scholars who employ sociological methods in their study of magic need to be taken into account as well. They argue that these characteristics were *not* applied neutrally to ancient persons or practices. Rather, accusations of enlisting the help of demons rather than God or of practicing nefarious rites in private rather than public ceremonies in the light of day or of causing someone to fall in love through the use of love potions were leveled against individuals and groups of people for sociopolitical reasons.⁶⁰ That is to say, while the characteristics may constitute part of a widely held conception of magic, they cannot be interpreted in simply a

positivistic manner. They are not neutral. They indicate, most often, the presence of social factors such as conflict, competition, and fear. Cultural sentiments and ideological prejudices, such as xenophobia, also constitute contributing factors—as much to ancient definitions of magic as to modern—returning us to Mauss’s proviso that magic is a social phenomenon.

Consequently, I emphasize attention to emic terminology in order to illuminate the ideological prejudices behind representations of magic. By focusing on ancient terminology, one can discern when and how magic was mobilized as a discourse in antiquity. This differs from approaches that impose a universal second-order definition of magic onto other cultures and concomitantly impose modern distinctions and categories as well. Such approaches conceal the presence of ideological factors that may be shaping the representation or determining the choice of terminology. Why, for instance, is one feat of power presented as *miracle* (*thauma*) and a similar one *magic* (*mageia* or *goēteia*)? Ancient writers deliberately crafted their depictions to conform to one or another set of stereotypes. In Acts of the Apostles (8), for example, Simon’s activities are labeled *magic* (*mageia* 8.9, 11), while those of Philip and Peter are described as *signs* (*sēmeia* 8.6, 13) or *mighty deeds* (*dunameis megalas* 8.13). Similarly Philostratus, a third-century biographer, is careful to depict the miracle worker Apollonius of Tyana according to stereotypes of itinerant philosophers and holy men rather than profit-seeking “magicians” in order to deflect charges of magic against his protagonist (4.45).⁶¹ Versnel’s polythetic typology, thus, may obfuscate the object of study rather than illuminate it. Central elements of Versnel’s typology do not apply to the *PGM*, for example, which, since their discovery, have been consistently treated as examples of ancient Greek magic, as their name would imply.⁶² Robert Ritner and David Frankfurter, however, argue that the *Sitz im Leben* of these documents is the late antique Egyptian temple and its officiating priesthood.⁶³ Evaluating these documents, therefore, according to *Greek* standards of “religious” practice and, on those grounds, designating them magic because of their *deviant* sacrifices, *private* rituals, and *marginal* social location is misleading.⁶⁴ These documents, Ritner and Frankfurter argue, should be understood in the context of Egyptian temple practices: they were centered around the temple, the priesthood, and age-old ritual methods, involving animal sacrifices, sacrilegious blame, and coercion of the divine. That these practices have a long and venerable history in Egypt, where they were regarded as part of the official, legitimate temple cult, is obscured when one applies the label *magic* to them. I am not necessarily arguing that the *PGM*’s designation be changed,

but rather encouraging scholars who study these documents to do so on their terms (late antique Egypt) and not to ascribe a definition of magic to them based on standards from a different culture (classical Greece or modern science).

A similar problem with applying magic as a designation arises in the case of certain types of “mystical” texts from early Judaism known as Sar Torah texts.⁶⁵ These documents narrate stories of famous rabbis using rituals to invoke an angelic “Prince of the Torah” to grant them mastery of rabbinic learning and scholarship. These rituals involve fasting, prayer, and the recitation of angelic and divine names in order to compel this angel to grant the desired wisdom and knowledge. Are these texts magic? Certain scholars think so and describe the practitioners of this type of ritual practice as “magicians.”⁶⁶ To my mind, however, there is nothing specifically magical about these texts from the perspective of an ancient practitioner. Fasting, prayer, and recitation of divine names could all be considered legitimate “religious” practices to repent, gain merit, demonstrate self-control, and express piety. These practices do not match ancient stereotypes of magicians but rather modern ones that oppose magic to science. Given the largely pejorative connotations of the concept magic in antiquity it is not at all clear that these texts should be considered magic or that an ancient Jew would have considered them to be a form of magic (*kishuf*). On the other hand, a similar type of Jewish text from this period that describes the ascension to heaven and view of the divine throne room involves practices that might well have been considered magic by ancient observers and practitioners. *Sepher Ha-Razim* combines the recitation of angelic names and the use of protective amulets with the invocation of Greek deities (Hermes, Helios, Aphrodite)⁶⁷ and the violation of Jewish dietary practices (ingesting blood) in order to gain special privileges and powers—such as love and success—on the way to beholding the heavenly chariot.⁶⁸ This text demonstrates the messiness and indefiniteness of ancient practices, which often cross boundaries between what we consider to be magic and religion. It presents the difficulty of imposing scholarly classifications from a purely etic perspective that import modern categories and conceptions. It is for this reason that I emphasize the importance of paying attention to emic terminology and the discursive strategies employed in local contexts in order to understand if, how, and why the discourse of magic is operating.

Another aspect to consider is the material evidence for people practicing magic. Archaeological findings indicate that certain people in the ancient world did engage in practices widely regarded by their society as magic.

How are we to understand these rituals? Naomi Janowitz argues that *no one* in the ancient Mediterranean applied the label *magic* to themselves and their practices.⁶⁹ This position precludes the possibility, however, that magic could be viewed positively or that people could engage in unsanctioned ritual activities subversively. For example, in the second century CE a philosophy teacher and writer, Apuleius of Madaurus, offers a positive valuation of *magus* in a defense speech against the charge of using magic.⁷⁰ His definition of magic in that situation, while clearly polemical and exaggerated, indicates that *magia* could carry positive connotations of esoteric wisdom and divine power in the Roman world. Similarly, the Gospel of Matthew describes three *magoi* visiting the infant Jesus as authoritative witnesses to the significance of his birth (2.1). Babylonian rabbis sometimes depict *themselves* as masters of magic arts, demonstrating their special access to divine knowledge and power. The *PGM* also employ the term *mageia* as a self-designation several times, associating their rituals with sacred or holy mysteries.⁷¹ All these examples demonstrate that magic could function positively in at least certain circumstances, usually when it connoted ancient Near Eastern wisdom.

On the other hand, there is ample evidence that some people deliberately and subversively engaged in practices they understood to be *magic*. Certain ancient rituals involved transgressing traditional notions of piety by disturbing a grave or sacrificing in an aberrant manner. People practicing these types of rituals may have been inverting expectations of traditional piety as a form of subversive discourse or in order to access power and exert control over their lives when other avenues for self-determination appeared closed.⁷² Of course, the individuals engaged in these types of practices may also have justified their actions as just or warranted in the situation. Given magic's polyvalent character and shiftiness, how can one attempt to answer Versnel and Smith's call for a heuristic definition? Is such a thing possible in the face of magic's contradictory meanings and ideological baggage? My response to this question is to regard magic as a form of social discourse.

MAGIC AS DISCOURSE

In formulating my understanding of magic in the ancient world, I have drawn inspiration from the writings of Michel Foucault and others who have adopted his notion of discourse. Fairly early in my research I made the following observations and inferences regarding ancient magic:

1. Magic is conceived differently in different ancient Mediterranean cultures: despite certain common features and shared mythologies, the details of the representations vary considerably from place to place and over time, forming identifiable patterns or stereotypes. 2. Because these stereotypes exhibit strong marginalizing potential, power is inextricably bound up in their definition and deployment. 3. The differences between these representational patterns can largely be accounted for by understanding the particular social and political context in which they emerged and functioned as strategies for gaining power; conceptions of magic, therefore, can be treated as local and distinct rather than as universal or *a priori*. Foucault's notion of discourse provides a useful theoretical approach to articulate these observations and formulate an understanding of magic that bridges the gulf between those who reject the use of magic as a concept altogether and those who seek a universal heuristic definition.

Foucault's theory developed over the course of his career and can be divided roughly into two main periods: the period in which he conceptualized his work as a form of archaeology and the later period in which he developed the method of historical analysis he termed genealogy.⁷³ The notion of discourse figures prominently in both phases of his thought, but how he conceived it evolved. As the object of archaeology, Foucault understood discourses to be constituted by serious statements (*énoncés*) that carried institutional authority by having passed appropriate "tests" and could thus claim the status of knowledge (*savoir*)—becoming "objects to be studied, repeated, and passed on to others."⁷⁴ Discourses had their own histories and development, which Foucault understood to be somewhat random responses to external and internal constraints or rules.⁷⁵ He did not see a metahistorical principle at work behind these conceptual shifts, but rather the influence of nondiscursive factors such as events, economic processes, demographic fluctuations, and political decisions.⁷⁶ Foucault eventually shifts his understanding of discourse from one that focuses on authoritative statements and the creation of "knowledge" to one that places greater emphasis on the role of power and human embodiedness. Significantly, for our purposes, Foucault becomes more attuned to the agonistic aspect of discourse in this later phase of his career: "Subjection, domination, and combat are found everywhere he looks. Whenever he hears talk of meaning and value, of virtue and goodness, he looks for strategies of domination."⁷⁷ Foucault realizes that competing discourses can operate at the same time in a given society, reflecting different interests and agendas. History is largely the story of this contest, which leads him to correlate power and knowledge:

We should admit that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.⁷⁸

Foucault's later work increasingly emphasizes the complex relationship of power and the construction of individual subjects through technologies that manipulate the body. For example, he regards the rise of modern institutions such as prisons, schools, and factories to be strategies for producing disciplined workers in the modern capitalist state. Social sciences such as criminology, psychology, demography, and social hygiene arise as discourses part and parcel of these new institutional technologies.⁷⁹ They support and reify the need for discipline in the creation of the modern state.

Foucault's notion of discourse informs my understanding of magic in the following ways: first and foremost, I consider magic to be a socially constructed object of knowledge. Like madness or sexuality, which Foucault demonstrates have particular histories and arise in particular contexts for particular reasons, so too I will argue that the concept magic arose in a particular social and historical context for specific reasons. Once it emerged, magic acquired reality in the minds (and practices) of people in societies where the discourse functioned. Consequently, the concept magic endures in Western discourse where debates over whether this or that thing can be considered *magic* continue to exercise contemporary scholars. Second, as a discourse, magic exhibits agonistic characteristics. That is, magic is integrally bound up with notions of power and authority, legitimacy and danger. Magic functions as a discourse among competing discourses where it sometimes overlaps, supports, undermines, or subverts those other discourses. It is important to ask, therefore, at any moment when encountering instances of magic as either accusations, representations, or practices, whom does the discourse serve?⁸⁰ Third, Foucault's emphasis on locality versus universality is important to remember when considering magic. As we will see, the specific discursive strategies in which magic is employed vary from culture to culture in the ancient world. There is no one single definition or understanding of magic.

The concept magic in Western culture was largely formed by elite Greek writers in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE who actively sought to shape the society in which they lived according to their own set of values and prejudices.⁸¹ Thus the association of magic with barbarous activities,

foreign rituals, and dangerous women reflects the precise forms of misogyny and xenophobia circulating among those elite writers and their compatriots at that time. The questions I consider in this book regard how magic operated as a discourse in ancient contexts: *who* defined magic, *which* practices were labeled magic, and *how* was power negotiated through the application of this label?

For Foucault, discourse is not only a form of knowledge, it is a practice.⁸² Discourse confers and regulates power. Once the notion magic exists, it takes on a social reality: it can operate as a form of social control through the fear of accusation. It can also exist as a new form of ritual practice: individuals can decide to *do* magic once the notion of magic exists and is conceived to be a source of power.⁸³ The construction of the concept enables the performance. Whether it is understood to be subversive or not depends on the intentions of the practitioner, the interpretation of the observer, and the possibilities of interpretation available in that culture.⁸⁴ Magic constitutes a discursive *practice* to the extent that naming someone or something magic, performing a ritual understood to be magic, or choosing to promulgate a different understanding of magic (as Apuleius does in his defense speech) all constitute forms of social action. They negotiate power through the construction and possession of knowledge. This understanding of magic as discourse has implications for conventions that distinguish between literary genres, forensic accusations, material realia, and legal codes. A discursive formation constitutes all these; it is dispersed across traditional disciplinary boundaries and conceptions of genre.⁸⁵ Consequently, magic discourse appears across a range of texts and as a variety of forms of conduct at a number of institutional sites within ancient societies.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The chapters of this book focus on the *literary* representation and production of magic in antiquity. They take as their primary source material the imaginary and imagined practice of magic and witchcraft in literature from the ancient world. To this end I am not presenting a “history” of ancient magic: it is not my goal to rediscover or reconstruct the practice of magic as an artifact of ancient life. Many excellent scholars have already contributed significantly to this endeavor.⁸⁶ Rather, I am trying to reveal magic’s role as a *discursive* practice, which mediates power and social identity in specific ancient contexts. Consequently, this is not an exhaustive survey of all the “evidence” for magic in antiquity, and specialists will certainly find

important material that I have overlooked. Certain material artifacts, however, do figure in my discussion when they illuminate the construction and deployment of magic stereotypes in literary representations. For example, the discovery of lead binding spells (*katadesmoi*) dating to the fifth and fourth centuries BCE offers interesting evidence for the practice of rituals that, around the same time, are described as harmful magic (*pharmakeia*).⁸⁷ This type of concurrence between the archaeological and literary record indicates the presence of a discursive formation that includes naming strategies as well as ritual practices. These rituals or similar ones may have existed before, but they acquire new and sinister meanings with the development of a discourse that labels them foreign, subversive, illegitimate, and dangerous.⁸⁸

The texts I examine are primarily the products of elite writers. This reflects the nature of education and leisure in antiquity, which were primarily reserved for the upper classes. Further compounding this imbalance in the historical record is the fact that of all the literary products produced in antiquity only a very few survived, and these tended to do so because of their privileged status. These texts, more than others produced at the same time, carried authority and influence. Consequently they were copied frequently and preserved widely. While not representative of a universal point of view on magic in their respective societies, the texts do offer us a picture of what some elite thinkers said and thought about it. Many of these thinkers contributed to shaping later representations of magic, reinscribing their point of view across a variety of texts and genres.⁸⁹ Some also happen to have been in positions to influence social policy.⁹⁰ Because of their elite status, therefore, these texts can teach us a great deal about how magic emerged and functioned as a discursive formation in antiquity. They illuminate the intersection of knowledge and power.

Not all of the texts considered in every chapter, however, constitute elite texts in an absolute sense. At the time some of them were written (e.g., the New Testament and Babylonian Talmud), the communities that produced them were marginal relative to the dominant culture. Their texts only became authoritative centuries later. This is certainly true of Christian literature written before the fourth century. Increasingly, it is realized to be true of rabbinic literature as well, which did not attain authoritative status until perhaps as late as the seventh or eighth century. The accusation of magic, therefore, in early Christian writings—which is leveled against Rome and the Greco-Roman gods—can be read ironically: it was Christian rituals that closely resembled common stereotypes of magic and were regarded

to be such by non-Christian observers.⁹¹ Thus Christian claims that they perform “miracles” while Romans and Jews perform “magic” invert traditional categories and no doubt resonated subversively at the time. Christianity’s *lack* of official status and power needs to be considered when reading these texts, since it changes the meaning of the magic accusations in them: the accusation of magic by outsiders or rebels complicates the more common sociological understanding of magic, which sees it as a strategy of social control and marginalization wielded by those with power. The subversive use of magic further demonstrates its pliant character as a discourse. It shifts and adapts, reconfiguring meaning in every context where it operates, allowing the continual evolution and reinscription of itself across historical and cultural settings. This adaptation of magic explains both its widespread use as a discourse of alterity as well as the discreet ways in which its meaning and function change from context to context. It also points to the importance of considering each text and context separately rather than drawing broad definitions or universal descriptions.

In order to account for the different ways magic discourses function, I have broken the book down into four chapters. Each focuses on interpreting representations of magic in a Mediterranean culture at a distinct moment of its history: fifth-century Athens, early Imperial Rome, second- and third-century Christianity, and rabbinic Judaism. I selected these particular periods and contexts because they happen to be rich in representations of magic, fairly easy to delineate temporally,⁹² and are periods of time when the cultures under discussion appear to be at crossroads, where the definition and deployment of authority were being challenged or redefined. This is not to suggest that these societies were static at other times or that authority is not always being challenged in some way. But these chapters focus on points where new forms of government or conceptions of leadership were emerging; consequently, these periods and their rich literatures suggested themselves as particularly fruitful for investigation.

I do not intend to suggest by my chapter divisions an artificial separation of “Jews,” “Greeks,” “Christians,” and “Romans.” It has become increasingly evident that identities were complicated and mixed in the ancient Mediterranean. Jews could consider themselves to be followers of Jesus, Greek through education (*paideia*), or Roman by citizenship.⁹³ Similarly, many early Christians continued to attend Greek festivals and sacrifices or synagogue services.⁹⁴ The Roman Empire afforded a variety of gods to worship, organizations to join, and rituals to practice; individuals could belong to several different communities at once: ethnic, vocational, and sote-

riological. Depending on context or situation, people identified themselves by their guild, their ethnic origins, the god they worshipped, or some combination of these.⁹⁵ Consequently, ancient communities may not have been as separate and distinct as scholars previously thought.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the deployment of magic discourse in the texts below indicates that accusations of magic could be used to shore up and defend these boundaries, rhetorically erecting artificial barriers and clearly delineated identities where none in reality stood.

As a result of limiting myself to these specific periods, I miss the opportunity to discuss many worthwhile texts that deal with magic from other time periods and cultures of the ancient world. Since the book strives to make a larger theoretical point, however, I hope that some of these oversights can be taken in stride. I have also tried to limit discussion, as much as possible, to texts that employ emic terminology for magic (or indicate clearly from their context that something close to English's *magic* is meant). This approach reflects my interest in discerning *how* magic is deployed by the author and seeks to avoid, as much as possible, retrojecting my own definitions of magic onto ancient writers who may have had different conceptions and categories. Pliny's discussion of various techniques for healing, for example, includes some that he regards as superstitious or associates with the Magi and many others that he does not. Virtually all of these cures, however, would fit modern Frazerian definitions of magic and have, for this reason, been treated as magic in many modern studies.⁹⁷ In order to understand how ancient authors like Pliny understood magic one must pay attention to the categories and criteria that *they* use. In the gospel of Mark, for example, spittle is represented as a legitimate part of Jesus's miraculous healing powers that identify him as the Son of Man,⁹⁸ but later gospel writers excised references to the use of physical material or gestures that could be interpreted as magic.⁹⁹ Similarly, early Christian apologists such as Origen tried to downplay any aspects of Jesus's miracle working that might attract the accusation of magic, suggesting shifting concerns and ideas about what constituted legitimate or illegitimate healing activities. Paying attention to emic usage also allows one to see when magic discourse is functioning *positively* and to learn what this means in that context; if the designation magic is self-applied, what does that indicate about the social stance of the author who applies it?

While I emphasize the differences that exist between patterns of representing magic in these four contexts, I do not mean to imply that each text, author, or period is separated from others or from each other. On

the contrary, magic discourse traveled; it crossed linguistic, geographic, and cultural boundaries. Many aspects of each culture's arsenal of magic stereotypes can be said to have come from the same source and been borrowed.¹⁰⁰ To this extent, there are tremendous similarities in aspects of the particular representations. However, even in the similarities there are notable differences. To take one striking example: although women are typed as sorceresses in both Greek and Roman literature, Greek depictions tend to focus on jilted wives abandoned for another woman. This characterization differs from the wizened old hags of Roman literature, who scavenge in cemeteries for body parts to use in love magic. These old women are apparently unmarried (there is usually no mention of a spouse)¹⁰¹ and use magic in a predatory fashion to seduce younger men. While previous studies have remarked on the tendency of Greek and Roman literature to stereotype women as witches (in stark contradiction to the material evidence that indicates men commissioned a significant majority of magic spells),¹⁰² no one seems to have investigated the *differences* between these stereotyping patterns. Because I focus on the *how* of magic as a form of discourse rather than the *what* of magic as a social object, this difference presents itself as particularly relevant and compelling.

While I concentrate on illuminating the local deployment of magic, I eschew any simplistic, unilinear, causal connection between text and context. As Stuart Clark convincingly argues, explanations that try to show a causal link between outbreaks of magic persecution and a social, political, or economic phenomenon fail: there is too much local variation for such explanations to apply *universally*. He demonstrates that, with regard to early modern demonological treatises, "the subject of witchcraft seems to have been used as a means for thinking through problems that originated elsewhere and that had little or nothing to do with the legal prosecution of witches."¹⁰³ Instead, he shows how intellectual concerns of the day and a tendency toward binary thinking generally contributed to validating theories about witches that had virtually nothing to do with sociological phenomena: *witches* came to signify something about the world and had very little to do with real events or real women and their occult practices. Clark's research on the early modern fascination with witchcraft reinforces two aspects of this study: 1. conceptions of magic (or witchcraft) function independently of what people actually do: they are ideological constructs. (The constructed ideas, however, may shape certain people's activities and, concomitantly, ideas about what people do could influence certain de-

tails of representations.) 2. Local variation stymies any effort at a universal explanation for magic accusations or persecutions.

While Clark supports my contention that magic should be understood as a discourse rather than an objective reality and that it defies universal explanation, his argument that persecution outbreaks or even individual accusations do not have a clear relation to sociological phenomena misses important evidence to the contrary. Recent work on anti-Jewish violence in medieval and early modern Europe demonstrates that, in fact, while very ancient stereotypes of the Jew played a part in fueling or justifying incidents of violence, the choice to use violence or not and which aspects of the stereotype would be drawn upon were locally determined and reflect the particular issues at stake in each context.¹⁰⁴ In other words, these studies argue that in response to specific economic, political, or other social tensions certain individuals or communities harnessed existing stereotypes to incite anti-Jewish violence. Thus, while anti-Semitic stereotypes have a long history that is independent of the specific outbreaks of persecution (similar to the demonological treatises Clark discusses), the implementation of the discourse is local, reinscribing relevant aspects of the broader stereotype in specialized and targeted representations.

By *stereotypes* I mean broadly construed reductionist conglomerates of images and ideas about a group or type of people. Stereotypes are diachronic, persisting for centuries; they are amorphous and ambivalent, accruing an eclectic hogdepodge of competing and often contradictory images and associations that conjure both fear and fantasy.¹⁰⁵ Homi Bhabha's description of the colonial stereotype would apply to ancient stereotypes of magic as well:

Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of "official" and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse.¹⁰⁶

Representations, on the other hand, constitute the local and specific deployment of stereotypes. They draw on limited aspects of the broader aggregate—concentrating on those characteristics that are most relevant and intensifying their power to incite action. Most important, representations signify.¹⁰⁷ That is to say, they construct meaning and establish it as natural,

universal, and “true.” This distinction clarifies how patterns of representation emerge at specific times, both drawing on and reinscribing particular aspects of larger, more widely held stereotypes. For this reason, one can say that magic is represented as a feminine practice, contributing to the construction of an enduring witch stereotype. But this observation alone does not explain why old women are depicted as sorceresses in Roman literature and younger women figure more prominently in Greek writings. By focusing on understanding magic as a discursive practice, the local nature of specific representations can be studied while the broader configuration of magic as a stereotype can also be appreciated.

MAGIC AND GENDER

The association of women with magic is axiomatic, appearing already in the pages of ancient literature. As one scholar writes, “The history of witchcraft is primarily a history of women.”¹⁰⁸ This sentiment is articulated even more succinctly by a first-century rabbi who claims, “The more women (*nashim*), the more witchcraft (*keshafim*).”¹⁰⁹ Despite voluminous ancient testimony to women’s involvement with magic, however, archaeological evidence, consisting of curse tablets written on lead or some other durable material, indicates substantial male involvement.¹¹⁰ Approximately 86 percent of erotic binding spells are performed by or on the behalf of men.¹¹¹ The statistics increase when one includes magic to manipulate political, rhetorical, or athletic competitions. Consequently, the common literary portrait of female sorcery should be questioned; it is not a straightforward mimetic representation of ancient life as some scholars have regarded it.¹¹² The question to ask is what accounts for this discrepancy? Why are women overwhelmingly represented as the practitioners of magic when men, in fact, contributed their fair share to the magic arts?

By reframing this question in terms of *gender* rather than *women*, one comes to a different perception of the issues at play. Like magic, notions about sexual difference and the appropriate roles for men and women in society are socially constructed; they do not derive from nature.¹¹³ Furthermore, the two categories operate in binary opposition to each other; one cannot be thought without reference to the other.¹¹⁴ Thus, when focus is placed on the male, as it usually is, ideas about the female operate as a foil—the proverbial Other—against whom masculine ideals are constructed.

Gender also implies networks and systems of power.¹¹⁵ It comes as no surprise, therefore, that magic and gender intersect in ancient representa-

tions. By ordering human relationships and defining social roles, gender participates in establishing hierarchies of power. Weakness or dependency is conceived to be naturally feminine, while dominance and strength are conceived to be masculine. Consequently, who controls whom financially, legally, and physically is often conceived in gendered terms. This is especially true in the ancient world, where male slaves were feminized by playing the passive role sexually. Their “female” passivity vis-à-vis a male owner was expressed both legally and sexually. Concomitantly, free men who chose to play the “female” role sexually were regarded as having forfeited their “male” authority and citizen rights.¹¹⁶ Conceptions of authority, legitimacy, and power were thus signified largely in terms of gender.¹¹⁷

Regarding magic as integrally related to gender, therefore, does not accept the connection between women and magic as historically true. While some scholars treat ancient representations as mimetic and consequently reinscribe the dynamics of power that used magic to marginalize both women and men, their approach ignores the ideological component of these depictions and assumes a connection between real historic individuals and the women represented in these texts.¹¹⁸ As Kate Cooper demonstrates, however, women often function as a trope in ancient literature to signify something else: male discourse about women usually has more to do with men and their relationships to power than with actual women and their lives.¹¹⁹ Women’s compliance with gender expectations bears on *men’s* social position and authority. A man’s female relatives constituted extensions of his political self and could threaten his “masculinity,” and hence authority, if they failed to exhibit proper “feminine” comportment and behavior.¹²⁰ For this reason, representations of “women’s” magical practices in ancient writings may have little or nothing to do with what women actually did but instead reveal something about concerns and issues relating to men. Even where men are represented as magicians, magic conveys connotations of gender: conceived as an illegitimate and effeminate source of power, accusations of magic can delegitimize men by associating them with women and women’s wily ways.¹²¹ Consequently, throughout this study, I regard conceptions of magic as intimately tied up with gender and power.

Before continuing to an examination of magic’s discursive role in specific local contexts, I will begin by reviewing briefly the history and different connotations of ancient terminology for magic. This will serve as a further introduction to the chapters that follow and offer readers, who may not be familiar with the ancient languages, an entrée into the different discussions. It is not meant to be exhaustive.

ANCIENT TERMINOLOGY FOR MAGIC

Greek

The earliest attestations in Greek literature of words that later combine to formulate a concept comparable to *magic* in English indicate that the vocabulary was originally ambiguous; magic as a discourse of alterity did not yet exist. Words such as *pharmakon* could signify herbs used for healing as well as harmful drugs or poisons—the difference depended on context.¹²² In the *Odyssey*, for example, Circe employs an herbal concoction to bewitch Odysseus's crew and transforms them into wild boars (10.210–213). The word used to describe her potion, *pharmakon*, is the same word as that used to designate the antidote Odysseus receives from Hermes (*Od.* 10:290–292). *Pharmakon* thus functions ambivalently in the *Odyssey*. It can serve positive and negative purposes; it can function apotropaically as a medicine or deleteriously as a poison. The herbal antidote Hermes gives to Odysseus is described as “good” (*esthlon*), while the potion Circe proffers is “evil” (*kaka*). Odysseus searches for a “poison” drug (*pharmakon androphonon*) in which to dip his arrows and make them more deadly (*Od.* 1.261), while Machaon, son of the divinized healer Asklepios, uses “soothing” drugs (*ētia pharmaka*) to treat Menelaos's wound during the Trojan War (*Il.* 4.218). *Pharmakon* in and of itself is neutral. Using *pharmaka* constitutes a kind of *technē* or skill that can be employed for good or ill without any inherent indication of its moral valence. So when the adjective *polupharmakou* is used to describe Circe (*Od.* 10.276), it does not express the strong negativity that English translations such as “witch”¹²³ or “sorceress”¹²⁴ do. A more accurate translation would be simply “skilled with all kinds of drugs.” In the *Iliad* the same adjective describes physicians—*iētroi polupharmakoi*—articulating a positive valuation that attests to the term's neutrality (*Il.* 16.28).¹²⁵

Beginning in the fifth century, however, Greek literature reveals that four terms—*pharmakon*, *epaoidē*, *goēs*, *magos*—and their derivatives come to constitute a semantic constellation connoting dangerous, foreign, illegitimate, or spurious ways to access numinous power. In its preclassical origin each term bears a distinct, even technical, meaning and often continues to do so in classical literature. However, with time, these terms also come to express more abstractly threatening notions roughly equivalent to *magic* or *sorcery* in English as they are combined with one another and with other designations to construct negative associations and stereotypes.¹²⁶ The

continual use of these four terms in combinations and in contexts that designate dangerous and antisocial activities, such as poisoning, expands the meaning for each word to convey marginality and danger. By repeatedly associating these words with each other and with women and foreigners, they come to connote a general sense of Otherness and menace. This constellation of terms, and the prejudices they concretize, constitutes the origin or birth of magic as a discourse of alterity in Western culture. Far from being a universal concept, *magic* emerged at a particular moment in Greek history fulfilling a specific social role. Like other cultural artifacts of the Greeks, magic discourse was adopted and adapted by its heirs. To discover magic in non-Western cultures involves importing Western categories and modes of conception. This does not imply that other societies will not have similar or comparable ideas about legitimate and illegitimate access to numinous power, but the particular formulation of those discourses will differ, reflecting the specific concerns that dominate in those societies.

I will discuss each term and its history briefly in turn. In book 19 of the *Odyssey* a nurse recognizes Odysseus (who is posing as a beggar) by a scar he received as a child. One day while hunting, Odysseus was gored by a wild boar; his uncles stanching the blood with an *epaoidē*—usually translated as “charm” or “incantation” (457).¹²⁷ The word’s etymology relates to singing: it is “a song sung to or over.”¹²⁸ *Epaoidē* appears again in the fifth century where it continues to mean charm or incantation. For example, Prometheus asserts to the chorus in *Prometheus Vincit* that he will not be moved by “the honey-sweet charms of persuasion” (*meliglōssois peithous epaoidaisin*). Here, *epaoidē* conveys a more negative sense associated with charm—namely, beguilement or manipulation.¹²⁹ But *epaoidē* also retained its medical connotations: in the *Eumenides* (649) Apollo remarks that there is no incantation (*epōdas*) to return a corpse to life. Evidence from the fifth century shows that *epaoidē* could also include love magic. Pindar, for example, describes how Jason seduced Medea with a ritual he learned from Aphrodite: he tied a bird to a wheel and uttered prayers (*litas*) and incantations (*epaoidas*) (*Pyth.* 4.217).¹³⁰

Goēs derives from *goaō*, meaning to groan, weep, bewail, and has been associated with ritual lament for the dead.¹³¹ In the *Iliad* Andromache is said to lead the lamentation (*gooio*) for her husband Hector (24.723). Even before his death the women of his house are said to mourn (*goon*) the “still living Hector” (*Il.* 6.500).¹³² The noun *goēs* develops a different set of connotations, however, becoming by the fourth century one of the preeminent components of magic discourse, designating a trickster or charlatan. A frag-

ment from Phorinis (2 6.1 to 2 6.2) may indicate this transition; it describes *goētes* as mountain-dwelling men from Mount Ida in Phrygia (*goētes Idaioi Phruges andres oresteroi oiki enaion*) who, among other skills, cultivate a “fabulous plant” (*eupalamoi therapontes oreiēs Andrēsteiēs*).¹³³ Based on this and other evidence, some scholars relate *goēs* to a form of archaic shamanism involving “ecstasy, divination, and healing.”¹³⁴ In the fifth century *goēs* appears twice, both times in Aeschylus and both times associated with the dead and mourning: a fragment from a lost Aeschylean play, *Psychagōgos*, for example, links *goētes* with leading the souls of the dead.¹³⁵ In *Choephoroe* the chorus states that it will sing a positive fair song rather than the plaint of mourners (*krektion goētōn*). These examples indicate the continuing association of *goēs* with mourning and death.

It is this connection to the dead that may have contributed to the word’s later link with “magic” through Persian *magoi*. Walter Burkert notes that early information about *magoi* from the Derveni papyrus (ca. fourth century BCE) and other ancient testimony indicates their use of incantations, sacrifices, and libations to control demons and access souls of the dead.¹³⁶ Thus, an association between *magoi* and the dead may have led to an identification of *magoi* with *goētes*. The link between *goētes* and magic was then easily made by the use of restless souls (*āroī*) in curse tablets and binding spells, widely regarded as forms of harmful magic in the ancient world (Plato *Leg.* 933a–b). Furthermore, it is likely that these ritual practices (*katadesmoi*) were introduced to Greece from Mesopotamia sometime in the late Archaic or early classical period when contact with *magoi* first began and led to the association between these spells, *magoi*, and *goētes*.¹³⁷ By the classical and Hellenistic periods, *goēs* came to express notions of fraud or charlatanism in addition to magic and remained the most explicitly negative of Greek terms contributing to magic discourse.

The sixth century represents a critical moment in the development of magic discourse due, among other things, to the introduction of the word *magush* from old Persian, which identified a member of the priestly tribe.¹³⁸ *Magos* first appears in Greek documents in the sixth century when Persian expansion and Greek colonialism fostered encounters between the two cultures and an interest in each other’s religious practices.¹³⁹ Consonant with the original definition in Old Persian, the term *magoi* (pl.) in Greek writings initially designates Persian priests and, as such, conveyed a technical and specialized meaning.¹⁴⁰ For example, one early reference to *magoi*, quoted by Aristotle (*Met.* 14.4.10–11), suggests their role as theologians or philosophers:

according to Aristotle's account, a lesser known philosopher and mythographer, Pherecydes (sixth century BCE), defines the original generating agent (*gennēsan prōton*) to be the "Best" (*ariston*), as do the magi (*hoi Magoi*), Empedocles, and Anaxagoras. *Magoi* appear in this testimony alongside early philosophers who speculated on cosmology and metaphysics. Walter Burkert's recent book supports this understanding of their role; he documents the significant influence of *magoi* and Persian thought on the development of Greek philosophy, including such important tenets as Platonic dualism and belief in an immortal soul.¹⁴¹ Another possibly early reference to *magoi* includes them disparagingly in a list of religious practices that the Milesian philosopher Heraclitus (sixth century BCE) deems unholy. According to Clement of Alexandria: "Heraclitus threatens 'night-time roamers, *magoi*, *Bacchoi*, revellers, and mystery initiates' with what comes after death (*ta meta thanaton*) and he prophesies fire for them. For 'the things considered among men as mysteries (*musteria*) they perform impiously (*anierosti*)'" (*Protr.* 2.22.2).¹⁴² In this fragment Heraclitus rails against certain ritual practices that he finds objectionable. While his opinion was preserved by like-minded intellectuals and eventually came to dominate Western discourse, it almost certainly did not represent the majority view in sixth-century Ionia where mysteries were more likely to be regarded as "mainstream" than philosophy was.¹⁴³

By the fifth century these four terms come to construct and convey the notion magic in various ways. They conveyed connotations of subversive power and illegitimate authority. Words that originally occurred independently in extant texts increasingly appear in combination with each other—through intertextual layering their definitions inform each other and confuse categories such as poison, incantation, and Persian religion. Herodotus, for example, uses a verbal derivative of *pharmakon* (*pharmakeusantes*) to describe magian rituals during Xerxes' campaign in Asia Minor (*Hist.* 7.114.1). Aristophanes describes Circe as mixing drugs (*pharmaka*) and practicing trickery (*manganeuousan*) (*Plutus* 310). While Herodotus attributes the practice of Circe's dangerous herbal art (*pharmakeia*) to the magi, Aristophanes associates pharmacological practices with a verb designating deception or deceit that came to be closely identified with the developing concept of magic (*manganeuousan*).¹⁴⁴ Such juxtapositions of terminology color the meaning of each word. They delegitimize magian priests by linking them to a negatively charged word for "drug" or "poison" and reinforce the negative valence of *pharmakon* by identifying it as a form of trickery or cheating. This intertextuality amplifies the negative associations

of each term, gradually conjuring a more amorphous, malleable, and sinister concept that draws on the power of each stereotype yet eludes precise definition.¹⁴⁵

Plato reflects the dispersal of this discourse across a broad semantic field: he uses the term *pharmakeia* to designate both “poisoning,” which harms the body directly “according to nature’s laws,” as well as certain rituals that “by means of trickeries (*manganeiais*) and incantations (*epōdais*) and binding spells (*katadesesi*), as they are called, not only convinces those who endeavor to cause injury that they really can do so, but convinces also their victims that they certainly are being harmed by those who have the power to perform magic” (*hupo toutōn dunamenōn goēteuein*, *Leg.* 933a–b). Plato’s use of these terms together shows how far *pharmakeia*’s semantic range has extended beyond pharmacology; it can include now a variety of practices Plato believes affect people psychologically—because they believe in them. The use of *pharmakeia* to classify these other practices reveals the emergence of a complex discursive formation that emerges from the nexus of meaning created by these different terms and their various associations (negative and positive). In this passage Plato combines five terms designating different types of ritual practices (*pharmakeia*, *manganeiais*, *epōdais*, *katadesesi*, and *goēteuein*) into a single constellation that signifies antisocial and destructive behavior. Elsewhere, he combines certain of these terms again when he levels criticism against men who destroy not only individuals but entire families and communities through their claim to evoke the dead and win over the gods through sacrifices, prayers, and “magic incantations” (*epōdais goēteuontes*, *Leg.* 909b). Plato’s promiscuous commingling of these distinct terms to designate inappropriate ritual activities reveals the existence of a discursive formation, which I label *magic*, operating in Greek thought no later than the early fourth century BCE. This discourse subsumes a variety of terms and practices, including certain forms of medicine and pharmacology, but also incantations, curses, and poisoning.¹⁴⁶ It was this discursive formation that influenced Latin literature and Roman law through exposure to Hellenistic, especially Alexandrian, literature.¹⁴⁷

Latin

The first references to something resembling magic discourse come from Rome’s early law code, the Twelve Tables, which survives only in fragmentary testimonials quoted by later writers or speakers. It remains difficult to determine definitively the original intent and wording of the law,

however, since the writers who quote it inevitably contribute an element of their own interpretation to our understanding. Nonetheless, a fairly clear reconstruction can emerge.¹⁴⁸ The elder Pliny quotes two laws from the Twelve Tables in his *Naturalis historia* (28.17), an encyclopedia of ancient practices and phenomena: the first law proscribes using incantations to charm a neighbor's produce into one's own field (*qui fruges excantassit*).¹⁴⁹ The second law prohibits the use of harmful songs (*qui malum carmen incantassit*). In both cases the law seems to proscribe using charms (*carmina*) to cause *harm* rather than the practice of incantation itself. Like *epaoidē* in Greek, *carmen* in Latin seems to function neutrally. For example, the first law specifies using chants to steal someone else's crops, suggesting that *theft* is the primary concern rather than *magic*.¹⁵⁰ The term *excantare* appears here to mean "chant something out." In this case it is crops or a field's fertility that is "chanted out," but it could also be used to chant stars out of the sky (Horace, *Epode* 5.45)¹⁵¹ or someone's sanity out of his head (Lucan 6.457).¹⁵² It also appears in medical contexts, where it indicates the use of chants to remove illness from the body.¹⁵³

The second law forbids *malum carmen*; it is unclear, however, what exactly this proscription intends to ban. Pliny understands it be harmful curses. Others, however, regard it to prohibit invective or slander: cursing of another sort.¹⁵⁴ Augustine, for example, uses a quotation from Cicero to demonstrate that Roman law banned *slander*; the passage he quotes from one of the now lost books of Cicero's *De republica* specifically mentions the Twelve Tables and their law against *carmen*.¹⁵⁵ The term *carmen* thus carries a double meaning: depending on context and interpretation, it can mean *either* to charm *or* to curse. This dual signification reflects the extraordinary power of words—to name something is to have power over it.¹⁵⁶

Another term that contributes to the discourse of magic in Roman writing is *venenum*. Similar to *pharmakon* in Greek, *venenum* connotes "potion" or "poison" but comes to express evil or destruction more generally as it develops.¹⁵⁷ The two terms *venena* and *carmina* occur frequently together, suggesting the combined or juxtaposed use of herbal and verbal technologies. James Rives proposes that, in an unattested law, the Twelve Tables originally included *venena* along with *carmina* as a forbidden way to steal someone else's crops: he cites the case of a freedman mentioned by Pliny (*Nat.* 18.41–3) who was accused and brought to trial for using *veneficia* to make his farm prosper at the expense of his neighbors.¹⁵⁸ If this is so, the treatment of *venena* (potion) and *carmina* (incantation) as comparable or complimentary technologies may stem from the republican era. Gradually,

Rives notes, other terms come to replace *venena* and its related compounds, *veneficus* and *veneficium*. *Maleficium*, for example, which etymologically means a “wicked deed,” increasingly came to express the notion magic. By the fourth century CE, Rives argues, it replaced *veneficus* almost entirely.¹⁵⁹

The term *magus*, borrowed from Old Persian through Greek, first appears in extant texts in an invective poem of Catullus (90), where it articulates a variety of notorious and derogatory stereotypes about magi that already circulated in the Greek world.¹⁶⁰ For example, in his attack on Gellius¹⁶¹ he accuses him of incest with his mother and hopes that a *magus* will be born of the union if this “impious custom of the Persians is true” (*si uera est Persarum impia religio*). He then envisions the future misbegotten progeny of incest worshipping his gods with songs of praise and attending sacrificial fires according to the tradition of the magi. Catullus’s mocking portrait corresponds to much of what we know about the magi from Greek sources, such as Herodotus, but draws on it as a disparaging stereotype to marginalize Gellius, indicating that negative associations with magi, which developed in Greece following the Persian wars, were transmitted to Rome and found continuing employment as a discourse of alterity in colorful Latin verse. Cicero provides another early witness for use of this term, which again reveals a negative perception. Referring to magi as Persian priests and diviners, he disparages them for extravagant tales (*portenta*), which he compares to Egyptian dementia and “the [uninformed] opinions of the masses” (*Nat. d.* 1.43). Both Catullus and Cicero attest to an early association of magi with bizarre, outlandish, and even blasphemous beliefs, yet in both cases *magus* remains a technical term for Persian priest. It has not yet acquired broader semantic coverage.

This specialized usage disappears, however, by the end of the republican era. In Virgil’s *Aeneid* Dido employs incantations (*carmina*) to win back Aeneas’s love and prevent him from abandoning her. She apologizes for resorting to this sordid action, referring to it as “magic arts” (*magicas artis*) (4.492).¹⁶² This passage indicates that by the end of the first century BCE *magia* had exceeded the technical meaning of Persian religion and begun to subsume traditional terms, such as *carmina*, into a broader discourse. Dido’s apology indicates that she (and we presume her audience) understands the use of *carmina* to be negative, perhaps even illicit. Two centuries later, Apuleius was accused of doing magic on the grounds that he performed strange rituals and worshipped barbarous idols. The real reason behind this accusation was most likely his marriage to a wealthy widow, whose former in-laws had wanted to keep her estate in their family. His response to the

charge demonstrates the persistent ambivalence of this term.¹⁶³ On the one hand, he argues, *magus* is a Persian priest who possesses great knowledge, wisdom, and piety; in which case magic should be revered rather than proscribed (*Apol.* 25 and 26). On the other hand, in the more vulgar conception, *magus* is someone who knows how to perform harmful spells through the power of incantation and communion of speech with the immortal gods. In which case his accusers should be afraid to level a charge of magic against someone they believe to be so powerful and dangerous (*Apol.* 26). Apuleius's distinction between these definitions of *magus* illuminates the conflicting connotation of *magia* in the second century. *Magia* could signify either ancient and venerable worship of the gods or dangerous and illicit rituals to cause harm. More often the second, "vulgar," meaning is the one that held sway.¹⁶⁴

Maleficium, literally a "crime" or "evil deed," becomes increasingly associated with magic until it comes to function as a synonym for it. Rives draws on lexical evidence to conclude that, by the second century, when Apuleius defends himself against the charge of using magic, a broad polythetic conception of magic exists. This conception includes, in addition to incantations (*carmina*) and poison (*venenum*), "religious" deviance as well, approximating much more closely the Frazerian understanding of magic.¹⁶⁵ One should also include in a discussion of terminology *saga*, which means "wise woman," but acquires the connotation of "procuress" as well as "witch." As Matthew Dickie emphasizes, these two figures appear frequently combined into a single character in Latin elegy. Tibullus, for example, describes the magic ritual performed by a *saga* for his lover, so she can escape getting caught in adultery.¹⁶⁶ Propertius invokes a similar image with a different word, *docta*, as he angrily portrays his lover's procuress as an evil sorceress (4.5.5–18).¹⁶⁷ Apparently she had encouraged his lover to take better-paying clients rather than the poor, if passionate, poet. Matthew Dickie further notes that *saga* usually connoted an old woman and was, in this way, employed as a term of abuse.¹⁶⁸

It has been argued that Alexandrian poetry introduced the Greek notion of magic into Roman thought.¹⁶⁹ Richard Gordon, for example, suggests that a "strong view" of magic (that is a negative one approaching the Frazerian definition) developed only in the Hellenistic period and found its way to Rome from there.¹⁷⁰ Matthew Dickie argues even more forcefully that the concept of magic was introduced from Greece to Rome during the Hellenistic period.¹⁷¹ It is in the Augustan era, however, that we see a heightened interest in magic among Romans, manifest both in the rich lit-

erary output of texts dealing with magic as well as in the application of this discourse as a form of social control. Beginning with the reign of Tiberius accusations of magic, often combined with other treasonable offenses, such as consulting astrologers, figure in politically motivated trials leading to execution or exile.¹⁷² Astrologers and magicians were also banned from Italy under Tiberius's reign and again during the reign of Claudius (Tac. *Ann.* 2.32, 12.52). By the second century CE, the concept magic had expanded to include religious deviance and could be prosecuted as *maleficia* under the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis*.¹⁷³ It was also during this period, as Ramsay MacMullen documents, that magicians came to be seen as a threat to the empire, resulting in periodic purges of magicians along with astrologers from Rome.¹⁷⁴ Magic in Roman thought thus came to function as a versatile designation for a broad range of ritual practices perceived to be dangerous or subversive.¹⁷⁵ The accusation of magic could be launched against various groups including, for example, Christians, who were perceived to be strange or un-Roman but considered themselves to be practicing legitimate forms of piety and claimed to pose no threat at all to the public good.¹⁷⁶ Charges of practicing magic in Rome thus reflect social location and the perception of the one leveling the accusation and may not have an absolute or objective referent.

Hebrew

In the Hebrew Bible many foreign religious practices are proscribed but continue to be regarded as powerful and even attractive. These practices—designated in Deuteronomy 18:9–14 by various terminology such as *qosem*, *menahesh*, and *mekhashef*—all come to connote magic in a sense similar to Greek and Roman semantic constellations by the rabbinic period. The problem with labeling them *magic* and then distinguishing them from Israelite *religion* in the biblical period is that, to a large extent, many of these activities resemble legitimate ones observed by Hebrews at the time. In fact, Brian Schmidt argues that many of the practices banned in Deuteronomy (including child sacrifice) were originally part of the Yahweh cult.¹⁷⁷ They were proscribed during the Josianic reforms of the seventh century BCE, but the prohibition was retrojected backward onto the figure of Moses and the Torah he received at Sinai, according to biblical tradition. By condemning these practices as “foreign” and linking them to Canaanites, who according to the Bible were displaced from the land by the covenant between Yahweh

and Israel for being idolatrous and immoral, the authors of Deuteronomy granted legitimacy to Josiah's reforms.¹⁷⁸ It is important to note that these practices are condemned for being foreign, not for being magic. Nothing about them, in and of themselves (child sacrifice notwithstanding), warrants prohibition except their alleged association with other deities.

Even those practices condoned by the Bible bear striking resemblance to foreign practices. The similarity, however, works strategically to demonstrate Yahweh's power over and above the competing gods of other nations.¹⁷⁹ In Genesis 41:8, for example, Joseph succeeds at interpreting Pharaoh's dream while the mantic specialists of Egypt (*hartummei mitzrayim*) fail.¹⁸⁰ The RSV and the NJPSV both translate *hartummim* as "magicians," however, the context suggests that they are no different than Joseph except that Joseph excels in his interpretation, demonstrating Yahweh's power to control human destiny through plague, famine, and predictive dreams.¹⁸¹ In the book of Daniel, *hartummim* again appear as dream interpreters in a story obviously dependent on the Joseph account from Genesis 41. In Daniel, however, they appear in conjunction with other divination specialists (*ashafim*, *mekhashefim*, *kasdim*) including astrologers (*gazzrin*) who comprise the class of "Babylonian wise men" (*hakimi bavel*).¹⁸² This commingling of terminology for different types of foreign religious functionaries suggests that at the time Daniel 1–6 was written (Persian or early Hellenistic period) a process of semantic aggregation, similar to what happened with Greek terms *magos*, *epoaidē*, and *goēs*, is occurring. As Ann Jeffers states:

It is striking that the *hartummim* in this list are mentioned along with other magicians despite the differences of function. The general impression given by such lists (see also Dan 2:27; 5:11) is of a confused *intermingling* of the various terms.¹⁸³

Another term, commonly translated as "magic" and more often as "witchcraft" because of its association with women (Ex 11:17), also resists a simple definition. According to Ann Jeffers, *mekhashefim* "appear in a list of practices and practitioners that are an 'abomination' to Yahweh (Deut 18:12) because of their heathen connections (v. 9)."¹⁸⁴ From this reference in Deuteronomy the precise nature of the proscribed activity cannot be determined. Some scholars have proposed that *mekhashefim* are diviners "because of the way the *qosemim* and *me'onenim* are mentioned once again in verse fourteen and are played off against the true prophets."¹⁸⁵ Jeremiah

(27:9) accuses the *keshafim* of being false prophets, reinforcing the conception that they are diviners of some sort. Micah (5:12–13) threatens to cut off *keshafim* along with *me'onenim* (soothsayers).¹⁸⁶ *Mekhashefim* served an official function within foreign courts and according to 2 Kings (9:22) were introduced into Israel by foreign queens.¹⁸⁷ Interestingly, Exodus 11:17 employs a feminine form—*mekhashefa*—in its prohibition of the practice, indicating that women could also practice *keshafim*. Perhaps on account of this gendered identification, the Septuagint translates *keshafim* most often with the term *pharmaka*, which was commonly associated with women in Greek thought.¹⁸⁸

These biblical terms designate various and specific foreign practices that are forbidden to Israelites, but they do not convey the sense of a discursive formation equivalent to magic. Nothing suggests that these practices in and of themselves were distinct from similar practices of the Israelite priesthood. Rather, Jeffers argues that Israelite and foreign practices seem to have been regarded as roughly equivalent; Israelite priests and prophets functioned in the same capacity and perhaps with the same technology as their neighboring colleagues.¹⁸⁹ Peter Schäfer reaches a similar conclusion; he claims that the Hebrew Bible is full of examples where Israelites transgress the boundary between magic and religion, indicating that “the notion of magic as distinct from religion seems to be alien to the Hebrew Bible.”¹⁹⁰ This equivalence of ritual practice, no doubt, accounts for the vitriolic denunciation biblical writers level against the foreign competition. It also most likely underlies stories depicting Israelites besting their foreign counterparts with *superior* divine power (Ex 8) and divinatory ability (Gen 41; Dan 1:20, 2:19–24, 4:16, 5:11–12).

When did the concept magic arise in Hebrew thought and language? The book of Daniel suggests that during the postexilic period a discourse of alterity comparable to the Greek discourse magic was developing. Other evidence points to the Hellenistic period: according to Jewish writings from this period, magic is introduced to humankind (specifically women) by the fallen angels of Genesis 6:1–2.¹⁹¹ Significantly, the earliest version of this narrative, the Book of the Watchers (third century BCE), does not articulate the forbidden knowledge of the angels in terms of a single category magic, nor is the role of women emphasized.¹⁹² Rather, specific sorts of prohibited knowledge are articulated: root cutting, spells, divination. The later Greek translation of the text (ca. first century BCE), however, enhances both the element of gender and magic. It is also at this time that notions of false

prophecy, which are closely tied to magic, appear as a *topos* in Jewish literature.¹⁹³ In other words, while the Hebrew Bible includes numerous proscriptions of foreign religious practices, the existence of an Othering discourse that covered a constellation of practices regarded as foreign and threatening did not emerge until the Hellenistic period and, I would argue, suggests Greek influence. Prior to contact with the Greeks “harlotry” (*zenut*) was the preferred discourse of alterity in Hebrew writings: engaging in foreign ritual practices was denounced as infidelity and adultery.¹⁹⁴ In late antique Jewish literature, such as the Babylonian Talmud, a discourse identifiable as magic *can* be seen to operate. But it is deployed more often in the statements of Palestinian rabbis, who were living in a Hellenistic milieu, than by their Babylonian colleagues. The Babylonian sages, in contrast, express an attitude that more closely resembles the one in pre-exilic biblical writings—namely, *our* ritual technology is superior to *theirs*.¹⁹⁵

This survey of ancient terminology for magic suggests that while certain types of ritual practices have been prohibited as either foreign or harmful throughout history, the formulation of a broad, polythetic discourse *magic* to classify and censure people and practices under one heading has a specific history. The concept magic emerged from the complex matrix of Greek culture and thought sometime between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE; it is clearly identifiable as a discourse of alterity in fifth- and fourth-century literature, including drama, philosophy, medical treatises, and forensic speeches. Through the spread of Hellenistic culture, magic became a shared discourse across the ancient Mediterranean, traversing boundaries and languages. It operated not only as a semantic field, subsuming existing terms in different languages, but also allowed for the development of magic as a ritual practice. Extant papyri, curse tablets, and other material evidence suggest that some people did engage in practices that corresponded to their culture’s understanding of magic. Furthermore, these practitioners sometimes appear to have drawn on stereotyped representations of magic for images and leitmotifs, suggesting that they were adopting a self-consciously subversive stance in relation to the institutions of authority in their culture.¹⁹⁶ This is not to say that all or even most practices labeled magic (by ancient or modern commentators) constituted “magic” for the practitioners. Nonetheless, it seems clear that some people did draw on the discourse of magic to inform and shape their ritual practices.

Despite the wide dispersal of this discourse across the ancient Mediterranean, representations of magic reflect the particular issues at stake in local sites of deployment. Magic is not universal; it operates in specific and contextualized ways. Thus it is to an examination of local magic representations that I turn in the following chapters.