Before There Was "Magic": Transformation and Invisibility in Greek Epic

Derek Collins 2008, 27 writes that "the central dilemma for any student of Greek magic is that the Greek term *mageia* (Latin *magia*) from which we derive 'magic' only emerges in the latter half of the fifth century BCE, while the evidence for practices and substances that were understood to be magical, as well as for individuals who were thought to be magicians, existed prior to the birth of the term." By focusing on practice instead of terminology, Collins attempts to show a line of continuity between later depictions of "magical" activities involving necromancy and the use of *pharmaka* with scenes found much earlier in Homer's *Odyssey* (and elsewhere). In doing so, Collins also calls into question scholarly distinctions of "magic" as practiced by gods and goddesses as opposed to those of mortals and heroes like Odysseus.

In this talk I will explore and analyze select scenes from Greek epic in which individuals, both gods and heroes, obtain invisibility. Beginning in the late 5th c. with Euripides' *Orestes*, we find the acquisition of invisibility being connected with the τέχναι μάγων. Before Orestes kills Helen, she vanishes, leaving a Phrygian slave to wonder what has happened (1493ff.): "She (Helen) disappeared from the bedchamber through the roof, O Zeus and Ge and Light, either by drugs (*pharmaka*) or the skills of the *magoi* or by theft of the gods." The connection between the *magoi* and an act of invisibility is important because it demonstrates that in the 5th c., the acquisition of invisibility was being linked to "magic," i.e. rituals of the *magoi*. But the desire for acquiring invisibility existed long before it was connected with the *magoi*. Indeed Greek epic literature provides numerous examples of invisibility being achieved in practice long before there was a terminology of magic.

(1) Proteus seeks to escape from Menelaus by using his tricks (ὀλοφώϊα, *Od.* 4.410, 460) and his crafty skills (δολίης...τέχνης, *Od.* 4.455) which allow him to transform into a myriad of

forms (*Od.* 4.456-459). (2) The goddess Athena covers Odysseus in a thick mist (πολλὴν ἠέρα, *Od.* 7.15; ἀχλὺν θεσπεσίην, *Od.* 7. 41-42) as he enters Scheria and seeks a favorable audience before the queen. Similarly, Hermes allows Priam to avoid the perceptions of Achaean guards by lulling them to sleep (*Il.* 24.343-334, 443-447). (3) Athena distracts Penelope's attention (ἡ δ' οὔτ ἀθρῆσαι δύνατ' ἀντίη οὔτε νοῆσαι τῇ γὰρ Ἀθηναίη νόον ἔτραπεν, "She could neither see nor perceive in his direction; for Athena had redirected her thought," *Od.* 19.478-479), when Eurykleia, upon seeing Odysseus' scar, is about to reveal his identity to Penelope. (4) Athena wears the cap of Hades to escape Ares (*Il.* 24.343-334) and Perseus does likewise to defeat Medusa (Ps.-Hesiodic, *Scutum*, l.226-227).

Perhaps, not surprisingly, in Greek epic literature we find invisibility being pursued for some of the same reasons that arise in ritual texts and literary examples after the introduction of a terminology of "magic," e.g. to escape from an enemy, to conceal one's identity, and to travel safely. (Phillips 2009, 31-44). Moreover, it is often achieved in similar ways, e.g. by shapeshifting, concealing oneself by darkness, clouds, or mists, or affecting the perceptions of others (Phillips 2009, 23-30). To cite but one example, the scene in which Athena affects the perceptions of Penelope and hence, prevents Eurykleia from revealing Odysseus' identity (via his scar) is reminiscent of later ritual texts that seek invisibility by altering perceptions, e.g. *P.Oxy.* 3931 (on which see Phillips 2009, 76-77). The context also represents an ideal and timely situation for the bestowal of invisibility (Phillips 2009, 31-44).

At the same time, there are other traits worth noting about scenes of invisibility in Greek epic accounts that diverge from later treatments. Epic accounts do not provide us with invocations and rituals for invisibility, though they can introduce "magical" objects like the cap of Hades. Moreover, there is also the question of agency. Who bestows invisibility and why?

More often than not these same accounts depict invisibility as something achieved out of *intrinsic* divine power or because of *unsought* divine favor, instead of being an intentional request on the part of a hero to go unnoticed. Finally, the individuals depicted as receiving invisibility are generally not portrayed as outsiders and indeed are often the very gods themselves. Although none of the accounts of invisibility in Greek epic are necessarily colored by the familiar language of magic, it is clear that the desire to escape the notice of others at an opportune time was indeed alive and well before the advent of a terminology of "magical."

Bibliography

Collins, D. 2008. *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*: Oxford.

Phillips, R. 2009. *In Pursuit of Invisibility: Ritual Texts from Late Roman Egypt*, ASP 47: Durham, NC.