

Magic, Abjection, and Gender in Roman Literature

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LUCAN'S CIVIL WAR epic, *Pharsalia*, graphically describes the wretched depravity of the Roman civil war and the ensuing disintegration of civilized order and human dignity.¹ His depiction of the sepulchral witch, Erictho, is particularly arresting; she dwells in battlegrounds and cemeteries where she has continual access to the tools of her trade—decaying flesh, the cinders of cremated corpses, and the implements of death itself: nooses, crosses, and crucifixion nails (6.538–46). She also resides on the fringes of what it means to be human; she is emaciated and filthy, “oppressed by a Stygian pallor and weighed down with matted hair” (6.516–18). Erictho rejects human society not only spatially, by inhabiting tombs and going out only under darkened skies (6.518–20), but also ethically, by violating human corpses; she transgresses a primary tenet of civilized society—respect for the dead. She furthermore verges on the monstrous by cutting an unborn infant from the womb to make an infernal sacrifice and by slicing off the faces of men still caught in the throes of death, who hover at the boundary between this world and the next (6.554–59).

In Book Six of the *Pharsalia*, Erictho challenges both human and divine order through a necromantic rite in which she revives the corpse of a fallen soldier so he can report the outcome of the war, which is known only to the shades below. Erictho also sends a message back down to the infernal regions through a ritual that mingles the abhorrent with the erotic; she kisses the open mouth of a corpse, bites the tip of his motionless tongue, and whispers secret sacrileges into his icy cold lips (*gelidis infundit murmura labris arcanumque nefas*, 565–69). This image of a filthy hag tonguing a mutilated corpse sends chills up the spine and triggers an immediate and visceral pang of revulsion.

Lucan's portrait of Erictho epitomizes the characteristics of magic that have disturbed the western imagination for millennia. It is the stuff of which nightmares and witch-hunts are made. In this chapter I will also argue that Lucan's

depiction of Erictho is quintessentially abject and that Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection can illuminate this and other literary representations of magic in Roman antiquity.

Portraits of filthy sorceresses, mutilating corpses and violating the dead, I propose, emerged out of, and reflected, a powerful corporal ideology that supported social hierarchy. In ancient Rome elite male bodies were regarded as naturally endowed with superior characteristics that justified their social privilege. Yet, even elite male bodies required cultivation, regulation, and manipulation to ensure that they conformed to these idealized standards, indicating awareness, on some level, of the fragility and artificiality of this corporal-based social hierarchy. The penal code served to enforce these artificial distinctions through a class-based punishment scheme that protected the ideal inviolability of elite bodies while publicly degrading the bodies of slaves, foreigners, and *humiliores* (the underclass), rendering their imagined difference a legal fact.²

In this chapter I will read ancient stories of witches, who transgress the boundaries of bodies, social mores, and even the threshold between life and death, against the corporal ideology that sought to protect the fragility and vulnerability of individual bodies, especially those of elite men like the authors of our texts. Their socially constructed identities and position in the hierarchy depended on demonstrating inviolability and self-control. The fear, therefore, of losing control, of being subjected to corporal violation and social inversion, I suggest, motivates many aspects of depictions of magic in Roman texts. It also resonates with the psychoanalytic category of abjection, which is why I have brought these two ideas together to illuminate a problematic feature of ancient magic.

Abjection—the revulsion experienced at confronting the wretchedness and fragility of human embodiment—is an idea developed from psychoanalysis by the French theorist Julia Kristeva. The use of psychoanalytic theory to illuminate ancient texts and societies has had a mixed reception.³ Nonetheless, this chapter will engage the notion of abjection to nuance our analysis of women and magic against the backdrop of ancient corporal ideology. As my readings of various texts indicate, Kristeva's theory of abjection enables us to perceive a common thread working through diverse portraits of women's magic and links them not only to each other, but to larger psycho-social dynamics at play in ancient Rome. Furthermore, Kristeva's notion of the primal abject, which I discuss near the chapter's end, offers an explanation for one of the significant social questions prompted by studying ancient magic, namely, given that the material evidence reveals men were as likely to be practitioners of magic as women were, why does the literature associate women and magic so strongly? The concept of abjection has the potential to illuminate this anomaly.

Julia Kristeva and the Concept of Abjection

In *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva formulates the notion of the abject as anything that “disturbs identity, system, order”;⁴ abjection forces us to confront our creatureliness. Kristeva develops this concept from psychoanalytic theory and extends it to an interpretation of religion, literature, and law. For Kristeva, society and individual psychology are interconnected: the individual emerges as a subject through internalizing the social-symbolic order, which is based in language. The same forces that work on society, therefore, can be seen to operate on the individual, and vice versa. As she formulates it, the concept of abjection explains individual psychological development as well as it illuminates the structures and dispositions in a diverse array of social products (legal, literary, and religious, among others). Because abjection can be used to illuminate not only aspects of individual psychology, but social products as well, I propose that it can help us understand why ancient magic generated strong feelings of fear and revulsion,⁵ and why it was often associated with women.

Starting from the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein, Kristeva describes the infant’s earliest experiences as plenitude and continuity with the body of the mother; this connection with the mother begins prior to birth, but continues into the early prelinguistic stage, which Kristeva labels the “semiotic *chora*.”⁶ In this stage the infant is not yet aware of her own physical or psychic boundaries; everything is perceived as an extension of herself. Gradually, through the process of abjection—jettisoning whatever is unwanted, whether feces or unwanted food—a child develops an awareness of its own body and boundaries.⁷ Through the basic actions of spitting out and excreting, the child discovers the boundaries of its body and begins to develop an awareness of herself as a distinct individual.⁸

For Kristeva, individuals emerge as subjects, first, through pushing away from continuity with the mother, and then by embracing language and the symbolic order, which structures the social world. The symbolic order—the arbitrary collective set of symbols that a society agrees to use—for Kristeva is associated with the father, patriarchy, and law; by embracing this the child is able to emerge as a self-aware and conscious subject (ego).⁹ Subjectivity is thus quintessentially an entrance into language, which occurs part and parcel of rejecting the primal abject—the maternal *chora*.¹⁰ While Kristeva uses the term “maternal” to refer to this relationship, the notion applies equally to any caretaker who nurtures the infant. In ancient Rome, elite children would have experienced this relationship primarily with a wet nurse (*nutrix*) and household slaves rather than with their own mothers.¹¹ Abjection operates not only on an individual psychoanalytic level, but also on a social level, where threats to boundaries, borders, and

collective identities are hedged by laws, taboos, grammar rules, and rituals, all working to preserve social coherence through containment of the abject. This is where abjection theory can help illuminate ancient attitudes toward magic, at least on the part of elite men, who authored most of our ancient texts.

Experiences of abjection continue throughout one's life in response to objects and actions that threaten boundaries of the self or society. Kristeva writes, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."¹² Anything abject reveals the fragility of our well-bounded selves and rationally controlled autonomy. In short, the abject is anything that reminds us of our origin and ultimate dissolution into death and disorder. Because Kristeva conceives the unconscious to be structured as a kind of language, abjection can also be found in the limits or breakdown of human communication, in the nonsense and chaos of foreign speech, expressed by the very word barbarian (*barbaros*).¹³ Abjection operates on the societal level as well by demarcating social boundaries and projecting unwanted behaviors onto other people or groups, who then need to be repelled or eliminated as monstrous, bestial, and demonic.¹⁴ In this way, abjection acts collectively to regulate socially approved behavior and to define a community's sense of identity.

Much of Kristeva's concept of abjection resonates with ancient corporal ideology, which both conceived elite bodies to be innately superior and inviolable and at the same time expressed concerns about protecting their integrity and cultivating the proper characteristics to reflect their presumed innate nobility.

Abjection and Greco-Roman Corporal Ideology

The social function of abjection, which defines communal boundaries by repelling unwanted behaviors and projecting them onto vilified others, illuminates what is at stake in many ancient depictions of magic, especially those that highlight socially transgressive behavior. Kristeva conceives the abject to function on three levels: anything that threatens the integrity of the physical body, individual identity, or society. Often, all three levels are manifest in depictions of magic; attacks on the integrity of individual bodies could threaten not only individual identity, but the stability and integrity of the social body.

This understanding of abjection can be helpful for analyzing Hellenistic and Roman societies in which social order was predicated on a clearly demarcated hierarchy. Nobility resided in the body; traits such as courage, grace, and self-mastery, which defined the noble classes, were regarded as inborn. Hellenistic novels, for example, demonstrate the notion that status is corporally located: despite being severed from their birth families and natal origins by misfortune, elite protagonists reveal their true identities by their beauty, noble carriage, and

courage. Like a river to the sea, in these stories, inborn superiority leads children of nobility to their rightful place at the head of society.¹⁵

Despite the confident assertion of natural class-based characteristics and aptitudes that were displayed in a person's physiognomy, concern for ensuring that noble characteristics properly develop also occurs in ancient medical writings and philosophic literature, revealing a worry that "inborn" traits might not manifest without sufficient encouragement. For example, medical texts recommend that high-born infants receive special massages and swaddling techniques with the intention of directing their physical development in the proper manner; nurses were instructed to stretch and massage ligaments to impart correct posture and proportions for noble children in their care. Male and female infants, however, received different treatment, which was intended to inculcate the different types of behavior and physical characteristics considered most appropriate for their sex (Soranus *Gyn* 2.14–15).¹⁶ Elite boys underwent education and rhetorical training to cultivate proper comportment, hand gestures, eye movements, and vocal modulation in order to display their masculinity, power, and persuasion. Not only did professional success in the legal or political realm depend on mastery of this corporal training (*askēsis*), but social standing and relationships among peers also relied upon these traits, which were subject to constant scrutiny and reevaluation. One's social currency could precipitously fall with a misplaced facial expression, gesture of the hand, or crack in the voice, revealing an alarming fragility of status and social identity that undercut any conception of inborn character or nobility.¹⁷

A delicate hydraulic machine, controlled by humors and temperatures, the human body required vigilant care to maintain its proper operation and peak performance.¹⁸ This mutability constituted the source of a body's vulnerability. Too much sex or not enough exercise could upset the fragile balance of humors, which determined a body's proper masculinity or femininity (Galen's *Hygiene* 5.2). Different regimes were prescribed for individuals based on sex and social status, in order to harmonize correctly the different humors in the body; improper observance of this protocol could deleteriously affect not only the proportion of masculine to feminine traits in the patient, but the sexual characteristics of their unborn children as well.¹⁹

This corporal ideology was graphically and vividly displayed in the realm of judicial punishment. Both Greece and Rome respected the integrity and inviolability of citizen bodies, which legally distinguished them from the bodies of slaves and foreigners.²⁰ The Roman arena in particular displayed this difference through gruesome and increasingly elaborate spectacles of capital punishment, visually reinforcing the hegemonic class system, which preserved certain classes of bodies from painful and humiliating degradation but subjected others to it as a form of edifying amusement.²¹ Capital punishment was almost never inflicted upon a citizen of Rome in the Republic, especially one of high social

rank. Rather, he would be banned from fire and water (*aquae et ignis interdictio*), which was tantamount to a social death, but did not violate the physical body of the citizen and allowed him to flee into exile.²² During the Principate, two shifts gradually occurred: first, capital punishment for all orders became much more common as a result of newly enforced *maiestas* laws. Second, the distinction between slave/foreigner and citizen collapsed as Roman citizens of the lower orders were subjected to degrading and terrifying forms of punishment formerly reserved for conquered enemies and slaves.²³ These punishments, the *summa supplicia*, which included vivicombustion, crucifixion, and being thrown to beasts, were designed to inflict the greatest amount of suffering and degradation on victims. The contrast between noble and dignified deaths of the elite and the humiliating violation suffered by lower classes and slaves in the arena ideologically reaffirmed the division of rank between *honestiores* and *humiliores*. Social worth was demonstrated graphically by the sanctity and integrity of elite bodies versus the vulnerability and indignity of lower-class bodies.

This concern with the integrity and inviolability of elite bodies translated to sexuality as well. Because women's bodies were regarded as naturally designed to be penetrated and bear children, elite women posed a problem for the ideological identification of nobility with inviolability; as Jonathan Walters explains, elite women's high social status was in tension with "the 'naturally' demeaning nature of the act of being penetrated."²⁴ By opening their bodies for the gestation of another—distended, morphed into two at once—noble women also posed a potential danger to the honor of a family or to the certainty of paternity. As gateways to this world they could act as porous gaps in the security of a class-based social hierarchy; their bodies might nurture and permit entrance to an intruder from the wrong class. This unease with the openness of women's bodies was expressed medically and philosophically: women were conceived to be porous, mutable, and lacking self-control—women's bodies provided a foil for an elite masculine identity that was predicated on stability, certainty, guarded boundaries, and self-mastery.²⁵ In other words, as Kristeva argues, and I will discuss more fully below, women's bodies—especially mothers' bodies—provoked an experience of abjection and had to be hedged with restrictions, regulations, and taboos.

Literary Readings: Magic and Abjection in Roman Texts

Reading ancient representations of magic through the lens of ancient corporal ideology and the concept of abjection illuminates depictions of gruesome, threatening, and morbid rituals performed by female characters, and fosters an interpretation that goes beyond merely labeling them as misogynistic. Literary readings of magic and abjection can be divided into two main categories. First

are stories in which magic triggers abjectionary revulsion by violating physical bodies, the sanctity of corpses, or the boundary between human and animal. These are cases in which the instability of personal identity is ultimately at stake. Second are stories in which magic violates the integrity of the social body by challenging gender roles and thereby destabilizing the hierarchy that rested on them.

Violating the Human Body

Corpses and Mutilated Bodies

I will begin with depictions of magical assault on individual bodies, which express anxiety over preserving a stable identity; depictions of witches, violating corpses, figure prime among these. The sanctity of the corpse is one of the most basic and universal dispositions of human society.²⁶ While practices vary widely, from burial to cremation to ritual consumption, all human societies ritualize their treatment of the dead; this ritual marks the corpse's transition from a living member of the community to becoming refuse that needs to be discarded. Outside this ritual safe-zone, encounters with corpses trigger a profound experience of abjection and remind one of the instability of life; the corpse is, after all, the ultimate waste product, whose castoff existence forces an awareness of our own certain dissolution.²⁷

Ancient representations of magic cultivate this horror of the corpse with lurid depictions of necromantic rites that are conducted in cemeteries or with purloined body parts. Horace, for example, depicts two hags foraging for bones in a pauper's cemetery that had been converted into a park on the Esquiline (*Satire* 1.8). In this scene two hags harvest buried bodies for use in a magic spell. Their magic rite not only cultivates abjection by exposing corpses outside the hallowed rituals of burial and mourning, but also shows the limits of human subjectivity and the frailty of life: by using corpses for magic, human beings become mere objects. Garbage to be used and reused for ulterior purposes, they are dispossessed of agency. Kristeva writes, "The subject is unable to accept that its body is a material organism, one that feeds off other organisms and, in its turn, sustains them. The subject recoils from its materiality, being unable to accept its bodily origins, and hence also its imminent death."²⁸ Horace's satire ends when the old women flee; they have been frightened by a loud fart from the statue of Priapus, who is narrating the comic episode (1.8.46). The humor in *Satire* 1.8 results from the ironic tension created by juxtaposing an absurdly flatulent ithyphallic statue with the abjection of the women's corpse-magic. Because humor is an important strategy to circumscribe information that is unpalatable, it is no surprise to find humor and the abject combined here. Humor often attends abject topics such as excrement and body fluids.²⁹

Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* also combines corpses and abjection with humor in its numerous depictions of magic. For example, the protagonist in the story, Lucius, witnesses the grotesque and horrifying ingredients used by Pamphile, the sorceress who is at the center of the novel's plot. Her magic apothecary includes: "body parts from corpses mourned and even buried; here some noses and fingers, there some flesh-covered nails of a crucified criminal, elsewhere the preserved gore of victims butchered, and a mutilated scalp wrenched from the teeth of wild animals" (3.17). She even employs pulsating entrails that were pulled from a living body (3.18). Like Erictho in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Pamphile's magic relies substantially on the abject power of human corpses. It is as if the power of horror that these objects inspire by transgressing the boundaries between life and death—human subject and magical object—increases their potency to violate human autonomy and will. In fact, the entire novel revolves around the theme of abjection and human transformation: the opening lines of the novel invite the reader to enjoy a series of bawdy tales "so that you may be astounded at men's forms and fortunes, transformed into other shapes and in return restored, reciprocally bound" (1.1).³⁰ In other words, the novel focuses on the abject instability of identities; it is no wonder then that magic figures as a constant theme throughout.

In another episode of the *Metamorphoses*, two witches are stealing body parts from a corpse that has not yet been buried. In a comic yet unsettling incident they accidentally steal the facial organs of his sleeping guardian instead. Because the two men share the same name, the living Thelyphron, rather than the dead one, responds to the witches' magical summons (2.30). The mix-up is revealed when an Egyptian prophet (*Aegyptius propheta*) revives the corpse to reveal his murderers' identities (2.28). He also reveals that the nose and ears of the young man who watched his body the night before are wax replicas made by witches to conceal their theft. This story, while depicting an accidental episode of organ-harvesting from a still-living person (remember that Erictho and Pamphile are said to have done it deliberately), can be seen as triggering a strong sense of abjection; it reveals the fragile boundaries between life and death. A living person is harvested like a corpse, while sleeping, and a dead man is raised to expose the identity of his murderers. This story highlights the vulnerability and instability of the human body, whose anatomy and identity (little is more integral to a sense of identity than ones facial organs) are liable to theft. It also underscores the uneasy liminality of sleep, in which the living enter a state that resembles death and can, as in this episode, fall prey to terrifying circumstances when they are least aware and able to protect themselves. The dead, for their part, can be raised from eternal slumber with potent ritual actions.³¹ In this story, magic functions as a narrative catalyst for revealing the inherent instability of the human form. As the title, *Metamorphoses*, would suggest, bodies and their social personae exist in fragile and uncertain conditions. Magic uncovers the inherent abjection of human existence in this book.

Another example where magic harnesses the abject power of death is Seneca's tragedy, *Medea*. The sorceress dresses in funerary attire, brandishes a torch snatched from a cremation pyre, and pours her own blood upon the altar (*Manet noster Sanguis ad aras*) as a libation to the goddess Hecate (797–810). This macabre ritual confounds the normal relationship between sacrificial victim and hierophant, as well as between sacred and defiling. Blood itself is abject and evokes revulsion: it signifies life when in the veins, but death when it escapes the body. Its flow signals vitality's ebb. In *Medea's* case, she mutilates her own body while confusing the boundary between life and death; her attire and ritual implements carry with them the contagion of the Underworld.

In all three portraits, abjection—marked by the presence of corpses, blood, and dismembered human bodies—signals the transgressive nature of magic rites and the female characters who perform them.

Confronting Bestiality

On the threshold between individual identity and social identity lie stories about magic effecting animal transformations. These stories reveal not only the insecurity of individual identity, they underscore the fragility of the category “human” upon which notions of society and civilization depend.³²

In Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, for example, Lucius is avidly curious about the workings of magic. He seduces a sorceress's apprentice to learn secrets of her mistress's magic art. After witnessing the sorceress Pamphile transform herself into a bird, Lucius demands the same, but he is accidentally turned into a braying ass. His lover grabbed the wrong vial and, voilà, Lucius is covered in hair and stands on four-hoofed feet. This episode signals the beginning of Lucius's quest to be restored to human form, a goal that is ultimately made possible by the goddess Isis after many entertaining and harrowing adventures. Animal transformation is a constant theme throughout the *Metamorphoses*. Not only does magic transform Pamphile into a bird and Lucius into a donkey, but one of the sorceresses (discussed previously, the one who stole the guardian's nose and ears), first appeared to him in the shape of a weasel (2.25). Add to this a tale Lucius hears about an innkeeper witch (*saga* 1.8) who turns her enemies into animals. She transforms an unfaithful lover into a beaver and turns a competing innkeeper into a frog (1.9). In these stories, satire joins hands with the abject. The novel is humorous and entertaining alongside its disconcerting and abject depictions of magic that serve to characterize the human condition.

In all these depictions—and one should not forget to include Circe's infamous spell in Homer's *Odyssey* (10.212), which converted Odysseus's sailors into swine—magical transformation reveals how artificial the distinction between humans and animals can be. By demonstrating the ease with which individuals slip from one category to the other, these stories highlight the arbitrary and easily

transgressed nature of boundaries that human societies construct to separate themselves from beasts. Lucius's experiences as a donkey, in fact, reveal the cruel, barbaric, and inhumane behavior that human beings regularly exhibit toward animals. By violating the boundary presumed to separate humans from animals in these depictions, magic casts the reader face-to-face with the poverty of human pretenses to order and civilization, in other words, with the abject.

In addition to stories of magic that transform human victims into animals, other depictions use animal imagery to portray the sorceress herself as bestial. In Horace's *Epode* 5, Canidia's hair is entwined with vipers (15–16). Her friend Sagana has the streaming hair of a spiny sea urchin (28). In *Satire* 1.8 Canidia and Sagana claw in the dirt (*scalpere terram unguibus*) like wild animals looking for bones and buried body parts (26–27). Propertius similarly uses animal imagery in his *Elegies* to portray his lover's procuress/sorceress, whom he regards as greedy and an obstacle to his mistress. He accuses the procuress of digging out the eyes of a crow with her fingernail and of consulting screech owls and disguising herself in the skin of a wolf (4.5.14–18). These invective poems use animal imagery to vilify certain women and convey the transgressive character of magic. If, in these portraits, human bodies have no integrity or stability, what do depictions of magic reveal about threats to social boundaries? This is the question pursued in the following section.

Violating the Social Body

Kristeva describes acts against the integrity of the social body to be equally abject and revulsion-causing as acts that transgress the individual body. Just as confronting a disintegrated cadaver challenges our belief in the permanence of individual identity, confronting violent and evil acts challenges our trust in society's laws and religious prohibitions to shield us. Crime, especially violent crime, threatens security and stability on the social level, triggering a collective response to abjection. As Kristeva writes: "Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility."³³ We encounter this type of collective abjection operating in many depictions of magic, where magic serves to violate social mores, gender roles, and basic human decency. Infanticide tops the list of all these categories.

Infanticide

Returning to Horace's *Epode* 5, Canidia's magic rite appears deadly serious and sinister, not ridiculous as it did in *Satire* 1.8, where flatulence disrupted the nefarious activities of two old women. In this text, a group of old crones starves a boy to death in order to distill yearning desire from his liver, which will become

the main ingredient of a love potion. This act of infanticide horrifies us as readers. Dismembering rotting corpses on a battle field or mutilating the cadavers of crucified criminals triggers revulsion to decay and death. But murdering a boy to make an old hag's love potion (*amoris poculum*) evokes horror for its cruelty combined with trite venality.

In *Pharsalia*, Erictho commits the most heinous form of infanticide; she slices an unborn infant from its mother's womb to deliver the child to an early death on a smoldering altar as a sacrifice (6.558–59). Perverting the traditional roles of midwife and hierophant in the same act, her magic rite inverts proper Roman rituals in which a male priest sacrifices a domestic animal—not a child—to ensure divine protection, abundance, and fecundity.³⁴ This sacrifice appears especially horrendous given the vulnerability and liminality of pregnant women, who are in most societies granted special protection.

Erictho's obstetric intervention also provokes an experience of abjection by attacking the very source of life: the pregnant womb. The womb—and according to Kristeva, female genitalia more generally—arouses ambivalent emotions such as disgust, fear, and loathing.³⁵ Whereas Freud identifies fear of female genitals with the castration complex, Kristeva links it to abjection. The sight of a distended pregnant belly recalls with fascination and horror the fact that all human beings originate inside the body of another person. Life comes from life; human beings emerge embodied from another body to perpetuate the cycle of birth, death, and decay.³⁶

Subverting Gender Roles

Lust constitutes a common element in Roman portrayals of women's magic. Canidia and her friend Sagana, for example, stop at nothing in their pursuit of ingredients for a love potion. In *Epode* 5 they are joined in their project—killing a young boy for his liver—by Folia of Ariminum, who is described as *masculae libidinis* (possessing a “masculine libido”). This designation could apply to virtually all the sorceresses of Latin literature, who almost unanimously use magic to pursue and subdue male objects of sexual desire or conceal acts of adultery, which I will discuss more fully below.³⁷ Horace presents these women as beyond their sexual prime and physically unappealing; they seek to dominate men whom they would have no hope of seducing without the coercive power of a love potion derived through murder.³⁸ This situation reverses ancient social custom, perceived to rest on natural order, according to which men seek sexual gratification with younger women, not the other way around.

In addition to inverting gender roles when women use magic to control men's libidos and gratify their own, the idea of a sexually voracious old crone evokes horror and revulsion. In *Epodes* 8 and 12 Horace describes with satiric delight the abhorrence of an old woman's body: her flabby chest and withered buttocks,

which frame an anus like that of a flatulent cow, inspire nothing but vitriolic ridicule from the sexually flaccid poet. Here, again, humor is used to convey abjection, which eludes the bounds of normal language. Old women's bodies, in these satires, invoke the abjection associated with corpses. They remind us of death and our mortal origins. As Amy Richlin states about these depictions: "Old women themselves are repeatedly addressed as corpses; one woman is imagined as lust-ing in her grave. . . . In fact old women evoke the most intense expressions of fear and disgust, along with a sense that they constitute a sort of uncanny other."³⁹ In other words, sexually potent old women are quintessentially abject: they mingle the opposing poles of life and death, of fertility and decay; they transgress natural order in addition to social order.

An earlier Hellenistic portrait that anticipates this theme, Theocritus's *Idyll* 2 depicts a magic ritual that explicitly performs this gender role-reversal by melting and binding the male object while presenting the female subject as dominant and controlling.⁴⁰ In this poem, a love-struck maiden melts a wax figure of her lover (who has taken her virginity, but not made her a proper wife, 41) in order to make him melt with love for her. For the pain he has caused her she burns a bay leaf to make him burn; to force him to return to her she spins an *iunx* that will draw him back.⁴¹ In each of these actions, she assumes a sexually active and controlling stance that inverts traditional sex roles and violates "natural" male mastery, challenging both masculine identity and one of the cardinal principles of social organization in ancient societies—patriarchy.⁴² In virtually all Roman depictions of magic, women use sorcery to overturn traditional gender roles and usurp male sexual prerogative. From this social perspective, women's magic is highly abject; it undermines the fundamental basis of social order in antiquity—gender-based social hierarchy.

Adultery

The final abjectionary motif that recurs in Roman depictions of magic is adultery. In the majority of Roman depictions of magic, especially from the imperial period, women use spells to facilitate adultery or to pursue men for sexual relationships outside the confines of marriage.⁴³ In Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, Pamphile transforms herself into a bird and manipulates pulsating intestines and other ghastly body parts to satisfy her insatiable lust. Although she is married, her magic compels handsome young men into her bed, where she violates their bodies as well as their masculine autonomy. The poet Tibullus similarly describes a magic rite that is replete with all the customary sepulchral elements, including "bones from a still-warm funeral pyre," that will enable his lover to deceive her husband and commit adultery with the poet (1.2.41–58). Another elegiac poet, Propertius, describes the magic powers of his lover's procuress, which she uses to deceive watchful husbands (4.5.5–18). In these literary portrayals,

magic is associated not only with the pollution of corpses and bestiality of animals, but with the dangerous and abject quality of women's adultery.

While sex (*stuprum*, lit. defilement, dishonor) with unmarried freeborn women was a crime during the Republic,⁴⁴ it became much more serious after Augustus passed a series of moral reforms that made adultery and *stuprum* into public crimes to be tried by the State, rather than family crimes punished by the *paterfamilias*.⁴⁵ Catharine Edwards argues that concerns over adultery expressed at this time reflect less the actual moral decay of elite women in the late Republic, as some have argued, than the use of marital fidelity and women's chastity as potent symbols for Rome's social and political stability.⁴⁶ Women's simplicity and chastity were idealized as attributes of former times—before Rome's power and wealth corrupted the patrician class—and served a nostalgic and propagandistic purpose as part of Augustus's claim to restore the virtues and values of the Republic.⁴⁷

Given the heavy symbolic load laid at the door of women's sexual comportment, depictions of women enlisting revolting forms of magic to gratify their lust in adulterous unions carried an especially potent ideological charge. As a crime, adultery threatens the very basis of patriarchy: women circumvent male control and surveillance to fulfill their own sexual agendas, generating significant and sometimes paralyzing doubts about paternity and, ultimately identity. Adultery thus challenges the entire hegemonic structure and corporal ideology of ancient society.

When viewed through the theoretical framework of abjection these depictions of women's craven magic and adulterous lust express deeper anxieties about preserving social order and safeguarding elite men's hierarchical privileges. This is clear in one final example for this section. In response to the announcement of his friend's engagement, Juvenal launches a vitriolic attack on women in an attempt to dissuade his friend from marriage. He reviles Roman women of his day for being unchaste, unfaithful, and sexually libidinous (esp. 329–34). They violate proper gender roles and break their most sacred vow of marriage by falsely presenting a foundling or illegitimate child to their husbands as an heir (558–605). Significantly, they also use magic to deceive and manipulate their husbands, driving the men literally insane with noxious potions (610–14). This passage, therefore, combines the abjectionary elements of magic that recur in ancient depictions and could be deemed a triumvirate of abjection: violating class boundaries through unregulated sexuality, overthrowing gender hierarchy, and violating men's corporal integrity.

Abjection of Magic in Practice

Manipulating men's libidos, either to guarantee their fidelity or seduce them, figures as a central goal of women's magic in Roman literary depictions. Significantly, erotic desire constitutes a primary motivating factor for a large proportion

of actual spells performed in antiquity as well. According to John Gager, approximately one-fourth of extant curse tablets concern "matters of the heart."⁴⁸ The rest pertain to other areas of life in which competition and uncertainty led people to seek advantage through magical means.⁴⁹ Recently, Esther Eidinow has argued that "competition" is inadequate as an explanation for many of the curse texts.⁵⁰ Rather, she proposes that writing curses (along with oracle consultation) "were both strategies by which ordinary ancient Greek men and women, individually and collectively, expressed and managed aspects of the uncertainty and risk of everyday life."⁵¹

Whether we understand the motivation for ancient magic to be competition or risk management, it is important to point out that ancient magic primarily took the form of curses and binding spells (*defixiones*, *katadesmoi*).⁵² That is to say, people framed their needs and desires in terms of harming or controlling other people. Even "love" spells sought to attract a particular person by causing him, or more often her, physical suffering as in the following example:

Nab Euphēmia and lead her to me, Theōn, loving me passionately like a mad woman, and bind her fast (*katadēsate*) with unbreakable chains, super strong, hard as adamantine, for love of me, Theōn, and do not let her eat, nor drink, nor fall asleep, nor joke, nor laugh, but make her leap forth from every place and every house, and abandon father, mother, brothers, sisters, until she comes to me, Theōn, loving me, desiring me, right away, with an unceasing desire and manic love.⁵³

To the extent that this type of magic violates the corporal integrity, autonomy, and social identity ("abandon father, mother, brothers, sisters") of its victim, it is abject. As Gager summarizes, "... all *defixiones* express a formalized wish to bring other persons or animals under the client's power, against their will and customarily without their knowledge. In some cases, the wish is expressed as an intention to inflict personal harm or death."⁵⁴ Scholars have debated the degree to which these violent intentions should be understood literally or figuratively. Gager argues that cursing uses hyperbolic metaphor, the primary purpose of which is expressive, such as shouting "kill the bum!" during a sports competition.⁵⁵ Farone similarly argues that curses communicate through analogy: the intention is to render the victim useless *like* a corpse, not actually dead.⁵⁶ John Winkler proposes that the burning and suffering invoked in ancient attraction spells (*agōgai*) project the burning and suffering of unrequited love onto the desired object.⁵⁷ By ritually acting out and projecting the petitioner's feelings of frustration, *agōgē* spells allow for a resolution of the petitioner's psychic turmoil.⁵⁸ While these explanations make sense to a modern observer, who is familiar with the ideas of "splitting" and "projection" developed by psychoanalysis over the past century,

most ancient observers regarded spells as dangerous and frightening because they were believed to work, and that is the starting point for understanding ancient magic's ability to elicit abjection.

Although this type of magic was not illegal everywhere in antiquity, it was often banned and generally regarded as a threat to society by operating surreptitiously against the bodies and minds of citizens.⁵⁹ It has been suggested, however, that someone laying a curse on their opponent may not have kept it a secret, intending that fear and hypochondria would harm the target of the spell as much or more than the spell itself.⁶⁰ In any case, magic threatened the social body through attacks on the bodies of individual persons, causing a gifted orator to become mute,⁶¹ or a fast horse to break his leg,⁶² or an enticing wife or courtesan to lose her charm.⁶³ Faraone has argued that in the agonistic context of ancient cities, curses and binding spells were frequently enlisted to promote or protect the interests of individuals and their families.⁶⁴ Moreover, he suggests, curses may have been the last recourse for "underdogs," who lacked the authority or power to protect themselves.⁶⁵

While the leveling effect of *defixiones* that Faraone proposes may appear to legitimize the practice, two ancient accounts describe the fear, helplessness, and horror of those who found themselves victimized by magical attack. Tacitus reports the terrifying discovery of a curse enlisted against the heir to the imperial throne, Germanicus, and suspected of causing his untimely and painful death.

It is a fact that explorations in the floor and walls brought to light the remains of human bodies, spells, curses, leaden tablets engraved with the name "Germanicus," charred and blood-smeared ashes, and other implements of witchcraft (*malefica*) by which it is believed the living soul can be devoted to the powers of the grave. (*Ann.* 2.69)

Three centuries later, the orator, Libanius, experienced a sacrilegious nightmare that he understood to portend "spells, incantations, and an attack by sorcerers." Following this dream he experienced a crisis in his career; by his own account "[his] oratory was undone" (1.246). He also suffered from an extended bout of gout, which he attributed to the same cause. One day, a desiccated chameleon was discovered in his classroom; "its head was tucked between its hind legs, one front leg was missing, and the other [leg] closed its mouth in silence" (1.249). After finding this mutilated creature, Libanius's situation began to ameliorate; the magic's power was apparently undone or weakened by its discovery.

While both stories of magical attack can be explained by other means—stress and hypochondria on the part of Libanius, poisoning on the part of Germanicus,⁶⁶—it is clear from these accounts that harmful magic was readily suspected when people experienced a sudden and deleterious change of luck.⁶⁷

Both these accounts also reveal the extreme horror of discovering evidence of magical attack and point to the abject nature of binding or nailing a figurine with the intention of causing surreptitious harm or, possibly, death. The magical violation of someone else's autonomy and physical well-being breaches not only the boundaries of her or his body, but interferes with her or his will and subjectivity. In this way magic threatens dissolution of the self, provoking an abject response of horror, revulsion, and fear.

Ancient literary depictions emphasize the subversive power of women's "love" magic. The material record suggests that erotic magic indeed constituted a significant percentage of extant spells, but surprisingly, given the literary stereotype, men comprise the overwhelming majority (86 percent) of petitioners in extant Greek erotic spells.⁶⁸ The primary danger of erotic magic, therefore, was not, as literature would suggest, women using it to subvert male authority and commit adultery, but rather men using it to manipulate women into sexual transgression; these erotic spells often explicitly seek to lead a dutiful wife or concubine from the bed of her husband to that of another man, violating the sanctity of the household and the patriarchal authority of men over their wives and mistresses (*PGM* IV.2755–61, LXI.29–30, IV.2756–58).⁶⁹ The material record, thus, presents an impression of ancient women as far more chaste and faithful than they are portrayed in literature;⁷⁰ it seems that women were more likely to be victims of men's predatory magic than mistresses of erotic magic themselves.⁷¹

Erotic magic, even when (or perhaps especially when) performed by men, causes abjection by undermining a central pillar of ancient society. The patriarchal system highly restricted sexual access to freeborn women in order to guarantee paternity and, consequently, social status through the orderly transmission of property between generations of men. By seeking to compel women into illicit sexual unions, men's erotic magic circumvented this system and undermined an important foundation of ancient Mediterranean culture. Fritz Graf has proposed that men of lower social classes may have used erotic magic to seduce women of higher classes, gaining a foothold through marriage into a higher social station.⁷² Love magic also may have afforded families an acceptable explanation for the shameful misbehavior of their daughters, who dallied with men below their social station.⁷³ In either case, performing an attraction (*agōgē*) spell on a freeborn woman challenged the very foundation of hereditary social status, which is why the good reputations of respectable girls and women were so closely guarded; even a rumor of infidelity could raise questions about children's legitimacy and haunt a family.⁷⁴ In this way, men's erotic magic was as subversive and threatening as the adulterous magic of women stereotyped in literature.

The use of magic by subordinates to win favor from, or control the decisions of, a social superior constitute another aspect of magic that subverted corporal ideology and consequently resonates with abjection. The *Greek Magical Papyri*

(*PGM*) contain numerous spells that promise to curb someone's anger, or make the petitioner popular and persuasive. One such spell "to restrain anger" (*thumokatoxon*) and "to subordinate" (*hupotaktikon*) states: "Come to me, O God, who is not to be despised, O Daimon, and muzzle, subject, enslave (*katadoulōson*) so-and-so to so-and-so, and make him come under my feet" (VII.966–67). This spell challenges the very core of social identity based in corporal ideology; by giving someone the power to subordinate a social superior—even asking to enslave and humiliate him—this type of magic subverts the hierarchical principles on which ancient society depended. This ability to destabilize social order helps explain the depiction of magic as abject in so much of ancient literature, which reflects the perspective and values of the elite who produced it.

In addition to the subversive social effects of magic, many ritual practices performed as part of ancient spells could also be considered in terms of abjection. Like the magic of literary imagination, spells that were actually performed or found in recipe books of professional magicians often enlist ingredients and ritual actions associated with the abject. *Defixiones*, for example, were frequently left in cemeteries and request that the targets of the spells become cold and lifeless like corpses in the graves. While these requests were most likely meant metaphorically—cold and lifeless with respect to some person or skill rather than literally dead⁷⁵—the site at which the curse tablets were deposited (graves) and the invocation of corpses both invite an encounter with mortality and corporal disintegration that are primary and primal components of abjection. Other spells include macabre ingredients such as parts of mutilated animals, blood, or body parts from someone who died violently (*biaiothanatos*),⁷⁶ and instruments of death such as gallows-wood (*PGM* V.74), or parts of a shipwrecked vessel (*PGM* V.65, VII.466). David Frankfurter describes the gruesome use of a fetus (*brephos*) in Roman Egypt to bind someone with malice.⁷⁷ These spells resemble in many ways the lurid depictions of magic from Roman literature of the first and second centuries CE, which, as we have already discussed, trigger abjection on many levels.⁷⁸ *PGM* IV.2145–2240, for example, closely approximates the necromantic rite performed by Erictho in Lucan's *Pharsalia*. It directs one to inscribe three Homeric verses on an iron lamella and attach it to a person on the point of death, who will then be able to answer any question (2155–57). It instructs: "Attach it to someone condemned and executed, tell him the verses in his ear, and he will tell you everything you wish" (2164–65). Further permutations of this spell involve writing with the blood of someone who died violently (*haimatos biaiou*, 2209), or burying it in the grave/tomb of someone who died untimely or by violence (*aōrou thēkēn/mnēma* 2216, 2222). A "Prayer to Selene" (*PGM* IV.2785–2890) capitalizes on abject imagery in its invocation of the moon goddess: her womb is said to be covered over with the scales of reptiles (2804–5); like Erictho, she dwells amid tombs and devours cadavers (2868–69). Significantly, she is also described as the

source of life and death—"For all things are from you, and in you / eternal one (*aiōniē*), all things reach fulfillment (*teleuta*)" (2839–40). This links the goddess with the womb/tomb described by Kristeva as the primal abject.⁷⁹

The use of nonsense language (*voces mysticae*) in many *defixiones*, especially from the later Roman Empire, constitutes another aspect of magic that can be understood in terms of abjection. Like "abracadabra," these magical words were charged with power and activated the spell when uttered. While these incomprehensible words and phrases have been explained as the appropriate language to communicate with numinous powers and their intermediaries, angels and demons,⁸⁰ they also suggest a breakdown of civilized human communication. They could even be considered a reversion to the pre-linguistic phase of infancy—when one experienced continuity with the source of life—or of neurosis, where rational discourse breaks down in the face of the unconscious and its phobias.⁸¹ According to Kristeva, it is the ability to use language and symbols to communicate that initiates the infant's first steps into individuation from the maternal *chora*. The use of language enables the child to recognize the distinction between self and other; it provides the initial ordering of experience. Entrance into language and the symbolic realm more generally marks the beginning of subjectivity, the maintenance of which is secured throughout our lives by symbol systems, which mediate our experiences. As Noëlle McAfee explains, regarding Kristeva's theory of subjectivity, "The subject is an effect of linguistic processes. In other words, we become who we are as a result of taking part in signifying practices. There is no self-aware self prior to our use of language."⁸² Nonsense, chaos, in short any breakdown of the symbolic order, thus, threaten our sense of meaning and threaten our very self.

In summary, the evidence for the actual practice of ancient magic, while only a pale reflection of the terrifying rituals portrayed in literature, nonetheless reveals many aspects that could trigger abjection. It enabled people to violate social hierarchy and usurp the benefits and privileges destined by Fortuna for those with higher birth, nobler ancestors, or greater talent. It interfered with female chastity and the patriarchal control over wives and daughters, which may also have contributed to transgressing social hierarchy and putting paternal identity in doubt. Most importantly, the ritual binding, burning, stabbing, and consigning to Hades that appear so often in extant spells violate the integrity of individual bodies and wills and provoke a strong revulsion that may explain the highly developed abjection of magic in literary depictions.

What has not been explained is why magic, which was performed by men in equal or greater numbers than women according to the material record, should be associated so strongly with women in the literary imagination. The answer, I propose, may lie in the connection Kristeva draws between primal abjection and women.

The Primal Abject, Women, and Magic

Kristeva identifies the root of all abjection to be the maternal body, which is both the source of our existence and the object from which we must separate to become distinct and autonomous beings. The term Kristeva uses, *chora* (womb or vessel), first appears in Plato's *Timeaus*, where it designates the original vessel of creation: "a receptacle (*hupodoxēn*), a sort of nurse (*tithēnēn*) of all generation" (49a). For Kristeva, *chora* is not so much the mother's womb as it is the sheltered, dependent relationship of the child to her caretaker. It is the space in which identity begins to emerge, "an articulation, a rhythm, but one that precedes language."⁸³ During this earliest stage of life, according to Kristeva, the infant's identity is contiguous with its mother's or caretaker's; the infant does not yet perceive her as a separate person, does not consider her to be an object to the infant's subject. Gradually the child emerges from this state of "plenitude without differentiation"⁸⁴ to become a thinking, speaking, and acting subject. This process, according to Kristeva, is accomplished through the act of abjecting. "The first 'thing' to be abjected is the mother's body, the child's own origin."⁸⁵ Kristeva argues,

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archaeology with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.⁸⁶

For Kristeva, becoming an autonomous self occurs precisely through the act of abjection—first of the mother's body, which reminds us of our birth—and eventually, through the abjection of anything that threatens the body's boundaries, whether physically or symbolically. This separation is never complete. As the quotation above suggests, there always remains a fear of falling back into that comfortable abyss of primal unity and undifferentiated experience.⁸⁷ Abjection "preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be."⁸⁸

The maternal body thus presents an ever-present psychological danger for the child and for society, which must patrol it through taboos and prohibitions.⁸⁹ In fact, Kristeva identifies this fear of and desire for the mother as the origin of incest taboos. The mother's body "becomes a phobic 'object,'"⁹⁰ which must be abjected so that order, identity, and boundaries can be created. Roman depictions of lustful hags, performing seduction spells on young men, echo this revulsion toward the maternal body and a desire to proscribe the phobic place of

origin. Satiric portraits that sexualize the aging female body transgress, and therefore reinforce, this primal taboo whose aim is to segregate sex and death. With their images of wilted flesh, these depictions force the reader to confront mortality, but more significantly, they invite the reader to consider that forbidden “place”—the uncanny womb/tomb, as seen in *PGM* IV.2785–2890, which according to Kristeva is the place of origin that lurks in our unconscious as the primal fear of our possible loss of self and dissolution back into the maternal body.⁹¹ Depictions of women’s magic invite the reader to contemplate that threat and to explore abjection as a violation of the social prohibitions that symbolically proscribe the mother’s body and threaten to annihilate self and society.

Kristeva argues that not only is the mother abject, but all women become abject through an association with her: “Without a way of conceiving the mother that allows us to abject her and come to terms with that abjection, we abject all women.”⁹² Thus, fear that the maternal body poses a threat to individual autonomy and social order is projected onto all women, who categorically become the threatening Other.⁹³ According to Kristeva, it is through the ritualization of defilement—in an effort to contain and control primal abjection—that men have managed to relegate the female sex to the position of Other, identifying women with irrational and dangerous powers: “That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed.”⁹⁴

Kristeva thus draws a direct link between the mother’s body, which the ego has to reject as abject in order for it to develop and for individual identity to emerge, and the position of women as Other. Through this association, the female sex as a whole comes to be identified with abjection, and regarded as a chaotic and dangerous power that needs to be brought under control by the patriarchal powers of law and social order. We see in her logic an explanation for the connection between women, abjection, and magic that pervades ancient representations of magic.

Conclusion

We have seen how depictions of magic in Roman literature express anxiety over controlling the stability and boundaries of the body, thus linking magic with abjection in the context of Roman corporal ideology, which sought to control rigid hierarchical boundaries through patrolling the comportment and integrity of individual bodies. Magic in these portraits engages abject materials such as corpses and defiling funerary implements; it dissolves human bodies, boundaries, and identities as well as it confounds the distinction between human and animal. Magic is imagined to violate social order by inverting gender roles and conferring on women prerogatives like sexual assertion that are traditionally reserved for

men. These depictions suggest that the producers of these literary texts perceived magic as a disturbing and degrading threat to individual integrity and social order: in other words, as abject. The material evidence for ancient magic also indicates that much about ancient magic resonates with Kristeva's conception of abjection: it threatened individual autonomy, corporal sanctity, and patriarchal control over women; it employed macabre ingredients, contact with corpses, and nonsense language (*voces mysticae*) that were saturated with abjection. Thus, it would appear that, while literary depictions are highly exaggerated and stereotyped, the abjection they portray reflects the perception, among at least some people, that magic was transgressive and disturbing, violating boundaries of the body, identity, and social stability.

Furthermore, Kristeva's theory of the primal abject suggests that women are often associated with abjection through the mother's body. This may help clarify the frequent depiction of women's deleterious magic in ancient literature. While men were frequent users of magic in the ancient world, the identification of magic as abject appears to have contributed to the association of magic with women in the literary imagination. In fact, exaggerated and hyperbolic depictions of *women* practicing magic suggest that these gendered portraits helped to communicate the abject quality of magic. Women's Otherness concretized the Otherness of magic, and vice versa. Magic thus comes to be associated primarily with women in the ancient imagination, creating enduring stereotypes of sexually overwrought and infanticidal hags, whose sexuality violates the primal prohibition of the mother's body and its identification with chaos, disorder, and death.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Dayna Kalleres for encouraging me to develop a speculative idea I proposed in an earlier version of "Interrogating the Magic and Gender Connection" into a separate article to fill out the section on literary fantasy and stereotype. Expanding that initial paragraph into a full-blown chapter proved to be much more challenging than anticipated. I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to readers who contributed suggestions and insights along the way: Dayna Kalleres, David Frankfurter, Annette Reed, Nicola Denzey Lewis, Stephanie Cobb, Phil Webster, Connor Steele, and Miriam Peskowitz, who provided editing consultation. Dayna, in particular, has repeatedly offered helpful guidance and encouragement at moments when the project seemed stalled. All translations are my own as are any remaining mistakes.
2. See discussion and citations below.
3. Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 10–11, emphatically rejects psychoanalytic explanations of

- ancient magic. See also criticisms in Marilyn B. Skinner, "Ego mulier: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 132, of Freudian interpretations of Catullus's fraught relationship with his literary mistress.
4. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
5. This contrasts with the current trend in ancient magic studies to regard magic as merely another ritual technology among many available to promote/protect one's interests in competitive ancient Mediterranean societies, without pejorative connotations.
6. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 14. This phase is pre-linguistic but not pre-symbolic. Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 34, 43.
7. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 13.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.
9. *Ibid.*, 13.
10. Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin; Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 49.
11. Skinner, "Ego mulier," 132–33.
12. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
13. McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 29.
14. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
15. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 4.20–21, 30, 32; Chariton *Charea and Callirhoe* 5.9; Xenophon of Ephesus *An Ephesian Tale* 1.1, 1.2; Heliodorus *An Ethiopian Story* 1.20.
16. Soranos D'Éphèse, *Maladies des Femmes livre II*, ed. and trans. by Paul Burguière, Danielle Gourevitch, and Yves Malinas (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1990), 21–24. While Soranus never states that these techniques are explicitly intended for well-born children, his audience is clearly elite. See the discussion in Dale B. Martin *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 25–27.
17. Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentations in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 63, 72 and *passim*, documents this very well.
18. Oribasius 3.31–34; and Galen *De alimentorum facultatibus* 474, 501–2, 528, 560 on the drying or cooling effects of certain foods; Galen *Hygiene* 6.2–5 on specific regimes to manage warm or cold dispositions and to treat pathological conditions. Elizabeth C. Evans, "Galen the Physician as Physiognomist," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 76 (1945), 292–93.
19. Galen *Hygiene* 6.5 and Soranus *Gyn* 1.31 on the dangers of too much sex; Soranus *Gyn* 1.39 on deleterious effects on unborn children of female behavior during sex; Hippocrates *Regimen* 1.27 on following a particular dietary protocol to determine

- the sex of a gestating fetus. Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 32–33; he reminds the reader on p. 37 that this conception of disease belongs primarily to the educated classes.
20. In Athens, for example, judicial torture (*basanos*) could be performed on slaves and foreigners but not citizens. Page du Bois, *Torture and Truth* (New York: Routledge 1991) 37. The refusal to allow one's slaves to be tortured was widely regarded as tantamount to confession since the testimony of slaves produced under duress was highly valued for its reliability (e.g., Demosthenes 30.37; Antiphon 1.6–12). In fact, some orators argued that slaves would only tell the truth *if* tortured, and unlike freemen, slaves revealed *only* truth when tortured (e.g., Lysurgus, against Leocrates, 29–31). Because philosophers, such as Aristotle, argued that slaves lacked independent reason (*logos*) and constituted extensions of their owners' bodies (*Pol.* 1255b), slaves were believed to respond more readily to physical suffering than free men did, who could, through exercise of reason, give false testimony and withstand intense pain (*Antiphon* 5.42, 49–50; *Isaios* 8.12). In fact, the ability to maintain silence despite extraordinary anguish was coded as an aristocratic virtue that marked a “natural” (*kata physin*) boundary between slave and free. See also Richard Bauman, *Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Peter Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).
 21. Cicero praised *munera* for this edifying capacity (*Tusc.* 2.41). See also Erik Gunderson, “The Ideology of the Arena,” *Classical Antiquity* 15 (1996), 117; and Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 28–29.
 22. The aversion to execution for citizens, especially nobles, was so ingrained that during the Catiline conspiracy, Pompey first had to declare that the conspirators renounced their citizenship before he could seek the death penalty for them as foreigners (*Sall. Cat.* 51.18). It is important to note that while capital punishment for Roman citizens (even members of the nobility) became more common during the Principate, nobles were not subjected to the degradation of the arena. Instead they were given the opportunity to commit suicide in the privacy of their homes. Bauman, *Crime and Punishment*, 12. Thus, even while the boundaries of their bodies were violated by the power of the emperor, demonstrating his ultimate and unchallengeable authority, their dignity remained intact. Courageous suicide was regarded as a noble form of death, which increased honor rather than detracted from it.
 23. Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege*, 127; Bauman, *Crime and Punishment*, 133.
 24. Jonathan Walters, “Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1997), 34, suggests that this ambiguity is responsible for Roman reticence to refer publicly to the sexual act within marriage.
 25. Anne Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) 135–70, is the classic statement on this for Ancient Greece.

26. Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 114.
27. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
28. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 75.
29. I wish to thank Connor Steele for drawing my attention to the relationship between humor and abjection in so many of these texts.
30. Humor and abjection operate in tandem again in this text.
31. The ritual specialist who resuscitates the dead man is described as a prophet and is presented in respectful language. Nonetheless, temporary revivification of a corpse to reveal hidden knowledge, as in *Pharsalia*, appears uncanny, and conforms to the abject theme of the entire novel.
32. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12–13, original emphasis.
33. *Ibid.*, 4.
34. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 297.
35. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 33–35.
36. *Ibid.*, 101.
37. See discussion in Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 79–96.
38. Drawing on depictions such as this one, Matthew W. Dickie, “Who Practised Love-Magic in Classical Antiquity and in the Late Roman World?” *The Classical Quarterly* (New Series), 50, no. 2 (2000): 581–82 argues that, in fact, lust and the desire to attract men sexually motivate most women’s magic in ancient Rome. See also Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 89–90, 178–81.
39. Amy Richlin, “Invective against Women in Roman Satire,” *Arethusa* 17 (1984): 71.
40. See, for example, Christopher Faraone, “Sex and Power: Male-Targeting Aphrodisiacs in the Greek Magical Tradition,” *Helios* 19 (1992): 92–103; Christopher Faraone, “Clay Hardens and Wax Melts: Magical Role-Reversal in Vergil’s Eighth Eclogue,” *CP* 84 (1989): 294–300; Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 153.
41. There are competing theories about how the *iunx* worked. See A.S.F. Gow, “ΙΥΤΞ, POMBOΣ, Rhombus Turbo,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 54 (1934): 1–13; Sarah Iles Johnston, “The Song of the *Iynx*: Magic and Rhetoric in *Pythian* 4,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 125 (1995): 177–206; and Christopher Faraone, “The Wheel, the Whip and Other Implements of Torture: Erotic Magic in Pindar *Pythian* 4.213–19,” *The Classical Journal* 88 (1993): 1–19.
42. Scholars have debated whether or not she represents a new liberated woman and changing social mores in Hellenistic Alexandria or behavior more representative of a courtesan. See Frederick T. Griffiths, “Home Before Lunch: The Emancipated Woman in Theocritus,” in *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Helene P. Foley (New York, London, Paris: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1981), 247–74; and Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 154, who includes earlier bibliography for his position.

43. Interestingly, adultery does not figure as a theme in Greek representations of magic.
44. Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 275–76.
45. Amy Richlin, “Approaches to the Sources on Adultery,” *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Helene P. Foley (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1981), 379–80, 382. Under the *lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis*, sexual liaisons between an unmarried freeborn woman and a man were treated the same as adultery, incurring the heavy penalty of exile, loss of half the woman’s dowry and a third of her property. The man involved was also penalized, losing half his property and going into exile. See also Judith Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 83–84.
46. Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 34.
47. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality*, 34. See also Kristina Milnor, *Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
48. John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 78.
49. Gager, for example, organizes *Curse Tablets* around five main areas of human interaction characterized by competition; Christopher Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” in *Magika Hiera*, ed. Christopher Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11, identifies competition between “rival tradesmen, lovers, litigants, or athletes concerned with the outcome of some future event” to be the primary social factor generating the production and consumption of ancient magic (*defixiones*).
50. Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.
51. Eidinow, *Oracles*, 4.
52. I am not including amulets that were apotropaic or medicinal in this discussion, but rather rituals that were recognized and labeled with one of the various terms for “magic.” See Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 12–15, 156.
53. Dierk Wortmann, “Neue magische Texte,” *Bonner Jahrbücher* 168 (1968): 88–90; see also Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 105.
54. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 21.
55. *Ibid.*, 22.
56. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context”, 8.
57. John Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 87–88.
58. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, 89.
59. See Ramsay MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire* (London: Routledge, 1966), chs. 3 and 4; Hans G. Kippenberg,

- "Magic in Roman Civil Discourse: Why Rituals Could Be Illegal," in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 137–63; Robert K. Ritner, "The Religious, Social, and Legal Parameters of Traditional Egyptian Magic," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 43–60; C. R. Phillips III, "*Nullum Crimen Sine Lege*: Socioreligious Sanctions on Magic," in *Magika Hiera*, ed. Christopher Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 260–76; James B. Rives, "Magic in the XII Tables Revisited," *Classical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2002): 270–90; James B. Rives, "Magic in Roman Law: The Reconstruction of a Crime," *Classical Antiquity* 22, no. 2 (2003): 313–39; Giuseppe Veltri, "Defining Forbidden Foreign Customs: Some Remarks on the Rabbinic Halakhah of Magic," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies, Div. C, Thought and Literature.*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1994), 25–32; Collins, "Theoris of Lemnos and the Criminalization of Magic in Fourth-Century Athens," *Classical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2001): 477–93.
60. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 21.
 61. Cicero, *Brut.* 217 and *Orat.* 128–29; Libanius, 1.245–49. See Campbell Bonner, "Witchcraft in the Lecture Room of Libanius," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 63 (1932): 34–44; and Christopher Faraone, "An Accusation of Magic in Classical Athens (AR. *Wasps* 946–48)," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974): 119 (1989): 149–60.
 62. SGD 167, DT 237. Cited in Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 55–56, 61.
 63. DT 86, Dt 68. Cited in Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 85–86, 90.
 64. Faraone, "The Agonistic Context", 10–11.
 65. Faraone, "The Agonistic Context", 20. See also Frankfurter's and Ripat's contributions to this volume for thoughtful considerations of the petitioner's point of view. This study seeks to understand why magic generated such strongly abject depictions and was associated frequently with women's subversive activities; it is not intended to condemn or derogate the practice of magic in the ancient world.
 66. L. Cilliers and F. P. Retief, "Poisons, Poisoning and the Drug Trade in Ancient Rome," *Akroterion* 45 (2000): 90.
 67. The anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard offers a seminal account of this phenomenon. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, abridged with an introduction by Eva Gillies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 18–32. See also Peter Brown, "Sorcery, Demons and the Rise of Christianity: From Late Antiquity Into the Middle Ages," in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, ed. Mary Douglas (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 24–25, who notes specifically the case of Libanius.
 68. Percentage derived from Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 43 n. 9. Jason of the Argonauts is a rare exception in Pindar's *Pythian Ode* 4:217. On the preponderance of male attraction spells, see also Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 244–45; Winkler,

- Constraints*, 72; and Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 185.
69. Matthew Dickie, "Who Practices Love-Magic," 567, argues that the female targets of erotic magic were largely prostitutes or lower-class women of ill-repute, who were sexually experienced and available or could be easily made available with magical assistance. Even in this case, however, magic would interfere with and subvert other men's rights to these women, including owners of prostitute-slaves and men in relationships with concubines. Dickie often cites evidence from early Christian writers, but in this case he does not. According to the stereotype in early Christian writings (first to third century), men used magic to target chaste virgins of the church. See note 71.
 70. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 166.
 71. Only early Christian writings represent the situation more accurately, although there as well the portrayals of women's responses to men's magic conform to ideological and theological scripts and cannot be read as merely descriptive and unbiased. See Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 138–39. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 80–81, argues that even the relatively small number of erotic spells commissioned by women demonstrate female agency and sexual subjectivity. Of course, there is always the likelihood that women's magic tended to use more perishable household items that do not survive in the archaeological record, in which case the material record is skewed toward representing men's magic. See Richard Gordon, "Aelian's Peony: The Location of Magic in Graeco-Roman Tradition," *Comparative Criticism* 9 (1987): 64–65; and Richard Gordon, "Lucan's Erictho," in *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble*, ed. Michael Whitby, et al. (Bristol: Bristol Classical, 1987), 231–41. See also Dickie, "Who Practices Love-Magic," 567, 573–76, for examples of erotic magic on behalf of women.
 72. Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 186.
 73. Winkler, *Constraints*, 97.
 74. Richlin, "Approaches to the Sources on Adultery at Rome," 391–93; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 13. While Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality*, 51–52, notes that there does not appear to have been much concern about confirming children's paternity in ancient Rome (despite the claim that aristocratic women were rampantly committing adultery), she does suggest that accusations and fears of poisoning symbolically reflect "concern with women's capacity to 'pollute' their husbands' lines by conceiving children in adulterous relationships."

On the similar problem of establishing paternity in classical Athens, see Adele C. Scafuro, "Witnessing and False Witnessing: Proving Citizenship and Kin Identity in Fourth-Century Athens," in *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*, ed. Alan Boegehold and Adele Scafuro (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 156–98; David Konstan, "Premarital Sex, Illegitimacy, and Male Anxiety in Menander and Athens," in *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*, ed. Alan Boegehold and Adele Scafuro (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University

- Press, 1994), 217–35; Cynthia Patterson, “The Case Against Neaira and the Public Ideology of the Athenian Family,” in *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*, ed. Alan Boegehold and Adele Scafuro (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 199–216; and Alan Boegehold, “Perikles’ Citizenship Law of 451/0 B.C.,” in *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*, ed. Alan Boegehold and Adele Scafuro (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 57–66.
75. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 22; Faraone, “The Agonistic Context”, 8.
76. *PGM* I.248–49, eye of an ape or someone who died violently (*nekuos biothanatou*); *PGM* IV.2886, blood of someone who suffered violence (*Biaiou haima*); *PGM* VII.186–90 foot of a blood-eating gecko; *PGM* II.45–49, brain and right hoof of black ram, brain of ibis, as well as clothing of someone who died violently. This spell also requires petitioner to walk backward, suggesting abjectionary inversion. *PGM* III.1–10 requires petitioner to drown a cat and blame violence on an enemy as a curse; *PGM* I.285, wolf’s eye is an ingredient, but may be code for an innocuous plant substance. See Lynn R. LiDonnici, “Beans, Fleawort, and the Blood of a Hamadryas Baboon: Recipe Ingredients in Greco-Roman Magical Materials,” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 359–77.
77. David Frankfurter, “Fetus Magic and Sorcery Fears in Roman Egypt,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 46 (2006): 37–62.
78. It is possible that literary depictions influenced the practice of actual magic. See Kimberly Stratton, “Magic in the Greco-Roman World up to and Including the Republic,” in *Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West*, ed. David J. Collins (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
79. See the discussion of the Primal Abject, below.
80. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 9–10; S. J. Tambiah, “The Magical Power of Words,” *Man* 3 (1966): 171–208; Patricia Cox Miller, “In Praise of Nonsense,” in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 481–505.
81. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 6–7.
82. Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.
83. McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 18.
84. *Ibid.*, 35.
85. *Ibid.*, 48.
86. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 13, italics original.
87. Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 55.
88. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 10.
89. Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, 56.
90. *Ibid.*, 58.
91. McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 48–49. This can be confirmed, perhaps, by Amy Richlin’s findings that “female genitalia are compared in Latin with foul, wet, enclosed spaces and with the enclosure of the tomb.” See Richlin, “Invective,” 74.

92. Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, 160.
93. "Nevertheless, no matter what differences there may be among societies where religious prohibitions, which are above all behavior prohibitions, are supposed to afford protection from defilement, one sees everywhere the importance, both social and symbolic, of women and particularly the mother." Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 70.
94. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 70.