naming the witch

GENDER, THEORY, & RELIGION

naming the witch

MAGIC, IDEOLOGY, & STEREOTYPE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Kimberly B. Stratton

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DESIGNED BY VIN DANG

TO PIERRE, FOR HIS PATIENCE THROUGH ALL THIS,
AND MY PARENTS, WHO MADE IT POSSIBLE

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PREFACE

Naming the Witch explores the social background of and motivations behind powerful and enduring stereotypes of the magician, sorceress, and witch. In the ancient world accusations of magic could carry the death penalty or, at the very least, marginalize the person or group they targeted. Accusations, however, always arise from somewhere: they draw on and reinscribe fears of the Other, ideals about the Self, and conceptions of antisocial behavior. By these means, accusations of magic and stereotypes of magicians or witches mirror social values and accepted notions about the way things should be among the group employing this rhetoric. These ideas will vary from society to society and, concomitantly, so will the images and ideas associated with magic. *Naming the Witch* examines the earliest manifestations of stereotypes of witches and sorcerers in Western literature, seeking to understand the specific contexts that gave rise to these stereotypes in Western history. This book challenges universalizing generalizations and reductionist approaches to *magic* by seeking instead to understand the factors that contributed to the emergence of specific stereotypes at particular moments in time.

In order to uncover the background and motivations for stereotypes of magic, *Naming the Witch* examines literature from four different historical periods and cultures in the ancient world: classical Athens, early imperial Rome, pre-Constantine Christianity, and rabbinic Judaism. Through this comparative and cross-cultural approach, *Naming the Witch* illuminates certain aspects of ancient magic that have, so far, gone unnoticed—it highlights the *differences* between patterns of representing magic in various ancient cultures and explores the relationship between these stereotypes of magic and the social factors that contributed to shaping them. It reveals magic to be a form of *discourse* (i.e., a constellation of ideas, practices, and institutions) that functions differently depending on the social context. This discourse, I argue, emerged in fifth-century Athens, following the Persian wars, and contributed to the construction of xenophobic ideas about the un-Greek and uncivilized Other. This discourse of alterity then passed to Rome and the rest of the Hellenized world during the Hellenistic period where it adapted to and reflected *local* social concerns. In each situation, magic constitutes a discursive formation that negotiates power by operating as a foil for claims to legitimacy and authority.

Existing scholarship on ancient magic falls largely into four categories: 1. The first includes works that document material evidence for ancient ritual activities commonly classified as "magic." Such studies generally present the material without extensively commenting on or evaluating its social history.[1] 2. Second are works that attempt to reconstruct the social history of ancient magic with reference to either literary descriptions of magic and magicians and/or the material evidence mentioned just above.[2] These analyses sometimes uncritically accept representations of magic that have at their base ideological motivations and vilifying stereotypes. 3. Third is scholarship that recognizes the pejorative connotations of magic in both ancient and modern usage and, for this reason, questions the validity of continuing to use magic as a heuristic category in scholarship at all.[3] These scholars argue that uncritically accepting *magic* as a *descriptive* term in ancient texts reinscribes polemical labels and dangerous stereotypes, but they can also ignore the evidence that certain people did engage in practices perceived as impious, threatening, and antisocial by members of their society. In other words, some ancient people knowingly and perhaps subversively engaged in ritual activities they themselves considered to be magic. 4. The final category of scholarship on magic responds to the conundrum posed by the third group. These scholars attempt to resolve the tension between continuing to study *magic*, despite the negatively charged baggage (both ancient and modern) that the term carries, and rejecting the term altogether.[4]

Naming the Witch falls into this final category. I critically read representations of magic with an awareness of their ideological motivations and the rhetorical strategies that support and shape them. That is, I continually ask: "Whose interest do they serve?" But I also take seriously the archaeological evidence for practices that were commonly regarded as magic by people in the ancient world (i.e., rituals that violate social mores and traditions of piety in order to harm or gain control over someone else). Stereotypes do not emerge without reason; they reflect, at the very least, the perception of (real or imagined) danger. To dismiss the existence of magic altogether as just a form of slander ignores the very real relationship between accusations and fear, stereotypes and social tension. It is the *source* of these stereotypes that preoccupies my attention in *Naming the Witch*, using representations of magic as the tool to unveil struggles over defining authority and Otherness, legitimate power and unacceptable behavior in the four ancient societies that are the subjects of this study.

This research seeks to complicate existing ideas about magic by showing magic to be contingent—existing in different ways in different places—while at the same time I strive to show the continuity of magic as a discourse as it passed from Greece to the rest of the Mediterranean. Certainly, ideas about dangerous supernatural power, evil female demons, or strange foreigners exist in many different cultures in diverse times and places. What I argue is that labeling all these *magic* or *witchcraft* and attempting to identify a single explanation for them confuses important differences and cultural distinctions. Instead, I focus on understanding how the particular constellation of ideas and Othering devices known as *magic* developed in Western culture. I argue that magic has a definite history, the understanding of which will illuminate the process of marginalizing groups of people and negotiating power in culturally determined ways.

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A portion of chapter 4 was published as “The Rhetoric of ‘Magic’ in Early Christian Discourse: Gender, Power, and the Construction of ‘Heresy’ ” in Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, eds., *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (Leiden: Brill, 2006). An earlier version of material from chapter 5 appears in “Imagining Power: Magic, Miracle, and the Social Context of Rabbinic Self-Representation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73, no. 2 (June 2005): 361–393.

ABBREVIATIONS

All translations of primary sources are my own except where noted otherwise. Editions of the primary texts can be found in the bibliography. Abbreviations for classical, Jewish, and Christian sources follow the guidelines of *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, ed. Patrick H. Alexander et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999). Additional abbreviations are listed here.

AAR	*American Academy of Religion*
ANF	*Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1956–1962)
ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*
b	Babylonian Talmud
CP	*Classical Philology*
D	*Digesta Justiniani*
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. 1, 6th ed. (Berlin, 1951)
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)
Littré	Emile Littré, ed., *Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate*, 10 vol. (Paris, 1961 [1839–61])
m	Mishnah
NJPSV	New Jewish Publication Society Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

PG	J.-P. Migne, ed. *Patrologia cursus completus [Series Graeca]* (Paris, 1857–1886)
PGM	K. Preisendanz, ed. *Papyri graecae magicae: Die grieschischen Zauberpapyri* (Berlin, 1928)
PL	J.-P. Migne, ed. *Patrologia cursus completus [Series Latina]* (Paris, 1844–1864)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	*Society of Biblical Literature*
t	Tosefta
y	Jerusalem Talmud
ZPE	*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*

naming the witch

one

MAGIC, DISCOURSE, & IDEOLOGY

Round about the cauldron go;
In the poison'd entrails throw.—
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Swelter'd venom, sleeping got,
Boil thou first i'th'charmed pot.
MACBETH 4.4–9

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

This book illuminates the emergence of powerful and enduring stereotypes in Western cultural history: namely, the magician and witch. It argues that these stereotypes were constructed over several centuries through repeated representation and coincide with the development of ideas about ritual deviance and illegitimate access to sacred power emerging at the same time. It traces the development of a new discourse of alterity that emerged in Greece in the fifth century BCE and persisted as a marginalizing strategy until the modern period. In fact, it continues to operate in modern discussions of foreign cultures and beliefs, where it serves as a foil for notions like rationality, religion, and science.[1] In its origin this discourse employed a combination of terms designating foreign, illegitimate, subversive, or dangerous ritual activities and integrated them into a powerful semantic constellation. Through the repeated combination of these terms with each other, the discourse drew on and amplified connotations of each term so that the use of one could harness or invoke a network of meaning created by association with the others. I designate this constellation with the English term *magic*. In modern parlance magic is most often associated with fatuous sleight-of-hand tricks or with esoteric rituals to harness occult power. Both conceptions reflect, to some degree, ancient aspects of this discourse, which included terms designating charlatans and frauds as well as terms for subversive ritual practices that undermine social order and legitimate channels of divine favor. In order to understand better how these terms function individually and in combination I will close this chapter with a discussion of ancient terminology (Greek, Latin, and Hebrew) and the development of the semantic constellation I label *magic*. This discussion will also serve to introduce readers to the key terms that appear throughout the pages of this book. Unfortunately, the modern understanding of magic carries conceptual baggage as well, yet, despite its imprecision, I employ *magic* as the best approximation to this ancient discourse.[2]

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

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

Understanding where these stereotypes come from and how they developed can illuminate contemporary acts of Othering as well. While seemingly remote in time and social context, these representations nonetheless continue to figure in demonizing accusations that marginalize certain people, such as, for example, assertive women and communities with different religious practices or beliefs. Contemporary uses of these stereotypes do not necessarily involve accusations of practicing magic, although they can,[3] but they do draw on vilifying images and associations that evolved part and parcel of magic discourse in antiquity. Thus assertive women are frequently portrayed as lustful and domineering witches, while foreign religions are commonly painted in terms familiar from ancient representations of magic as threatening and uncivilized. Furthermore, modern conceptions of magic as irrational have played an important role in justifying colonial and imperialist policies on the grounds that “primitive” religious practices resemble magic and therefore need to be elevated through rationalist, scientific knowledge brought by Europeans; rationality as construed by European thinkers constituted a prerequisite for self-government.[4] Even our modern identity is defined partly in opposition to constructed notions of what constitutes magic. Randall Styers persuasively argues that definitions of magic formulated over the past few centuries contributed to the construction of ideas about modernity by acting as a foil for the conceptualization of distinctly modern concepts such as science, religion, and rationality.[5] It therefore becomes ever more pressing to understand the origins of this enduring concept and how magic, variously construed, has emerged as one of the most compelling and powerful strategies of difference in the Common Era, contributing to the construction of identity and maintenance of social control. In order to consider the emergence of these stereotypes and their deployment in various social contexts, it is necessary, first, to address the problem of defining magic, which for over a century has confounded scholars of anthropology, classical history, and comparative religion. It continues to do so today.

MAGIC

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

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

> Man, as yet in a low intellectual condition, having come to associate in thought those things which he found by experience to be connected in fact, proceeded erroneously to invert this action, and to conclude that association in thought must involve similar connexion in reality. He thus attempted to discover, to foretell, and to cause events by means of processes which we can now see to have only an ideal significance.
>
> (116)

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

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

Frazer's approach to understanding magic has dogged the heels of scholars ever since. While some scholars continue to operate within Frazer's magic/religion categories, others challenge the oppositional bifurcation altogether.[16] Marcel Mauss, for example, attempted to break down both sets of oppositions in his *A General Theory of Magic*. According to Mauss, magic resembles scientific techniques in its practical aspects and in the "automatic nature" of its actions.[17] It resembles religion in that both are based on communal belief in "mystical forces" and rely on those forces in daily life.[18] Bronislaw Malinowski similarly challenged these Frazerian categories. First he rejected the view that "savages" misunderstood causal connections. He proposed instead that magic was a way to reduce anxiety in situations where human skill and technical knowledge were insufficient to ensure success. Malinowski grouped magic with religion as sacred activities and distinguished it from science, which, he firmly believed, the Trobriand Islanders possessed.[19] Despite this early endeavor to eliminate the breach perceived to exist between magic, religion, and science, the debate has continued until the present day.[20] The latter part of the twentieth century, for example, saw interest concentrated on resolving the magic/science debate, specifically addressing the conceptualization of rationality and irrationality upon which this distinction is founded.[21]

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

More recently the debate has focused on resolving the equally tenacious distinction between magic and religion.[26] In 1933 Nock explored the history and meaning of the term *magos* in Greek writings and determined that the word had a number of connotations and uses: originally, it designated priests of the Persian religion, but later acquired the meaning of religious charlatan, quack, or impostor. He proposed, therefore, that accusations of magic in the New Testament may not actually represent the true activities of those accused but instead reflect a contest over religious authority—those accused of magic in Acts of the Apostles, he argues, were actually contemporary religious figures who competed against the early apostles and missionaries.[27] Accusing them of "magic," Nock claimed, was a way to delegitimate their religious authority: by drawing on the second, derogatory meaning of *magos*, Luke portrayed them as quacks and swindlers. With this article, Nock opened a decades-long debate over the "real" nature of magic accusations in ancient literature. Increasingly, scholars began to question the basis of these accusations and the assumption that early Christian and other antique writers accurately depicted the world around them. Instead, accusations of magic were seen to be part of a marginalizing strategy, whose deployment indicated the presence of competition and contest rather than the practice of either magic or "superstition."

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

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

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

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

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

As a result of this and similar research, many scholars began to move away from use of the term *magic* to describe certain types of ritual, employing instead emic definitions that derive from and, it is argued, reflect better the context and conceptions of the culture under study. This approach appeared to avoid the problem of using paternalistic definitions, such as magic and superstition, to describe other people's ritual practices. Because the concepts magic and religion evolved to make Protestant Christianity more palatable in an age of reason and science (as well as to justify imperialist policies and colonization), neither term, it was argued, accurately applies to ancient or foreign cultures.[39] Among classical scholars, who possess precise technical vocabulary to describe a variety of ritual practices (often in original languages), descriptive terms such as *sacrifice, libation,* *binding spell, curse tablet,* and *incantation* became preferred. These terms do not carry the pejorative baggage (ancient and modern) or misleading opposition to religion and science that the broader term *magic* does. Furthermore, they more precisely characterize the practice under discussion without falsely dichotomizing it, allowing for the fact that many of these practices (e.g., libation, sacrifice, curse, and prayer) occur both in officially sanctioned rituals (commonly designated *religion*) and in marginal or illicit rituals (usually labeled *magic*).[40] Numerous books and articles in the past decade and a half have consequently tended to follow this approach, eschewing the term *magic* wherever possible.[41]

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

C. A. Hoffman similarly endorses the use of *magic* as a comparative term. He notes, first, that many ancient sources define magic along lines equivalent to Frazer, demonstrating that this definition is not so anachronistic after all: Clement of Alexandria, for example, "posited coercion as a distinguishing feature of magic in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*."[45] Sources as far ranging as the Hebrew Bible and Pliny the Elder, he argues, conceptualize magic as a form of "performative utterance"—that is, words with the power to accomplish deeds, corresponding to Frazer's notion of auto-effectiveness.[46] Hoffman also criticizes various efforts to avoid the term *magic* by using alternative terminology. More specialized terms such as *divination* or *execration,* he argues, are just as subject to Western history and prejudices as *magic*. Furthermore, he proposes that in their specificity they should be considered "species" within the larger genus magic. Other attempts to supplant magic with euphemisms such as *ritual power* or *unsanctioned religious activity* merely repackage Frazerian notions in different language; they suggest that the traditional dichotomies between coercion and supplication or private versus public continue to define magic—even when called by another name.[47]

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

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

Smith also takes aim at social explanations for magic that "shift attention away from the act and actor to the accuser and the accusation" (18). Such approaches, which understand magic solely in terms of the accusation, Smith notes, look for explanations in the *relationship* between the accuser and the accused. "While the accusation of 'magic' may well be a power ploy that marginalized the accused, the accusation may equally well be between members of elite groups, or directed by the marginal against the elite" (19).[49] Such social explanations, Smith argues, also ignore the possibility that magic can be considered a source of power or prestige in a given society and the fact that "'magic' is just one possible option in any given culture's rich vocabulary of alterity" (19).[50] Smith's approach represents one of the most sophisticated and nuanced within magic studies—recognizing magic's social function, on the one hand, while endorsing the search for a cross-cultural heuristic definition of magic, on the other.

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

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

Later, he elaborates: "It is public opinion which makes the magician and creates the power he wields."[53] Mauss suggests in these passages that magic is both real—to the extent that people believe in and practice it—and a social construct—to the extent that people believe in and practice it. In other words, magic becomes real when the concept of it exists and people in that society live and act in such a way as to realize that concept through their actions. This includes not only rituals performed by people who understand their activities to be a form of magic but also accusations and persecutions that concretize magic in the form of social control or repression.

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

HOW I DEFINE THE TERM *MAGIC*

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

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