The Magic of Advertising in the *Little Beggar* (*PGM* IV.2373–2440)


Many of the spells in the Greek Magical Papyri call for ingredients such as severed body parts and bodily fluids while also instructing the ritualist to keep the ritual secret (see e.g. *PGM* IV.52-58). In contrast, the ritual contained within *PGM* IV.2373-2440, often called by its self-given name, the *Little Beggar*, requires no blood, body parts, or components otherwise offensive to public decency, and, for all its similarities to binding spells, it does not contain any calls for secrecy. In the first part of this paper, I suggest that the *Little Beggar* ritual, reimagined as a *Little Hawker* ritual, could be performed publicly despite threats to magical practitioners in the Roman Empire, and I propose a possible reconstructed public ritual corresponding to the ritual instructions of the papyrus. Such a critical fabulation provides both an efficient vehicle of interpretation, honoring the real life and material aspects of the ritual, and an opportunity to question conceptions of ancient secrecy and magic.

I take advantage of this latter opportunity in the second and third parts of my paper, considering first the implications of such a reconstruction on approaches to secrecy within the spells. Referring to magic or spells as private ritual is thus an effective way to differentiate between magic and religion (cf. Dieleman 2019, 93–96), but it obscures the potentials for performance of individual rituals. Gossip was the enemy of ancient magic users, and Eidinow's treatment of accusations of magic considers the interpersonal relationships of the parties involved (cf. Eidinow 2019, 765–768); in the context of magical accusations, these relationships were typically negative, but I expand this approach to include the relatively positive interpersonal effects of the *Little Beggar*. Comparing my reconstruction with modern marketing strategies and the social capital at stake in business spells (cf. Venticinque 2019, 431–434), I

suggest that, in the context of this ritual, gossip would be the ally of the ritualist, rather than the enemy, even if the use of magic was an open secret.

As I complicate further the question of magic in the ancient world, my interpretation of this ritual relies on the assumption that the simple act of magic was not enough to mark someone as a community villain. The positive interpersonal effects of the ritual, generating popular charisma as social capital, would enable the ritualist to perform a sort of socially-approved, or even mundane, magic (cf. Frankfurter 1998, 204–210). This image of a ritualist is at odds with slanderous depictions intent on establishing proper social practices (Van der Vliet 2019, 255–262), as my imagined ritualist can appear to be more of a crafty businessman than a supernatural meddler. Yet this ritual is no less supernatural for its mundanity, forcing us finally to imagine a definition of magic that can apply to public advertising with the aid of a spirit no less than it can apply to violent, erotic binding spells.

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