

“And You Will See ...”

Second Person Narration, Enargeia, and Textual Immersion in the “Mithras Liturgy”

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And then you again say the “Silence” formula, then open your eyes and you will see the open doors and the cosmos of the gods, which is inside the doors, so that your spirit races from the joy and the delight of the sight and rises up.¹



The ritual recipe in a section of a fourth century CE magical formulary, misleadingly known as the Mithras Liturgy, stands out as peculiar even in the context of the other spells within the codex. Although Albrecht Dieterich’s claim that it is a remnant of an authentic Mithraic ritual has generally been rejected, his name has stuck for this ritual that labels itself as an immortalization (ἀπαθανατισμός) enabling the practitioner to obtain an oracular revelation. The text, itself introduced as a revelation, via an archangel, from the great god Mithras and capped by a set of practical instructions, features a large central narrative section that describes the practitioner’s ascent into the immortal realm. This journey through the otherworld provides a vision of cosmology that can be analyzed and compared with other cosmological visions in ascent texts, but the underlying cosmology provides little insight into who this practitioner might be.²

1 GEMF 57 = PGM IV.623–628. *ὡς δὲ πάλιν λέγει, ἐγγή (λόγος), εἶτα ἀνοιξον τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς καὶ ὄψῃ ἀνεωγυῖας τὰς θύρας καὶ τὸν κόσμον τῶν θν, ὅς ἐστιν ἐντὸς τῶν θυρῶν, ὥστε ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ θεάματος ἡδονῆς καὶ τῆς χαρᾶς τὸ πνεῦμά σου συντρέχειν καὶ ἀναβαίνειν.*

2 Cp. Radcliffe G. Edmonds, “At the Seizure of the Moon: The Absence of the Moon in the Mithras Liturgy,” in *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, eds. S. Noegel, J. Walker, and B. Wheeler (Penn State University Press, 2003), 223–239; Radcliffe G. Edmonds, “The Faces of the Moon: Cosmology, Genesis, and the Mithras Liturgy,” in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, eds. Ra’anan S. Boustán and Annette

Since the murky circumstances surrounding the discovery of the text among the magical formularies of the so-called Anastasi cache or Theban magical library offer no contextual evidence for the creator or user of the codex, scholars have speculated about where the Mithras Liturgy might have come from and who might have performed such a ritual.³ While Dieterich postulates a Mithraic initiate, Merkelbach imagines an Egyptian priest being consecrated to the god Pshai-Aion. Such interpretations assume that there must have been an original religious ritual that was corrupted into a magical one, substituting a practical divinatory end for the original immortalization and purification of the spirit, an authentically religious experience. Others have suggested that an Egyptian temple ritual for divination has been bastardized and taken over for the private purposes of a magician, who must nevertheless still be a temple priest, educated in the scribal traditions of the temple.⁴ All these hypotheses, however, ignore the construction of the text itself. An analysis of the peculiar form of the text, especially the second person narration of the ascent, reveals that it is constructed, at the most basic level of grammar and syntax, in very different ways from other ritual instructions, whether Egyptian temple rites or even other recipes in the magical formularies. The second person narration also distinguishes it from other kinds of narratives of ascent through the heavens, familiar from Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions.

In the absence of historical context, the text itself can provide clues to who might have been reading it. Any text constructs its implied reader by the way it conveys its narrative, by what it includes, and what it assumes. As Umberto Eco notes, “it will be only the text itself—such as it is made—that tells us which kind of reader it postulates.”⁵ In narratological terms, the reader to whom the

Yoshiko Reed (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 275–295; Sarah Iles Johnston, “Rising to the Occasion: Theurgic Ascent in Its Cultural Milieu,” in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1997), 165–194; and Hans Dieter Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 32–38 for various explorations of the cosmology. See Adela Yarbro Collins, “Traveling Up and Away: Journeys to the Upper and Outer Regions of the World,” in *Greco-Roman Culture and the New Testament*, eds. David E. Aune and Frederick Brenk (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 135–166 for an overview of heavenly ascent texts.

3 See Korshi Dosoo, “A History of the Theban Magical Library,” *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 53 (2016): 251–274 on the Theban magical library.

4 Cp. Albrecht Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903); Reinhold Merkelbach and Maria Totti-Gemünd, *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri Religiösen und Magischen Inhalts*, 5 vols. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990–1996), 3:29–40, esp. 29–32.

5 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 10.

narrative of the text is addressed, the narratee, plays a vital role in the composition of the text, and the analysis of the ways this narratee is constructed can provide deeper insights into the text.⁶

While all texts connect the reader to the world of the text to some degree, the Mithras Liturgy immerses the reader in the text to a much greater extent than other ritual texts or heavenly ascent narratives. As Rutger Allan explains,

The experience of immersion is a scalar phenomenon. Readers can feel themselves being immersed in the storyworld to various degrees. The more a text enables the reader to construct an experiential simulation of the described situation (e.g. by means of words or other linguistic cues), the more intense the feeling of immersion will be.⁷

The Mithras Liturgy creates an intense feeling of immersion for its narratee, who is constructed by the text as a practitioner undergoing the experience of the ritual.

The Mithras Liturgy constructs a narratee very directly, using second person address and imperatives to dictate what the reader is doing—"say the 'Silence' formula, then open your eyes and you will see ..." The second person narration of the Mithras Liturgy distinguishes it from other forms of ritual instruction or ascent narrative, but this peculiar narrative style does not only depend upon the second person addresses. The Mithras Liturgy provides a narrative, a storyline with a character (you) moving through a sequence of events, and that narrative is characterized by vivid descriptions. All three of these features help provide an extraordinary immersive effect of the narrative, breaking the wall between the reader and the text to enable the reader to experience the narrative more directly. The reader as constructed by the text is not imagined as a temple priest or member of a Mithraic community performing a theatrical liturgy; the text instead provides for any reader willing to engage with the text a vivid immersive experience, as the repetition of "you will see" brings the visions before the mind's eye and places the reader in the midst of the action.

6 "The narratee is one of the fundamental elements of all narration. The thorough examination of what he represents, the study of a narrative work as constituted by a series of signals addressed to him, can lead to a more sharply delineated reading and a deeper characterization of the work." Gerald Prince, "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 24.

7 Rutger J. Allan, "Narrative Immersion: Some Linguistic and Narratological Aspects," in *Experience, Narrative, and Criticism in Ancient Greece: Under the Spell of Stories*, eds. J. Grethlein, L. Huitink, and A. Tagliabue (Oxford, 2019), 17.

The ideal reader of the Mithras Liturgy is thus an individual skilled—through innate talent and/or philosophical training—at becoming absorbed in the world of the text, one who can take on the persona of the narratee experiencing direct contact with the divine.

1 Second Person Narration

The direct second person address in the Mithras Liturgy creates a metaleptic effect—that is, it breaks the wall between the reader and the text, while the narration in the second person allows the text to create and shape the image of its reader through its descriptions of the reader's actions and reactions.

Modern narratological theory provides subtle tools for analyzing the ways that different kinds of focalization bring the reader to the text by shaping the perspective through which the action of the narrative is perceived. As Marie-Laure Ryan explains in her discussion of virtual reality effects, “The imaginative transportation of the reader's virtual body into the scene of the events is facilitated by a variety of narrative strategies.” Chief among these strategies is “internal and variable focalization (representing characters as subjects) versus external focalization (looking at characters as objects).”⁸ Seeing the world of the narrative through the eyes of one of the characters, rather than observing the scene from a distanced perspective, helps draw a reader in. When the character through whose ideas the narrative world is presented is not that of a narrator within the text or even a third person character whose perspective is focalized, but rather the “you,” the reader of the text, this immersive effect is greatly magnified.⁹

The ancient rhetoricians call this technique of addressing the reader directly apostrophe, and they remark on its powerful effect. As Quintilian says, “This Figure has something particularly vivid about it; the facts seem not to be told us, but to be happening.”¹⁰ Longinus explains the way this second person address makes the reader feel part of the narration. “All such passages

8 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 95.

9 As Kacandes comments, “Linguistic properties of the second-person pronoun invite the hypothesis that one also reacts strongly to apostrophe because one can so easily become the ‘you’ and thus feel oneself called into the relationship it creates.” Irene Kacandes, “Narrative Apostrophe: Reading, Rhetoric, Resistance in Michel Butor’s ‘La Modification’ and Julio Cortázar’s ‘Graffiti,’” *Style* 28, no. 3 (1994): 331.

10 Quintilian 9.2.43. *Habet haec figura manifestius aliquid: non enim narrari res sed agi videtur.*

with a direct personal address put the hearer in the presence of the action itself."¹¹ Modern narratologists describe this effect of breaking down the barrier between reader and text with Genette's term of metalepsis. As Irene de Jong explains, "the metalepsis involved in apostrophe creates pragmatically marked moments: for an instant, the distinction between the—temporal and spatial—universes of the narrator and the narrated world collapses."¹²

The second person address also enables the text to directly construct the image of its reader, especially when the address is not a momentary aside (a true apostrophe) but an extended narration. Such long narratives in the second person are vanishingly rare in the ancient literature, and even in post-modern literature narratives entirely in the second person tend to be few and experimental in nature. The second person address identifies the narratee directly with the reader, requiring the assent of the reader to that role if the narrative is to succeed at all. In post-modern literature, this situation creates a playful challenge for the reader, who may or may not be willing to consent to the role which the narrative assigns. In a prescriptive text like the Mithras Liturgy, however, the reader who chooses to engage with the text adopts the role constructed by the text, a role whose actions are described in vivid detail.

The sheer number of prescriptions for action distinguish the Mithras Liturgy from other texts that address the reader, even other magical formulary recipes. The main narrative section, from lines 538–732, contains over twenty imperatives within those 200 lines of text. The range of actions, however, is fairly limited; the narratee is instructed to direct the gaze at certain things and to make a few gestures (like kissing the amulet or putting a finger to the lips) but, above all, to speak. These utterances can range from intelligible speech to incomprehensible *voces magicae* to hissing and popping noises and even to mooing.

What transforms these imperatives from a collection of instructions into a second person narrative, however, is the series of second person singular future verbs that describe the sequence of events that occur in response to the actions of the imperatives. Nearly all of these verbs involve perception; most notably ὄψῃ, "you will see," occurs sixteen times.¹³ The prescription of the narratee's sense impressions within the world of the narrative enhances the immersive effect; that narratee neither sees nor hears anything in the mortal

11 Longinus 26.2. πάντα δὲ τὰ τοιαῦτα πρὸς αὐτὰ ἀπεριδόμενα τὰ πρόσωπα ἐπ' αὐτῶν ἵστησι τὸν ἀκροατὴν τῶν ἐνεργουμένων.

12 I. J. F. de Jong, "Metalepsis in Ancient Greek Literature," in *Narratology and Interpretation: The Content of Narrative Form in Ancient Literature*, eds. Jonas Grethlein and Antonios Rengakos (Berlin/Boston, Germany: De Gruyter, Inc., 2009), 96.

13 *GEMF* 57 = *PGM* IV.537, 542, 544, 544, 550, 555, 556, 565, 579, 583, 624, 635, 656, 661, 693, 702; a variation appears in 569 (ἴδης).

world outside the text but perceives only the immortal world into which the ascent is being made. “And you will hear nothing human nor of another living thing, neither will you see anything mortal on earth in that hour, but you will see all immortal things.”¹⁴ In addition to the visions that you will see, the narratee’s other senses are engaged. “Saying these things, you will hear thunder and turmoil from (your) surroundings, and likewise you will feel yourself disturbed.”¹⁵ Hearing is mentioned a few more times, and there is one reference to activating the five senses while making a bovine bellow; these references further immerse the senses of the narratee within the world of the narrative. The narrative moves forward with a succession of imperatives of an action for you to do, followed by the result that you will see, creating a sequence of events in which the second person narratee is directly involved at all times.¹⁶

While modern practices of guided affective imagery often offer a series of instructions to visualize various scenes, they are most often narrated in the present tense, in contrast to the future verbs of the Mithras Liturgy. However, taken in conjunction with the imperatives, these future verbs may be understood, in the terminology of Christopher Faraone, as “performative futures.” Drawing on the speech-act theories of J. L. Austin and others, Faraone shows how such performative futures have an almost illocutionary force; that is, they make the thing happen just by saying it.¹⁷ To say “you will see” is—in the context of a ritual—tantamount to *making* you see it.

Such modern practices of guided affective imagery, however, whether in psychotherapy or in a religious context, provide a closer analogy to the narrative of the Mithras Liturgy than Egyptian temple ritual instructions or apocalyptic visions of ascents to the heavens. The sequence of second person addresses and imperatives that focus on sense imagery in many of these meditative exercises resembles the narratological construction of the Mithras Liturgy, regardless of whether the aim of the exercise is to bring calm by imagining a pleasant

14 GEMF 57 = PGM IV.541–544. οὐδενὸς δὲ ἀκούσει [οἱ] ὅτε ἀνθρώπου οὔτε ζώου ἄλλου, δὲ ὄψῃ οὐδὲν τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς θνητῶν ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ, πάντα δὲ ὄψῃ ἀθάνατα.

15 GEMF 57 = PGM IV.620–623. ταῦτά σου εἰπόντος ἀκούσει βροντῆς καὶ κλόνου τοῦ περιέχοντος, ὁμοίως δὲ σεαυτὸν αἰσθηθήσει ταρακκόμενον. Note the genitive absolute σου εἰπόντος as another form of indicating the actions of the second person narratee.

16 The few exceptional cases of third person verbs accentuate the frequency of the second person action. The course of the planetary gods appears (φανήσεται) in line 549, and the seven pole-lords come forth (προέρχονται) in 673, but almost all of the other elements of the scenes are described as things seen.

17 Cp. Christopher A. Faraone, “The ‘Performative Future’ in Three Hellenistic Incantations and Theocritus’ Second Idyll,” *Classical Philology* 90, no. 1 (1995): 1–15, who, however, discusses first-person statements.

location, to confront a repressed anxiety, or to develop a closer relationship with the deity, as in the famous Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. The parallel construction of the text creates a similar effect of immersion for the second person addressee in all these cases.¹⁸

By contrast, the instructions for Egyptian rituals that survive on papyri such as the Bremner-Rhind papyrus show a different pattern of address and create a different effect. While there are some imperative forms, the instructions appear mostly in the third person.¹⁹ Even when there are addresses to a second person "you," there is no reference to the sensory experiences of the narratee; the focus is on the action performed, not the performer.²⁰ The text does not immerse the reader in the world of the narrative but maintains the distance between the worlds.

The Mithras Liturgy also differs from other ancient apocalyptic visions of an ascent through the heavens, as Sarah Iles Johnston has pointed out, since those narratives always appear either as first person accounts or third person narrations.²¹ As André-Jean Festugière notes, such accounts are also set in the past, in contrast to a future narration.²² A first person account of a heavenly ascent imbues the narrative with the authority of speaker, usually a legendary figure from the past like Enoch or Abraham, and even a third person account, such as Plato's story of Er, provides a frame that bolsters the authority

18 Tanya M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020) discusses practices that lead to such immersion or absorption, "It turns out that deliberately cultivating the inner senses—the practice at the heart of evangelical prayer and modern magic—has more or less the same effect as absorption does. Inner sense cultivation is the deliberate, repeated use of inner visual representation and other inner sensory experience" (Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 72, with reference to Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, p. 74). Her scholarly focus has been on modern magical practices (Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, 1st Harvard University Press paperback ed. [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991]) and evangelical Christian communities (Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, 1st ed. [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012]), but her more recent work explores the idea in a wider variety of religious practices.

19 Bremner-Rhind papyrus III 23.6–7 in R. O. Faulkner, "The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus: III: D. The Book of Overthrowing 'Apep,'" *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 23, no. 2 (1937).

20 Bremner-Rhind papyrus III 23.10–13 in Faulkner, "The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus: III."

21 Johnston, "Rising to the Occasion," 169, pointing to the second person addresses in the Mithras Liturgy and Chaldaean Oracles.

22 "La différence d'avec ces récits apocalyptiques est que l'expérience n'a pas été ici réalisée dans le passé, elle est à réaliser, et justement la *Recette* donne les moyens de la réaliser." A. J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, 4 vols. (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1944, reprint Les Belles Lettres, 2014), 3.171 (1271).

of the account with the weight of an imagined ancient tradition. By contrast, the direct revelation of the Mithras Liturgy claims authority by its immediacy; there is no loss of accuracy through a long transmission, nor is there any distance in time between the revelation and the reader.²³

2 Temporal Sequencing Effects

Greek hexametrical oracles are often characterized by second person future addresses and imperatives, but they do not create an extended narrative with a sequence of scenes that brings the reader into the world of the text in an immersive fashion.²⁴ The narrative pacing of the Mithras Liturgy, by contrast, also contributes to the immersive effect upon the reader as narratee; the “you” of the text is guided through a series of scenes in rapid succession, without distancing devices that separate the narratee from the text. The reader experiences the sequence of scenes as if in real time, and temporal markers within the text reinforce the pace. The narrative unfolds as a continuous set of action scenes, not as a discontinuous set of tableaux that are keyed to a hypothetical Mithraic order, as some scholars since Dieterich have argued.

Narratological analysis helps to uncover the devices in the text that create the effects, although ancient rhetorical theories are less explicit about the effects of temporal pacing than modern theorists. As Ryan points out in her analysis of virtual reality sequences, the temporal distance between the narrator and the addressee can create a distancing effect that inhibits immersion within the narration, but “spatio-temporal immersion takes place when this distance is reduced to zero.”²⁵ Allan describes some of the devices that enable this reduction of the temporal distance, providing “verisimilitude” to the narrative.²⁶ One is that the narrative “progresses at a relatively slow pace

23 Cp. Johnston, “Rising to the Occasion,” 166–169. Collins, “Traveling Up and Away,” provides a useful typology of heavenly ascents, but she focuses on *who* ascends and *why*, rather than *how* the ascent is narrated.

24 For these features in oracles, see Radcliffe Edmonds, “Sacred Scripture or Oracles for the Dead? The Semiotic Situation of the ‘Orphic’ Gold Tablets,” in *The “Orphic” Gold Tablets and Greek Religion: Further Along the Path*, ed. Radcliffe Edmonds (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 257–270.

25 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 130. Cp. “One of the most variable parameters of narrative art is the imaginative distance between the position of narrator and addressee and the time and place of the narrated events. Spatio-temporal immersion takes place when this distance is reduced to near zero.” Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 93.

26 Allan, “Narrative Immersion: Some Linguistic and Narratological Aspects,” 17.

(scene narration: narration time approximates narrated time)." That is, there are no event summaries that compress the extended narrative to a momentary mention, e.g., "the battle lasted three hours." Instead, each move and stage of the action is narrated in roughly the time that would elapse for those actions. This narrative is continuous and remains in order; it "advances in chronological order (no flashbacks / flashforwards)," without any of the narrative manipulations of time that create other literary effects (suspense, explanation, etc.) but inhibit the reader's direct immersion in the narrative.

The Mithras Liturgy creates a narrative for the second-person narratee that collapses the distance between the world of the reader and the world of the text by narrating a sequence of actions in near real time correspondence. Although Hans Dieter Betz, following Dieterich, breaks the narrative into a set of seven tableaux that correspond with a hypothesized set of Mithraic stages—the seven-gated ladder (κλίμαξ ἑπταπύλος) mentioned by Origen, those divisions actually ignore the way that the text provides a near continuous sequence of scenes marked by actions and signaled by temporal markers within the text.²⁷

I would argue that there are nearly forty separate scenes that take place in the narrative, each marked by a verb either in the imperative or the second person singular future (such as the sixteen uses of ὃψῃ—you will see). This sequence of actions is marked by the periodic uses of the particle δέ, appearing with its basic sense of "and then" no less than twenty times. Other temporal markers highlight the shifts between action scenes as well. ἔπειτα appears three times, while εἴτα and τότε both appear twice to provide a more emphatic sense of "then next" than the simple δέ. In five places, the temporal coordinating conjunction ὅταν appears to set up a sequence of events, usually "when X happens, then you will see Y." The rapid pacing of the sequence is marked by the repetition, in nine places, of the adverb εὐθέως, immediately or straightaway.²⁸ These temporal markers are much more densely clustered than in most narratives, powerfully reinforcing the chronological sequence of actions in the narration of the Mithras Liturgy.

By contrast, instructions for Egyptian temple rituals generally provide little in the way of temporal markers, merely specifying a time for the performance of the ritual rather than narrating the performance of the ritual in real time. The 'Apep ritual in the Bremner-Rhind papyrus, for example, provides

27 Origen *Contra Cels.* 6.22. Cp. Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy,"* 134–141; Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, 80–92. For a contrary view, cp. Edmonds, "At the Seizure of the Moon," 226–228; Edmonds, "The Faces of the Moon," 276–281.

28 The adjective εὐθύς, from which it is derived, means "straight" in a spatial sense, so the temporal usage of the word suggests the linear and continuous flow of time.

instructions on what the performer should do, as well as days and times in which the ritual is to be performed.²⁹ Although the recipe provides instructions for making images of 'Apep in wax and on papyrus, the process of making these images is not narrated in a step by step sequence, nor is there any description of what 'Apep should look like—that knowledge is presumed for the reader. The temporal framework of the ritual is laid out as a set of points at which the ritual is to be performed, certain hours of the day and certain days in the month.

Other comparisons show the unusual nature of the collapses of the temporal distance in the Mithras Liturgy. Greek hexameter oracles are not only marked by second person addresses and imperatives, but they often include a temporal component—when X happens, then do Y.³⁰ The feature is so common that Aristophanes includes it at the start of his mock oracle in the *Birds*. “**But when** the wolves and the white crows| dwell together between Corinth and Sicyon,| **sacrifice** first a white-fleeced ram to Pandora.”³¹ The construction in these oracles offers instructions for the future, triggered by a particular occurrence. The Mithras Liturgy, however, includes five such constructions with ὅταν, marking not the singular moment foretold by the divine oracle but rather just another part of the narrative sequence. The reader remains in the moment-by-moment narration, following the sequence of actions, rather than awaiting the arrival of the time foretold.

The wild and vivid imagery of the Mithras Liturgy has led some to speculate that these visions should be considered dream images or drug-induced hallucinations. The coherence of the temporal sequence, however, strongly tells against such a hypothesis, since such dreams and hallucinations are generally marked by an unclear temporality, where a coherent sequence of actions is notably absent.³²

29 Bremner-Rhind papyrus III 23.6–9 in Faulkner, “The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus: III.”

30 E.g., Pausanias 9.17.5. See Edmonds, “Sacred Scripture or Oracles for the Dead?” for a discussion of the semiotic features of verse oracles. Herodotus 8.77.1, in arguing for the validity of oracles, gives the examples of an oracle of Bakis that foretold the Persian defeat.

31 Aristophanes, *Birds*, 967–968, 971. ἀλλ’ ὅταν οἰκήσωσι λύκοι πολιαί τε κορώναι| ἐν ταυτῷ τῷ μεταξὺ Κορίνθου καὶ Σικυῶνος,| πρῶτον Πανδώρα θύσαι λευκότριχα κριόν·

32 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 35–42 imagines that the practitioner inhales hallucinogenic smoke (following the mistaken reading of Christian H. Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 186 (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 417–418 of κυφε in 511 as a reference to the incense *kyphi*, rather than a *vox magica* used as a special name) and sees visions from hallucinogenic elements in the ointment, but none of the ingredients listed

3 Enargeia

The vivid visual images of the Mithras Liturgy are perhaps its most notable feature, and narrative theorists both ancient and modern comment on the way that vivid imagery (*enargeia*) serves to immerse the reader in the narrative. Detailed descriptions, especially of figures in motion, heightens the engagement of the reader with the world of the text, and, while visual imagery is generally the most striking, texts that engage other senses augment the power of the narrative immersion.

As Ryan points out, among the various narrative devices that facilitate "the imaginative transportation of the reader's virtual body into the scene of the events," a detailed description—rather than a summary—of the scene is significant.³³ Allan likewise includes such details among the elements that create verisimilitude. The most effective narrative "provides graphic sensory details," for vision or other senses, "provides detailed spatial information," which helps the reader imagine themselves positioned within the space of the narrative, and "activates (cultural) knowledge schemas (cognitive frames) which enable the addressee to 'complete the picture' mentally."³⁴ This latter component engages the reader to fill in the details that are not explicitly enumerated, drawing on the cultural background shared by the author and audience.

This technique is noted by the ancient theorist, Quintilian, who analyzes how Cicero's description of stragglers at the end of a party prompts readers to fill in the details of the scene from their knowledge of such symposia so that they feel as if they see everything they would have had had they actually been there. "Could anyone be so unimaginative," he asks, "as not to feel that he is seeing the persons and the place and the dress, and to add some unspoken details for himself into the bargain?"³⁵ Not every single descriptive detail needs to be included to enable the reader to get a clear and vivid picture of the scene. Webb discusses how Quintilian relies on the audience's understanding of the resonances of certain cultural cues to shape their imaginative process of filling

can be shown to have appropriate properties, even assuming that their efficacy would have remained unmentioned in the text. On the comparison with dreams, cp. Richard Gordon, "Reporting the Marvellous: Private Divination in the Greek Magical Papyri," in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1997), 84–85 on the way oneiromancy focuses on single images from dreams, rather than complex narrative sequences. Even the longest incubation narratives include very few sequential scenes of action.

33 Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, 95.

34 Allan, "Narrative Immersion: Some Linguistic and Narratological Aspects," 17.

35 Quintilian, 8.3.64–66.

in the details.³⁶ Luuk Huitink, in his discussion of this same passage, highlights the details of spatial positioning and motion that evoke responses from the reader.³⁷ These select vivid details provoke the reader to supply the rest of the details from their personal experiences of moving through rooms, not a culturally specific competence but a more general physical one. The descriptions of movement appear to strike the reader in a particularly vivid way, generating an especially strong reaction.³⁸

Ancient critics praise the power of *enargeia*, vividness of description, to bring the narrative before the eyes of the reader in powerful and affecting ways.³⁹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus expresses amazement about the moving effects of Demosthenes' orations, "when I pick up one of Demosthenes's speeches, I am transported: I am led hither and thither, feeling one emotion after another."⁴⁰ He explains how Lysias achieves this effect of bringing the reader into the text with his use of pointed details that evoke the reader's sense perceptions.⁴¹ This vividness in the narrative makes the reader feel as if the actions described are happening in their sight and that they are meeting the characters in the narration in person, without the mediation of the text. Although Lysias supplies the evocative details, the reader must apply their mind, actively engaging the imagination, to achieve this effect most completely.

In his discussion of the Greek term, φαντασία, Quintilian refers to the power of imagination "by which images of absent things are presented to the mind in such a way that we seem actually to see them with our eyes and have them physically present to us."⁴² He connects this power of the imagination in reaction to vivid detail to those states of mind when we blur the boundaries

36 Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2009), 110.

37 Luuk Huitink, "Enargeia and Bodily Mimesis," in *Experience, Narrative, and Criticism in Ancient Greece: Under the Spell of Stories*, eds. J. Grethlein, L. Huitink, and A. Tagliabue (Oxford University Press, 2019), 208–209.

38 Cp. Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, 85–86 on the "association between movement, and its rendering of space through time, and vividness; between *energeia* and *enargeia*."

39 E.g., Quintilian 8.3.62. Cp. Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, 8 on *ecphrasis* with *enargeia*.

40 Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Dem.* 22.2. ὅταν δὲ <τῶν> Δημοσθένους τινὰ λάβω λόγων, ἐνθουσιῶ τε καὶ δεῦρο κάκεισε ἀγομαί, πάθος ἕτερον ἐξ ἑτέρου μεταλαμβάνων.

41 Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lys.* 7.

42 Quintilian, 6.2.29. *per quas imagines rerum absentium ita repraesentantur animo ut eas cernere oculis ac praesentes habere videamur, has quisquis bene ceperit is erit in adfectibus potentissimus.*

between reality and imagination, thinking that we are actually doing what we are imagining.

We can indeed easily make this happen at will. When the mind is idle or occupied with wishful thinking or a sort of daydreaming, the images of which I am speaking haunt us, and we think we are travelling or sailing or fighting a battle or addressing a crowd or disposing of wealth which we do not possess, and not just imagining but actually doing these things!⁴³

Quintilian observes how such description with *enargeia* seems to transcend the boundaries of the narrative, creating in us the emotions and the attendant physical sensations of the experience.⁴⁴ According to ancient theories of perception, emotions are also physical experiences (*pathoi*), so words can quite literally have a physical effect, even if they do not break bones quite as directly as sticks and stones.⁴⁵ Huitink points out that contemporary cognitive research reaffirms the ancient perception that reading a vivid account can make one feel as if participating in the event itself.⁴⁶ That is, reading an account of a scene, particularly one involving motion or other actions, triggers the brain to make similar reactions to those it would make if one were doing those same actions; the body is reacting at some level to the stimuli of the imagination as it would to the stimuli of perception and motion.

The Mithras Liturgy provides quite a number of such vivid scenes whose *enargeia* could immersively engage a reader who, in the words of Dionysius, "applies his mind" to them. The sequence of scenes that describe the narratee's departure from the mortal world and ascent through the heavens to the meeting with Mithras contains not just a stream of images that immerse the reader in the world of the narrative, but also a number of more elaborately described

43 Quintilian 6.2.30. *quod quidem nobis volentibus facile continget; nisi vero inter otia animorum et spes inanes et velut somnia quaedam vigilantium ita nos hae de quibus loquor imagines prosecuntur ut peregrinari navigare proeliari, populos adloqui, divitiarum quas non habemus usum videamur disponere, nec cogitare sed facere.* Cp. H. S. Versnel, "What Did Ancient Man See When He Saw a God? Some Reflections on Greco-Roman Epiphany," in *Effigies Dei: Essays on the History of Religions*, ed. Dirk van der Plas (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 49 on the experience of divine epiphanies as described in ancient texts.

44 Quintilian, 6.2.32.

45 Cp. Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, 100. "Even when the effect is not what we might strictly speaking call 'emotional,' the physical understanding of the impact of *enargeia* means that a reader/listener who conceives an image of any kind in his or her mind is still undergoing a *pathos* of some kind as he or she experiences the words' effect."

46 Huitink, "Enargeia and Bodily Mimesis," 193.

visions whose impact would be even stronger. These scenes notably open with an action by the narratee, followed by a vision that provides vivid circumstantial detail.

One of these is the appearance of the sun god, Helios. After the narratee has risen past the planetary deities and opened the doors of the sun to the world of the gods beyond, the sun's rays on which the narratee has ascended whirl around to reveal the solar deity himself.

As (you) say this, the rays will wheel around you. Look into the middle of them. When, then, you have done this, you will see a youthful god, beautiful, fiery-haired, in a white chiton and a scarlet chlamys, with a fiery crown.⁴⁷

This scene contains movement and action, as well as descriptive details of the divine epiphany. The god's fiery hair and crown, along with the brightly contrasting colors of the god's chiton and chlamys, stick vividly in the imagination.

Most vivid is the final epiphany of the supreme ruler of the universe, who appears in a flurry of special effects that transcend the visual. Flanked by a row of snake-faced maidens and bull-faced youths who represent the stars of the constellations of the Bears that circle the celestial pole, the cosmokrator Mithras himself appears.

When these have taken their places in order on either side, gaze into the air and you will see flashes of lightning coming down, and lights flashing and the earth shaking and a god coming down, supremely great, with a shining face, youthful, golden-haired, in a white chiton and a golden crown and trousers, holding in his right hand a golden shoulder of a calf, which is the Bear, which moves and turns around heaven, rotating it upwards and downwards according to the season. Then you will see lightning leaping from his eyes and stars from his body.⁴⁸

47 *GEMF* 57 = *PGM* IV. 633–637. τοῦτο εἰπόντος στραφῆσονται ἐπὶ σε αἱ ἀκτίνες· ἔσειδε αὐτῶν μέσον. ὅταν οὖν τοῦτο ποιήσῃς, ὄψῃ θεὸν νεώτερον, εὐειδῆ, πυρινότριχα, ἐν χιτῶνι λευκῷ καὶ χλαμύδι κοκκίνη ἔχοντα πύρινον στέφανον.

48 *GEMF* 57 = *PGM* IV. 692–704 ὅταν δὲ ἐνστώσιν ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα τῇ τάξει, ἀτένιζε τῷ ἀέρι καὶ ὄψῃ κατερχομένης ἀστραπάς καὶ φῶτα μαρμαίροντα καὶ σειομένην τὴν γῆν καὶ κατερχόμενον θῆ ὑπερμεγέθη, φωτινὴν ἔχοντα τὴν ὄψιν, νεώτερον, χρυσοκόμαν, ἐν χιτῶνι λευκῷ καὶ χρυσῷ στεφάνῳ καὶ ἀναξυρίσι, κατέχοντα τῇ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ μόσχου ὦμον χρύσειον, ὃς ἐστὶν Ἄρκτος ἡ κινούσα καὶ ἀντιστρέφουσα τὸν οὐρανόν, κατὰ ὥραν ἀναπολεύουσα καὶ καταπολεύουσα. ἔπειτα ὄψῃ αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν ὁμμάτων ἀστραπάς καὶ ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἀστέρας ἀλλομένους.

Despite the narratee having left the earth far behind, they see the earth shaking in the flashes of lightning that appear with the god's epiphany, shooting out from his eyes while stars leap forth from his body. Again, key details of clothing help make the picture vivid; while the crown and white chiton are like those of Helios, the trousers—a notoriously Persian item of clothing—mark this figure as Mithras, the Persian god. His appearance with a golden shoulder of a bull in his hand is a familiar one from many of the Mithraic temple decorations, further affirming his identity.⁴⁹ The scene with the god's appearance marks the dramatic culmination of the whole ritual, with the most elaborate and vivid descriptions.

Even in less elaborately described scenes, a focus on motions helps provide engaging detail. When the narratee has ascended to the heavens where the planetary deities move in their courses, these divinities notice this disruption of the cosmic order and charge violently toward the intruder. “For you will see the divine order of that day and of that hour, the revolving gods rising to heaven and others descending. ... And you will see the gods staring at you and rushing towards you.”⁵⁰ Although the deities are not named or described, the salient feature of the scene is their motion and the shift in that motion from the orderly rising and setting to the violent, rushing attack.

It is not insignificant that the first vision the narratee experiences is that of rising out of the ordinary mortal world; this vision is actually a loss of vision as the familiar world of the senses disappears.

Draw in breath from the rays, inhaling three times, as much as you can, and you will see yourself lifted up and mounting on high, so that you seem to be in the middle of the air. And you will hear nothing human nor of another living thing, neither will you see anything mortal on earth in that hour, but you will see all immortal things.⁵¹

49 Cp. Roger Beck, “Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac: II,” *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2, no. 2 (1978): 87–147, reprinted in Beck (2004), as well as Radcliffe Edmonds, “Did the Mithraists Inhale? A Technique for Theurgic Ascent in the Mithras Liturgy, the Chaldaean Oracles, and Some Mithraic Frescoes,” *The Ancient World* 32, no. 1 (2001): 10–24, and Richard Gordon “Den Jungstier auf den Goldenen Schultern Tragen: Mythos, Ritual und Jenseitsvorstellungen im Mithraskult,” in *Burial Rituals, Ideas of Afterlife, and the Individual in the Hellenistic World and the Roman Empire*, eds. Katharina Waldner, Richard Gordon, and Wolfgang Spickermann (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 2016), 207–240.

50 *GEMF* 57 = *PGM* IV.544–547, 555–557. ὁψη γὰρ ἐκείνης τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ τῆς ὥρας θεῖαν θέειν, τοὺς πολεῦοντας ἀναβαίνοντας εἰς οὐρανὸν θεοὺς, ἄλλους δὲ καταβαίνοντας. ... ὁψη τὴν ἀποφορὰν τοῦ ὁράματος· ὁψη δὲ ἀτενίζοντάς σοι τοὺς θεοὺς καὶ ἐπὶ σε ὁρμωμένους.

51 *GEMF* 57 = *PGM* IV.537–544. Ἐλκε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀκτίνων πνεῦμα, γ' ἀναπῶν, ὃ δύναισι, καὶ ὁψη σεαυτὸν ἀνακουφίζμενον [χ]αὶ ὑπερβαίνοντα εἰς ὕψος, ὥστε σε δοκεῖν μέγον τοῦ ἀέρος εἶναι.

For the maximal immersive effect of bringing the narratee most fully into the world of the narrative, the primary world outside the narrative must vanish from the senses.

While oracular texts have similar constellations of second person addresses and imperatives with a temporal marker indicating the occasion for the action, they lack the descriptions with the kind of *enargeia* that draws the reader into the text. Even the rare texts that do include a vivid image lack the continuous progression of vivid imagery that characterizes the Mithras Liturgy. The gold tablets' image of the glowing white cypress tree in the underworld is certainly striking, but the remainder of descriptions, even in the most elaborate versions, lack the detail and vividness of the Mithras Liturgy's succession of scenes that creates an immersive effect.⁵²

4 Other Parallels: Chaldaean Oracles or Theater

Certain fragments of the *Chaldaean Oracles* provide the closest parallel to the imagery of the Mithras Liturgy, as scholars of theurgy have often noted, but these strange oracles surviving only in quotations among the Neoplatonists also furnish the closest parallel in narrative framing.⁵³ The second person future addresses of "you will see ..." followed by vivid images, appear especially in the fragment of one *Oracle* quoted by Proclus.

After this invocation, you will either see a fire, similar to a child, extended by bounds over the billow of air, or you will see a formless fire, from which a voice is sent forth, or you will see a sumptuous light, rushing like a spiral around the field. But you may even see a horse, more dazzling than light, or even a child mounted on the nimble back of a horse, (a child) of fire or

οὐδενὸς δὲ ἀκούσει [ο]ὔτε ἀνθρώπου οὔτε ζώου ἄλλου, δὲ ὅψῃ οὐδὲν τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς θνητῶν ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ, πάντα δὲ ὅψῃ ἀθάνατα.

52 B1 Petelia = OF 476. Εὐρήσ[σ]εις < δ' > Ἄϊδαο δόμων ἐπ' ἄριστερά κρήνην, πὰρ δ' αὐτῇ λευκὴν ἐστηκυῖαν κυπάρισσον. You will find in the halls of Hades a spring on the left, and standing by it, a glowing white cypress tree.

53 Cp. especially Johnston, "Rising to the Occasion" and Edmonds, "Did the Mithraists Inhale?," both drawing on Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire* (Le Caire: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1956), whose reconstruction of the theurgy of the Chaldaean Oracles depends heavily on his reading of the Mithras Liturgy.

covered with gold or, again, a naked (child) or even (a child) shooting a bow and standing on the back (of a horse).⁵⁴

One crucial difference appears, however; the *Oracle* does not offer a prescriptive, guided set of images, but rather informs the recipient of the possibilities that may occur. This conditional “either-or” structure distinguishes the Oracle text from the kind of recipe instructions that appear in the magical formularies. Fragment 147 likewise describes a conditional situation.

If you speak to me often, you will perceive everything in lion-form. For neither does the curved mass of heaven appear then nor do the stars shine. The light of the moon is hidden, and the earth is not firmly secured, but everything is seen by flashes of lightning.⁵⁵

By contrast, this conditional is absent from the other passages in the magical formularies where this constellation of vivid imagery and second person address appear.

Although no other recipe has such a density, the Mithras Liturgy is not the only magical recipe that provides vivid visions framed with the injunction, “you will see ...”; several other recipes have one or two visions introduced with this formula. In the spell entitled “Apollonius of Tyana’s Serving Woman,” the practitioner experiences an epiphany of a beautiful goddess after invoking her with *voces magicae*. “After you say this, you will behold sitting on an ass a woman of extraordinary loveliness, possessing a heavenly beauty, indescribably fair and youthful. As soon as you see her, make obeisance.”⁵⁶ In the same formulary

54 Proclus *in Remp.* I 111.1–12 = CO 146 ταῦτ’ ἐπιφωνήσας ἡ παιδί κατόψῃ| πῦρ ἵκελον σκιρτηδὸν ἐπ’ ἡέρος οἶδμα τιταίνον·| ἡ καὶ πῦρ ἀτύπωτον, ὅθεν φωνὴν προθέουσιν·| ἡ φῶς πλούσιον ἀμφὶ γύην ροιζαῖον ἐλιχθέν·| ἀλλὰ καὶ ἵππον ἰδεῖν φωτὸς πλέον ἀστράπτοντα| ἡ καὶ παῖδα θοοῖς νώτοις ἐποχούμενον ἵππου,| ἔμπυρον ἡ χρυσῶ πεπυκασμένον ἡ πάλι γυμνόν,| ἡ καὶ τοξεύοντα καὶ ἐστηῶτ’ ἐπὶ νώτοις. Fragments CO 147, 148, and 149 quoted by Psellus (PG 122 1133b5–8, 1136b11–c1, 1148b14–15) have similar instructions, along with some imagery, but not to the same extent.

55 Psellus PG 122 1133b5–8 = CO 147 Πολλάκις ἦν λέξης μοι, ἀθρήσεις πάντα λέοντα·| Οὐτὲ γὰρ οὐράνιος κυρτὸς τότε φαίνεται ὄγκος,| ἀστέρες οὐ λάμπουσι, τὸ μήνης φῶς κεκάλυπται,| χθὼν οὐχ ἔστηκεν· βλέπεται δέ <τε> πάντα κεραυνοῖς.

56 PGM XI.12–14. ταῦτα εἰπὼν ὄψῃ γυναῖκα ἐπ’ ὄνου καθίζο[μ]ένῃ<ν>, εὐμορφον λίαν <εἰς> ὑπερβ[ολ]ήν, οὐράνιον τι κάλλος ἔχουσα<ν>, ἀδιηγῆτως ὡραῖαν καὶ νέαν, ἣν ἰδὼν σὺ εὐθέως πρ[ο]σκ[ύ]νησον. Note, in addition to the ὄψῃ, the adverb εὐθέως. Cp. the appearance of a star in PGM LVII.23–26. The most elaborate vision appears in GEMF 31 = PGM I.106–119, where the summoned spirit conjures up a banquet (complete with daimons in fancy sashes as servants) that matches the practitioner’s imaginings. The recipe comments,

as the Mithras Liturgy, there is another spell that has a series of visions interspersed with instructions.

After saying the light-bringing spell, open your eyes and you will see the light of the lamp becoming like a vault. Then while closing your eyes say (differently: 3 ... after saying 3 times), and after opening your eyes you will see all things wide-open and the greatest brightness within, but the lamp shining nowhere. Then you will see the god seated on a lotus, decorated with rays, his right hand raised in greeting and left [holding] a flail, while being carried in the hands of 2 angels with 12 rays around them.⁵⁷

This spell provides a sequence of three visions that resembles the narrative sequence of the Mithras Liturgy, but no other spell comes close in the sheer number of different vivid images or the sustained narrative sequence in the second person.

The difference between the prescriptive formulary recipes in prose and the verses of the Oracles that cast the visions into the conditional suggests that the revelations in the *Chaldaean Oracles* are not intended for the same practitioners as the recipes in the magical formularies—or at least not for the same practical purposes. The *Oracles* seem to provide a more theoretical overview, like the discussions in Iamblichus, rather than a set of instructions for practice. Several of the recipes in the formularies, however, like the Mithras Liturgy, seem as though they might have been devised by practitioners following guidance like that found in the *Chaldaean Oracles*. The recipes in the magical formularies, like the descriptions in the *Chaldaean Oracles*, use the techniques of second person address and vivid imagery to draw in the reader, immersing the willing reader within the world narrated.

This immersion into the world of the narrative achieved through the *enargeia* of the narrative descriptions should not be mistaken for the experience

however, “you consider these things partly real and partly just illusionary.” και ταῦτα ἡγεῖ τὰ μὲν ἀληθῆ, τὰ δὲ βλέπεσθαι μόνο[v]. Richard Gordon, “The Religious Anthropology of Late-Antique ‘High’ Magical Practice,” in *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jörg Rüpke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 175 sees this example as showing the limitations of the exercise of imagination within the formularies.

57 *GEMF* 57 = *PGM* IV.1104–1114 σημεία τοῦ λύχνου· μετὰ τὸ εἰπεῖν τὴν φωταγωγίαν ἄνυξον τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς καὶ ὄψητὸ φῶς τοῦ λύχνου καμαροειδὲς γινόμενον· εἴτα κλειόμενος λέγε (ἄλλως· γ’ ... μετὰ τὸ εἰπεῖν γ’), καὶ ἀνοίξας ὄψη πάντα ἀχανή καὶ μεγίστην αὐγὴν ἔσω, τὸν δὲ λύχνον οὐδαμῶς φαινόμενον. τὸν δὲ θεὸν ὄψη ἐπὶ κιβωρίου καθήμενον, ἀκτινωτόν, τὴν δεξιὰν ἀνατεταμένην ἀσπαζόμενον, τῇ δὲ ἀριστερᾷ <κρατοῦντα> σκύτος, βασταζόμενον ὑπὸ β’ ἀγγέλων ταῖς χερσὶν καὶ κύκλῳ αὐτῶν ἀκτῖνας ιβ.

of the audience in a theatrical production, where the distance between the world of the stage and that of the audience remains present in the audience's awareness.⁵⁸ Nor should it be confused with the experience of a participant in a scripted performance, whether dramatic or ritual, where again the awareness persists of the gap between the world of the performance and the ordinary world. The addition of a cast of performers in costume with props distracts from, rather than enhances, the immersive effect of narrative *enargeia*. The ancient critics indeed warn against the use of props and extras in speeches, arguing that the power of words is sufficient.⁵⁹

Some modern historians of religion, however, deem the power of words insufficient for the ancients. In their reconstruction of the ritual of the Mithras Liturgy as an elaborately staged theatrical production, Reinhold Merkelbach and Maria Totti-Gemünd posit a presumed primitive inability to grasp abstract ideas through words that necessitates an acting out of all the elements of the ritual.⁶⁰ This primitive reliance on theatrical performance for the Egyptian magician is explicitly contrasted with the sophistication of a "pious Stoic" Roman, who would not need such hocus-pocus to grasp the philosophically "logical" concept of the immortality of the soul.⁶¹

Merkelbach proposes that each vividly described scene of the ritual was theatrically enacted, citing various complicated devices of ancient Greek theater, as well as the debunking accounts of pagan rituals by Christian apologists, to show that various special effects would not be technically impossible.

58 Cp. the remarks of J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 9–73, esp. 46–48 and 70, on the incompatibility of drama with fantasy, by which he means not just the modern genre but the imaginative capacity in the ancient sense of *φαντασία*.

59 "Quintilian cites several examples of emotional appeals involving props and extras (particularly children) falling disastrously flat, but he never betrays any doubts about the predictable power of *enargeia*." Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, 107 on Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 6.1.37–42.

60 "Aber die früheren Menschen hatten in ganz anderem Maße das Bedürfnis, ihre Gedanken und Hoffnungen spielend zum Ausdruck zu bringen. Es genügte ihnen nicht, ihre Vorstellungen in Worten auszusprechen. Worte allein wären für sie etwas Theoretisches und Ungreifbares gewesen. Sie haben ihre Gedanken in Handlungen umgesetzt. Was in heiligem Spiel vor Augen gestellt wurde, was man auch mit Händen hätte greifen können, erst das war deutlich genug, und was sich im Spiel sichtbar ereignete, war für sie dann auch wirklich." Merkelbach and Totti-Gemünd, *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri Religiösen und Magischen Inhalts*, 3:39–40.

61 "A pious Stoic would not have required a specific ceremony to render the breath of life immortal; philosophically the immortality of the *pneuma* was itself evident without a ceremony." Reinhold Merkelbach, "Immortality Rituals in Late Antiquity," *Diogenes* 42, no. 165 (1994): 109.

The ritual ascension would involve the performed being lifted up on a pedestal, “either by a rope or a hydraulic construction.” The vision of the doors of the sun opening to the world of the gods would be rendered by complex scenery: “the solar disk may have been mounted on a sort of window which was then opened, revealing another backdrop with the flaming doors which were in turn opened.” The instructions to close the eyes while saying another prayer provide “the opportunity for a complete change of scenery. ... When the candidate re-opens his eyes, the doors will be open, and beyond them he will see the world of the gods.”⁶² The world of the gods would be represented by puppets, while the seven snake-faced maidens and bull-faced pole-lords would be portrayed by “dancers” and “actors.” The supreme god, impersonated by a masked priest, would then give the oracle.⁶³ The whole production would, on Merkelbach’s reconstruction, require a large cast of performers, not to mention the technical crew to operate the scenery and special effects, and it could only take place in a temple designed for such performances—Merkelbach suggests the Serapeum in Alexandria.

Such a reconstruction not only rests on a misguided understanding of primitive mentality that is contradicted by the ancient accounts of the effects of words, but it also invents details of staging and production that are not to be found in the text. Descriptions of oracular rituals that do include such details highlight this absence in the Mithras Liturgy. Pausanias describes the two attendant boys who wash and anoint the one consulting the oracle of Trophonius, along with the priests who guide him to the fountains of Memory and Forgetfulness. His costume is carefully described: “a linen tunic, with ribbons girding it, and wearing the boots of the country.”⁶⁴ Some of the recipes in the magic formularies likewise prescribe costumes and props, such as the “Apollonian invocation” where the practitioner is instructed: “Adorn yourself with prophetic dress. (Then) hold an ebony staff in your left hand and the phylactery in your right; the latter is the sprig of laurel.”⁶⁵ A spell from the Egyptian

62 Merkelbach, “Immortality Rituals in Late Antiquity,” 104, 106. Cp. Merkelbach and Totti-Gemünd, *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri Religiösen und Magischen Inhalts*, 3:35–36.

63 “Die ‘Welt der Götter’ wird durch Marionetten dargestellt worden sein.” “durch Tänzerinnen dargestellt worden sein.” “Der oberste Gott kann entweder durch einen maskierten Priester gespielt oder durch ein Scheinbild dargestellt worden sein. In diesem Fall mußte hinter den Kulissen ein Priester stehen und die Worte des göttlichen Orakels sprechen.” Merkelbach and Totti-Gemünd, *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri Religiösen und Magischen Inhalts*, 3:36, 37, 38. Cp. Merkelbach, “Immortality Rituals in Late Antiquity,” 107.

64 Pausanias 9.37.7–8.

65 *GEMF* 31 = *PGM* 1.277–284. *στολίδας σεαυτὸν προφητικῶι χρήματι ἔχε ἐβεεννίνην ῥάβδον ἐν τῇ λαιαί χειρὶ καὶ τὸ φυλακτήριον ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ.*

Book of the Dead similarly prescribes costumes, "A man shall say this spell being pure and clean, after he has dressed in garments of the channel shore, the sandals as white sandals, made-up with malachite, anointed with myrrh of best quality."⁶⁶ While the Mithras Liturgy does provide instructions for preliminary purifications and other preparations, props, costumes, and other actors are absent.

5 Conclusions

Any text constructs its own reader to some extent, but a second person narration like the Mithras Liturgy shapes its narratee more directly, literally prescribing the actions and sense impressions of the reader immersed in the text. Closer attention to the ideal reader constructed by the text can provide us with more insights about the actual readers, since the text seems to have been sufficiently appealing to readers to have been copied multiple times. While a single papyrus codex is our only witness, the text itself shows that more examples have been lost. The scribe of the papyrus compiled the version we have from at least two other manuscripts, since in several places the scribe notes that the other texts provide alternate versions of certain *voces magicæ*. Even if the codex we have was a compilation made by a scribe wishing to preserve the heritage of tradition, rather than a collection of recipes for a working magician, the earlier versions were designed for a practitioner, and enough practitioners found the procedure valuable to pass it along.⁶⁷

So, what can the text tell us about the nature of the practitioner? The practitioner, as constructed by the text, would be someone capable of carrying out

66 Book of the Dead 125 in Joachim Friedrich Quack, "Conceptions of Purity in Egyptian Religion," in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism*, eds. Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 149–150.

67 Cp. Richard Gordon, "The Rationale of Multi-Purpose Praxeis in the Formulary Tradition," in *The Greco-Egyptian Magical Formularies: Libraries, Books, and Individual Recipes*, New Texts from Ancient Cultures, eds. Christopher A. Faraone and Sofia Torallas Tovar (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 416–417, "Such a conclusion of course raises the vexed question of how far, if at all, these ambitious but late magical formularies were ever intended to be used| instrumentally. Now that the sheer variety of magical production in late Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, and the exceptional nature of the ambitious formularies collected by Anastasy, have come to be better appreciated, it seems more rather than less likely that their compilation was mainly due to a desire to preserve what was taken to be a grand inheritance, now modernized and updated in the new language of authority and sophistication: Greek."

the instructions in the recipe, being able to procure various special ingredients, such as the Sun scarab beetle, lotus pulp, honey, and rose oil specified in the recipe at the end of the Liturgy for making the eye ointment, but the processes involved don't seem to involve any special training or expertise.⁶⁸ Further instructions indicate, for example, that the reader is not expected to know the plant kentritis, as a description is added at the end. Performing the ritual does not require access to a particular sacred space, like a temple that only priests would be able to enter; it is, in the terminology of J. Z. Smith, a ritual of *anywhere*, not part of the temple religion of *there*.⁶⁹ The practitioner thus *might* be a priest or scribe trained in an Egyptian temple, but not necessarily so—anyone who reads the recipe might muster the resources to perform the rite, and it would not require the temple of Serapis in Alexandria to perform.

Most importantly, rather than a costumed performer acting out stage directions in a temple ritual, the practitioner must be a reader willing and able to immerse within the text, accepting the persona of the narratee and performing the actions of the ritual. Not all readers of the text, however, might be equally able to immerse themselves in the world of the text; some might be more talented—or more practiced—than others. Tanya Luhrmann has discussed the impact of training and talent for what she calls absorption into the faith frame, the experiencing of the relationship with invisible others as real and even perceptible to the senses.⁷⁰ The ideal reader of the Mithras Liturgy, then, would be an individual who, by natural inclination and through practice, is

68 Except for the reference to spreading the sacred sand (760), which must, as Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy,"* 208 suggests, require special knowledge to understand: "what this 'sacred sand' is and how one spreads it in a pure manner, seems to have a mythological background known to the magicians." The added correction to the recipe to ignore the earlier directions and use instead "the great mystery of the scarab revitalised through the 25 birds" provides another piece of assumed knowledge for the reader, but this instruction clearly belongs to a later recension.

69 Jonathan Z. Smith, "Here, There and Anywhere," in *Magic in History: Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, eds. S. Noegel, J. Walker, and B. Wheeler (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 21–36, drawing on Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*, distinguishes between religions of *here* (based in personal or domestic space), religions of *there* (centered around sacred spaces like temples), and religions of *anywhere* (in which rites can be performed in any location by a qualified expert).

70 "I suggest here that there is a human capacity for absorption—a capacity to be immersed in the world of the senses, inner and outer—and those who have a talent for it and who train to develop it are more likely to experience invisible others as present. Those who have the proclivity are more likely to report sharper mental images and more unusual spiritual experiences. They are more likely to say that they experience a god as being present." Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 60.

able to make use of the vivid descriptions of the narrative to become absorbed in the world of the narrative, to experience the face to face encounters with entities that would otherwise remain unseen. It is this developed capacity, rather than training in priestly ritual, that characterizes the reader as constructed by the text.

The peculiar collection of narrative features in the Mithras Liturgy—the second person addresses and sensory language, the rapid temporal sequence of scenes, and the vivid descriptions—all serve to immerse the reader in the text, providing a vivid experience of the narrated world. Other texts of similar kind, whether other ritual instructions or other narratives of heavenly ascent, lack the same constellation of narrative features and do not create the same immersive effect. The Mithras Liturgy is neither a description of a theatrical production nor an account of a dream vision; it is a text designed to produce an experience for the reader, more akin to a guided visualization or a spiritual exercise than an apocalyptic revelation. The ideal practitioner, the reader who identifies with the "you" of the second person narration, is someone who, through training or talent, is able to perceive, not with mortal eyes but in the immortal eyes of the mind, all the visions of the cosmos that the text declares "you will see."