

Invisibility, Belief, and Narrative

The presence of invisibility rituals in the Graeco-Egyptian papyri (*PGM*) suggests that achieving invisibility was of interest to some in late Roman Egypt. But did anyone actually believe that achieving invisibility was possible? Ancient (and modern) authors alike are divided on this question. Not surprisingly, extant invisibility formularies present such activities in a favorable light, yet at the same time also reflect the beliefs of many in society-at-large. In Lucian's *Lover of Lies* (36), his leading character, Tychiades, critiques the surprising tendency of his learned colleagues to believe such tales, like the one his ailing friend Eucrates famously tells about the sorcerer's apprentice in which an Egyptian temple scribe mysteriously disappears in the presence of his assistant. Nonetheless, the ancient world did have its share of "unbelievers" regarding human claims of achieving invisibility. Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* 37.60.165), while referencing an invisibility rite involving a heliotrope plant and stone, calls it "the most blatant example of the shamelessness of the Magi." Contemporary scholars have also struggled to know what to make of such rituals. LiDonnici (1999, 235), while discussing invisibility rituals, contemplates whether their presence in the *PGM* "might not reflect the traffic in more practical spells and their ingredients, and work to enhance the value of the others..." Dieleman (2012/2013, 190) asserts that "it goes without saying that none of these spells were ever successful in turning anybody truly invisible..."

In this paper I suggest that perhaps a better question to ask rather than "Did such rituals work?" (following Meyer and Smith 1999, 4) or "Did people ever go unnoticed?" is "Did society-at-large believe that on occasion individuals achieved invisibility and if so, what was the role of narrative in affirming these beliefs?" In answering this question, I will be applying Sarah

Iles Johnston's recent findings on narrative technique and belief (2015 and 2016) to narratives involving the human acquisition of invisibility. Johnston (2016, 154) makes the case that well-formulated narratives help "get people to believe in things they cannot experience through the normal five senses (such as invisible others) by means of persuasion through suggestion than by persuasion through authority and that a significant means of persuasion through suggestion is the telling of vivid, engaging stories..." It is in just such kinds of "vivid" and "engaging" narratives that acts of invisibility are presented as occurring. It is my contention that the same kinds of narrative techniques that draw people into storylines also help to affirm popular beliefs.

In this paper four narrative techniques will be explored in relationship to invisibility tales: the use of (1) **episodic** or **serial narratives** that help to draw an audience into stories by encouraging them to keep thinking about them (and what it means to become invisible) between episodes (such as with the tales found in the Homeric epics); (2) **Plurimedial** portrayals that reinforce audience knowledge about stories across various media platforms (e.g. representations involving Perseus and the Cap of Hades and Odysseus going unnoticed before Penelope); (3) *Deixis* that helps to bring stories into the world of the audience by pointing out places or things that exist in both worlds (e.g. places where disappearances of individuals like Oedipus, Herakles, Cleomedes of Astypalaea, and Jesus of Nazareth were believed to occur); and (4) **Crossovers** that introduce a character or in this case an object or ritual from another story that the audience is already familiar with (e.g. the Cap of Hades or invisibility rituals). Although the invisibility rituals in the *PGM* reflect the vibrant hybridity of late Roman Egypt and the ritual traditions therein (Phillips 2009), wider net has intentionally been cast for this examination, a move that I believe is justified given the familiarity of the Greek mythic tradition in many of the texts found within the *PGM* and elsewhere in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt.

Bibliography

- Dieleman, Jacco. 2012/2013. "Review of Richard L. Phillips, *In Pursuit of Invisibility: Ritual Texts from Late Roman Egypt*," *Enchoria* 33: 189-191.
- Johnston, Sarah Iles. 2015. "Narrating Myths: Story and Belief in Ancient Greece." *Arethusa* 48, no. 2: 173-218.
- . 2016. "How Myths and Other Stories Help to Create and Sustain Beliefs." In *Religion: Narrating Religion*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston, 141-156. Farmington Hills, MI.
- LiDonnici, Lynn R. 1999. "The Disappearing Magician: Literary and Practical Questions about the Greek Magical Papyri." In *A Multiform Heritage: Studies on Early Judaism and Christianity in Honor of Robert A. Kraft* (Scholars Press Homage Series 24), ed. Benjamin G. Wright, 227-243. Atlanta, GA.
- Meyer, M. and R. Smith. 1999. *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*. Princeton, NJ.
- Phillips, Richard. 2009. *In Pursuit of Invisibility: Ritual Texts from Late Roman Egypt*, *American Studies in Papyrology* 47. Durham, NC.