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Module 2, Essay 1

Language played a powerful role in both ancient Greek and Roman magic. Spells are written on amulets, curse tablets, and spoken aloud by literary characters and proclaimed sorcerers of the time. Written accounts of recipes and magical knowledge also relied on language to be passed down. However, there is a limit to the extent of language in magic; there are some instances where magic was perceived to be present but in the absence of language to personify the spell. Therefore, language was heavily used to exemplify magic, but it was not a necessary element for the magic to work.

Because magic is an art form, the delivery of the magical speech is as important as the recitation of the incantation. Witches in literature seem to draw power from their emotions to amplify the effect that the spell has on its victim. This is especially true in the case of Erictho: “her voice, [was] more capable than any herb of invoking the powers of hell” [[1]](#footnote-1). Not only does the written formulation of the spell play a role, but also the speaker’s energy is a powerful element in the spell’s strength. An important note on speech delivery comes from certain Egyptian magical practices that influenced the Greeks. The Greeks adopted the Egyptian idea that magical power is tied to particular words that were different from normal vocabulary. It was the pronunciation of these special words that enhanced a spell [[2]](#footnote-2). Language was also used to finalize a spell or potion; a witch would prepare the recipe but only when she commanded that the magic be done would the spell come into effect. An example of this comes from the *Iliad*, after Circe applies magical ointment onto Odysseus’s men, the she binds the spell by tapping the soldiers with her wand as she commands them to “turn into pigs” [[3]](#footnote-3).

Not only was coherent language used in Greek and Roman magic, but animal sounds and speaking in tongues also appeared in the uttering and in the aftermath of spells. The latter is described as prophetic ecstasy and is defined as a “trance state of consciousness… in which the normal mind is suspended and normal language is often replaced by unintelligible utterances.” Two episodes of this ecstasy occur in the *Iliad* when the Trojan seer “understood in his mind the decision that the gods in their deliberations had made” [[4]](#footnote-4) and at the end of the Odyssey when the suitors, doomed to die by Odysseus, dine but “roused unquenchable laughter, and struck their wits away… from jaws that were not theirs” [[5]](#footnote-5) . The causes for such a state are: “hypnosis via prayers and magical formulas, by taking drugs, toxic substances, inhaling aromatic vapors…” [[6]](#footnote-6) etc. Here, language is an indicator of the effectiveness of the magic, whether the words are spoken aloud or understood in the minds of the affected. In fact, the Greek word *mania* is often used to describe this disheveled conscious state. The usage of animal sounds also appears in spells and these sounds usually reflect the nature of the spell itself. For example, in Erictho’s maleficent chant “You could hear the barking of dogs… the howling of wolves, the moaning of the restless owl… the shrieking and roaring of a wild beast, the hiss of a serpent... -all these noises were in her voice” [[7]](#footnote-7). These noises are associated with Erictho’s evil intentions and increase the potency of the spell.

Spoken language was indeed the main medium for incantations, but there were more real, nonliterary, applications of enchanted items that functioned through inscriptions rather than orated magic. The most common of these magical objects were amulets [[8]](#footnote-8) and curse tablets [[9]](#footnote-9). Amulets were often custom made, that is, the inscription on the amulet included the wearer’s name. These trinkets could be enchanted to help or hinder their owner in virtually any aspect of life. One amulet found in Amisos protected its wearer, Rufina, from a lawsuit [[10]](#footnote-10). The ancient Greek word for amulet was *periamma*, meaning “object tied around,”. By this definition, anything with a thread tied to an item constituted an amulet by Greek standards [[11]](#footnote-11). Interestingly, some of these basic item-and-thread amulets included no inscription, the object at the end of the string is powerful enough to produce the desired result. One such Greek example was the practice of “wearing the anus of the same creature as an amulet on his left arm, it acts as an erotic charm” [[12]](#footnote-12). Curse tablets were also frequently used items in both the ancient Greek and Roman worlds that needed no oration to produce magical results. Archaeologists have uncovered these tablets in graves, wells and near rivers. Often their inscriptions appeal to chthonic gods “to bind the writer’s prey, whether they were court rivals, a hoped for lover, or a hated chariot team” [[13]](#footnote-13).

Nonlinguistic magical practices were adopted by the Greeks upon their introduction to the Egyptians during the Hellenistic period. Some of these incorporated practices involved the reader of a magical scroll to pretend to be a God in order to intimidate the real Gods into carrying out the reader’s demands. A second noteworthy incorporation by the Greeks included the idea that magical power was related to specific gestures and rites. The latter was akin to religious rites but differed enough to avoid mixups between religious and magical rites. One example is the sacrificing of black animals to chthonic deities to prevent the heavenly gods from claiming the animal for themselves. [[14]](#footnote-14)

Apart from performing magic itself, language was crucial in the passing of magical knowledge and recordkeeping. Recipes for incantations, potions, and other bewitchments were written down in order to produce the desired result. Often, these recipes involved odd ingredients, sacrifices, and other items to be present for the spell. It would be a hard task for a witch to memorize every spell in her arsenal, so naturally the required items were recorded and passed down to the next generation of sorceresses. Thus, language was important in reciting and preserving magical knowledge.

Language was certainly the medium for the majority of classical spells, but it was not necessary to all magical practices, nor was it always the main source of a spell’s strength. It is clear that orated incantations relied on the delivery, emotion, and vocabulary of the speaker in order to produce a spell’s power. Oration was also not the soul embodiment of magical language, but inscriptions on amulets and curse tablets were as efficient and more commonly used by the ancients than their audible counterparts. As well as performing magic, language was also used to record both recipes and magical knowledge, a less exciting but vital tradition nonetheless. However, there are still some instances where language was absent in magical practices. Some amulets included no inscription, their magical centerpiece spoke for itself. And nonlinguistic elements of speech delivery like performance or gestures made by the speaker also influenced magical potency.

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