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**Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2008. Pp. xiv & 207. £55 hardback; £15.99 paperback. ISBN: 978-1-4051-3238-1 (Hbk).**

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It is evident that Derek Collins' *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* is a book about ancient magic even before one sees the title, since it features J. W. Waterhouse's 'Circe offering the cup to Ulysses' on the front cover (see also Ogden 2002 and Yarnall 1994). However, this is not simply a rehash of previously covered material. Over the course of six chapters (the sixth is a brief conclusion) Collins covers a range of magical practices, starting with an overview of anthropological studies in magic and a framework for Greek magic, through binding magic, erotic figurines and Homeric incantations, to laws against magic. The title implies that there will be a relatively narrow focus – that of magic in the ancient Greek world – but in the fifth chapter Collins includes Roman laws, stating that 'the Romans inherited most forms of Greek magic and in their laws continued to seek Greek precedents to refine Roman magical terms' (p.xii). This is also the basis behind extending the time period for a brief foray out of 'ancient' and into medieval, with Collins reasoning that, since laws against medieval magic were based on Roman laws, an ancient Greek magical origin can be deduced.

There is no literature review of contemporary material about ancient magic, although the first footnote points the reader at two different, recent overviews available for a detailed consultation of bibliography, including Collins' own 2003 summary. This is no doubt partly because the introduction is a brief four pages (Collins notes that '[l]ong introductions bore me to tears' (p.xiv)), and partly also because the first chapter is a detailed analysis of others' theories in the field of anthropology.

Despite the first chapter being entitled 'Magic: What is it and how does it work?', Collins deliberately breaks out from the tradition that books about magic must begin with a tortured attempt to define that slippery term 'magic'. As early as the first page of the introduction Collins states that he feels this 'debate is largely irrelevant' (p.xi) and later on states that 'the discussion is largely misleading to the extent that it focuses on terminology rather than on specific ritual practices' (p.103).

Collins begins instead with a discussion of anthropology, ‘perhaps the most productive academic field in magic... because the material record is insufficient in itself’ (p.2). Collins states that his aim for this book is for it to be ‘both accessible to non-specialists and challenging to specialists’ (p.xi) but it is at this point that I wonder whether it might be the non-specialist who might find it challenging, digging through these various theories. Chapter One aims almost to deconstruct our notion of what ancient magic might be, by analysing the social and cultural factors that may make up an act of magic, whereas Chapter Two, ‘A framework for Greek magic’, then reconstructs ideas of magic for the ancient Greek.

It is not just the term ‘magic’ which causes a problem of definition when discussing ancient magic. Chapter Two considers other magical phrases that are problematic to define and translate, as well as the related issue that words such as *mageia* (‘magic’) only came into use in the fifth century BC (p.27). Collins uses Homer’s *Odyssey* to elucidate both these points, including a discussion of the ambiguous term *pharmaka* which can mean drugs or medicines, magical or medicinal, harmful or helpful (pp.28-9). The example for use of *pharmaka* is the goddess Circe, and I was surprised that there was no discussion regarding whether she should be seen as a magical practitioner or not in this poem, especially as Collins begins this section stating that he will keep the focus on magical practices so as to avoid the problem caused by the ‘overly textual approach of some scholars’ whereby ‘unless there is an available term for magic, then practices are... not magic’ (p.27). Although Homer only applies the label ‘goddess’ to her – presumably since the word for ‘magic’ did not exist at the time (Dickie 2001: 23 dismisses her from his discussion of magic, I feel somewhat unfairly, on these terms) – there is evidently something about her Homeric portrayal that has led to her reputation as a witch, and her actions are often interpreted as magical practices. Like Homer, however, Collins only refers to the Odyssean Circe as a goddess, although he notes that ‘by the fourth century, Circe... became synonymous with magical practice’ (p.28).

Given that two chapters of this six-chapter book are given over to the more theoretical analysis of magic and its framework, one discusses the law and another is the conclusion, this leaves only two chapters for an analysis of magical practices. The focus of this book is not on literary magic (although there are some examples from literary texts, notably Theocritus’ *Idyll* 2 and, as previously mentioned, Homer’s *Odyssey*), and so Collins looks at binding spells (including curse tablets) and erotic figurines together in Chapter Three, and Homeric incantations (that is, incantations using Homeric verse, not incantations within Homeric

poetry) in Chapter Four. These are not all the forms of Greek magic, although Collins notes that some of those not included ‘could be assimilated easily to one or another of the interpretive frameworks’ offered within these chapters (p.xi).

Binding and erotic magic are often inextricably linked, with erotic spells often featuring figurines that are in some way bound (thereby binding the victim to the performer), and so it is sensible that Collins discusses them together. Although some material in Chapter Three has been covered in detail before (e.g. on Greek papyri, curse tablets and binding spells see Betz 1986, Gager 1992, Graf 1994 and Ogden 1999 – the latter oddly absent from Collins’ bibliography and not cited within this chapter; on erotic magic see Faraone 1999), Chapter Four on Homeric incantations delves deeper into this particular topic than many previous works have. Not to be confused with the *sortes Biblicae* (an oracle based on verses selected at random from the Bible, see p.129), the Homeric incantations are a branch of magic which involved the recitation of a Homeric verse as the spoken text for a spell.

Collins discusses multiple examples, demonstrating their context in the original poem (often not obviously linked to the content of the spell) and analysing why this particular verse may have been chosen for that particular magical reason. I found it particularly interesting that part of a passage from the *Odyssey*, in which Helen drugs her guests to keep them happy, is used as an incantation to calm anger. Ironically, it is not the verse which mentions the actual use of the (presumably magical?) drugs themselves, but the following verse about the after effects of the drug (p.107). However, this fits in with the majority of the verses selected for incantations, which are not related to magical passages from the poems at all.

The final main chapter discusses laws against magic, initially Greek laws (including Plato’s laws against magic), then Roman law, and finally a brief comment on the ‘Medieval Inheritance’ (pp. 164-5). Although it does feel odd to have a discussion about Apuleius – a member of the Roman Empire living in North Africa and writing in Latin – in a book on Greek magic, this chapter is a fascinating delve into Apuleius’ defence on a capital charge of being a magician. Collins points out how much of Apuleius’ rhetoric revolves around catching the prosecution out in a pedantic discussion of semantics, rather than actually refuting the magical charges. There is a strong impression that Apuleius was almost playing a game by seeing how many magical references he could use to prove his innocence, as Collins

notes that '[i]t is probable that Apuleius revealed these details knowing that his audience would fail to grasp their magical significance' (p.158).

Overall, this book is an important new addition to studies of ancient magic. Some material has been covered before (the ever popular curse tablets, for example), but the initial summary chapters on the anthropological theories and ancient Greek approaches to magic (as well as the final legal discussion) present the reader with a full context for any discussion of magical practices. Collins achieves this without becoming bogged down in a discussion of terminology (besides, he notes, 'good treatments are available elsewhere' (p.103)) which can sometimes derail other studies. The focus on Greek magic centres the book with a clear methodology of always bringing the discussion back to the Greek origins of the magic in question, although I do wonder whether such detailed discussions of Roman practice from the time of the Roman Empire (and beyond), and especially the case of Apuleius, are always entirely relevant. Perhaps simply 'Ancient Greek Magic' would have been a more accurate title, since it is unclear what now could be included in a book entitled 'Magic in the Ancient Roman World'!

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