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Stereotype in the Ancient World, by Kimberly B.
Stratton

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Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World.

Kimberly B. Stratton, 2007

New York: Columbia University Press, xviii + 312 pp., \$45.00/£26.50. ISBN 978-0-231-13836-9

In her *Naming the Witch*, Kimberly Stratton provides a stimulating investigation of the ways that stereotypes of magic and those who use it vary in the ancient world, exploring how the social contexts in different historical periods affect the particular stereotypes that gain prominence in those eras. This link between the representations of magic and their historical context makes Stratton's study valuable to anyone interested in the social, intellectual, or religious history of the ancient world. The study is well written and clearly structured, and Stratton makes a broad range of material accessible to readers who may not have the same depth of background in Greek, Roman, Early Christian, and Jewish materials, although the choice of endnotes instead of footnotes does a disservice to the erudition buried in Stratton's documentation.

Stratton considers the history of magic, 'that particular constellation of ideas and Othering devices' (p. xi), as a discourse in Foucault's sense of a socially constructed and contested object of knowledge, examining the different ways it appears in the evidence from four different periods in the ancient world. Starting in her first chapter ('Barbarians, Magic, and Construction of the Other in Athens,') with the Classical Athens of tragedy, Stratton moves in the next chapter ('Mascula Libido: Women, Sex, and Magic in Roman Rhetoric and Ideology,') to the poetry of Augustan Rome. She then considers representations of magic in early Christian material from around the second century ('My Miracle, Your Magic: Heresy, Authority, and Early Christianities,') and finally the ideas of magic that can be gleaned from the Babylonian Talmud, finally put together from earlier traditions in the sixth century CE ('Caution in the Kosher Kitchen: Magic, Identity, and Authority in Rabbinic Literature'). These chapters are preceded by

an introduction in which she surveys the scholarly disputes over magic and sets out her methodology, and a brief epilogue pulls together the major ideas of the work.

These theoretical end pieces are in some ways the most stimulating parts of the book, since Stratton neatly lays out her ideas for tackling some of the most difficult problems in the study of ancient magic, providing a good summary of the controversies that have vexed earlier scholars and showing how her approach to magic as a discourse of alterity can avoid or resolve many of the problems caused by essentialist definitions of magic. By examining the way different modes of alterity are emphasized in different historical contexts, Stratton can highlight how particular stereotypes are linked to the specific social concerns of the time and the strategies for constructing legitimate authority in those particular political contexts.

One of Stratton's most interesting points is the difference in the ways in which female figures are used as Others in the different contexts. She notes the prominence of young, vengeful female witch-figures in Greek tragedy in contrast to the old, lustful women in Roman poetry, pointing out that both these female types differ from the male, alien sorcerers of early Christian literature, who make women their victims. She suggests that, while the Greek and Roman materials used women as a type providing a contrast to the norm of the male citizen subject, the early Christian writers, conceiving of themselves as Others in the Roman Empire, used the figures of women to represent themselves and their own vulnerable position in society. While much of the discourse in all the studies is focused on women and sexuality, the rabbinic sources draw a special connection between cooking and women's activities because of the importance of dietary regulations in the establishment of rabbinic authority in these periods.

As valuable and thought provoking as her ideas are, Stratton's particular studies in her chapters do not always live up to the potential of her proposed methods. Stratton rightly draws attention to the links between the choice of type of alterity (age, alien status, gender) and the specific historical circumstances in which particular images of the witch were produced, but her account becomes at times overly schematic. The different types of alterity coexist with one

another as possibilities for accusations of magic in all of the historical periods she examines – male, foreign sorcerers show up in Greek and Roman literature; young, vengeful sorceresses appear in both pagan and Christian literature of the Roman era; and old hags abound from the earliest Greek sources to the Christian period. The social and political circumstances she examines certainly play a role in determining which kinds of stereotypes predominate, but considerations of genre and even individual authorial preference also have their influence. The particular attributes of any given witch figure depend first and foremost on the role the character plays in the literary narrative, from the divine foreigner Circe in Odysseus' wanderings to the all-too-human young, barbarian girl Medea in Ovid. The literary imagination allows the figure of the witch to be shaped to fit the story, focusing on one type of alterity or heaping strangeness upon strangeness to create a terrifying figure.

These critiques, however, merely underscore the importance of Stratton's fundamental point, that the specific representation of magic must be linked to the particular socio-political context. While Stratton identifies some important trends in each of these periods, the context of each of her texts is richer and more complex than she portrays, and the representations of magic are dependent on more factors than she can examine in her study. Stratton's *Naming the Witch* should serve as a call for scholars to follow her lead in this kind of investigation of the particular contexts that shape the representations of magic and witches in the ancient world.

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