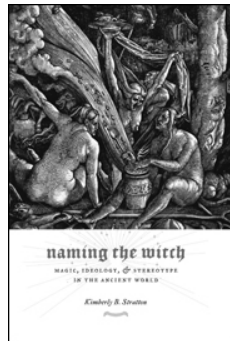


○ **REVIEW OF KIMBERLY B. STRATTON, *NAMING THE WITCH. MAGIC, IDEOLOGY, & STEREOTYPE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD* (GENDER, THEORY AND RELIGION SERIES)**

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Naming the Witch is a book of 5 chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1, *Magic, Discourse, and Ideology* is an introduction to the tools and concepts used in the next 4 chapters, which then deal with magic in ancient Greece (2), in the Roman world (3), in early Christianity (4) and in Rabbinic literature (5). The epilogue reflects further on some of the issues raised.

The promotional blurbs on the back cover certainly raised my expectations, with impressive statements such as ‘theoretically and historically sophisticated’; the research is carried out ‘with fresh eye and ideological sophistication’ (whatever that is...). Then there are adjectives such as fascinating, excellent, lively, stimulating and attentive. Coupled with the snazzy layout this certainly gives a good first impression.

Chapter 1 outlines various definitions of magic and touches upon its colonial and rationalist implications. Over against these positions, which neglect to see magic as a construction, Stratton positions her understanding of magic as discourse and its role as a discursive practice. This analytical approach gives her the freedom to move around within a number of genres such as literature and forensic material. Finally by deploying a notion of gender instead of maintaining the customary focus on women, the discursive power of magic and its relations to power is brought to the fore.

Chapter 2, "Barbarians, Magic, and the Construction of the Other," was highly enjoyable. It traces the emergence of a discourse of magic from a number of elements. There is the intensification of Athenian nationalism through military victories over the Persians, as well as Pericles' marriage law, which demanded two Athenian parents for a child to claim Athenian citizenship. This law thus included woman as a necessary marker of authentic Athenian identity, which in turn allotted the women in the *oikos* increasing power over masculine honour. The discourse of

magic is in part generated from male anxiety regarding this power of the women, in part from a xenophobic stereotyping of barbarians in general and Persians in particular. Stratton finds this triangle between gender, foreignness and magic in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Euripides' version of *Medea*, and in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. In all cases, magic dramatises the disorder and social disruptions through lack of compliance with 'normative' or desired gender hierarchies. Thus masculinised women and feminised men mark a disorder generated by the use of magic potions, exacerbated by involvement with foreign women and the invoking of women's jealous passions through improper conduct. The discourse of magic denotes subversive practices, and draws on notions of barbaric and feminine otherness to function as a backdrop for the formulation of an Athenian identity, which is part of the nationalist agenda of the newly found democracy.

Chapter 3, "Mascula Libido. Women, Sex and Magic in Roman Rhetoric and Ideology," moves along the same lines, that is, it traces the discourse of magic and gender stereotypes within the politics and literature of this time and place. The difference from Greek configurations of magic is that while the magic we have seen practiced by Greek women is restorative and defensive, we encounter a more predatory notion of magic practice in the Roman world. The issue here is the independent women of the elite. If such a woman remains unmarried, then upon the death of her father (on whom she is legally dependent while he is still alive) she gains legal independence. That the political power of these women was somewhat unsettling for Roman men, Stratton shows in various examples of 'the discourse of the wicked woman'. This discourse canvasses certain types of behaviour, which then may be seen as an inversion of the ideals of the desired role of a domesticated wife. Within this discourse operate notions such as: seeking control over men; acting in inappropriately masculine ways (in other words the terror of gender confusion we saw in Greece); and poison. Stratton discusses various examples both from the courtroom and from Latin literature, ranging from Virgil and Horace to the retelling of Medea's story in Ovid and Seneca, and the farce of magical ritual in Apuleius. Stratton places this merging of the discourse of the wicked woman and magic as discourse of alterity within Roman social order and Augustus' moral and religious reforms. Here the image of the witch and her accompanying traits of uncontrolled libido and independence emerge as the antithesis of the 'idealised and politicized vision of female behaviour' (99).

With Chapter 4, "My Miracle, Your Magic. Heresy, Authority and Early Christianities," we move into the early Christian writings. Here we see – not surprisingly – that the discourse of magic has been worked into Christian cosmology, and thus any practice of magic is equated with Satan. Of particular interest to a study which is highly interested in the deployment of gender within the discourse of magic, is the fact that the Christian writings from the first two centuries differ from the Greek and Roman literature. While Greek and Roman literature stereotype women as sorcerers, Christian writings portray women as the victims of male sorcery. This reflects at a different level the relationship between the churches and the Roman Empire. The reaction of the virgin to this onslaught of magic is either capitulation or resistance. In this way the women in question become images of either a true church or a heretical one. The representations of women are seen to reflect ideas about male authority over against the Roman Empire.

And then we come to the rabbis. "Caution in the Kosher Kitchen. Magic, Identity and Authority in Rabbinic Literature" looks at magic in the Babylonian Talmud. Here Stratton emphasises the ambivalence towards magic in the Babylonian Talmud, which has rabbis using magic to demonstrate their power while it also functions as marker of a social danger. This ambivalence

is solved – as is so often done before – by placing the attitudes onto two different redactional strata. The positive attitude is mapped onto Babylon, and the negative attitude is traced to Palestine. This splitting and mapping is obviously due to Stratton's practice of emphasising the cultural specificities of understandings of magic. Thus the Hellenistic social context of the Palestinian rabbis and this particular environment's discourse of alterity have influenced the Palestinian rabbis' attitude towards magic. In Babylonia, this discourse was not prevalent, and so the rabbis from this redactional stratum would be less influenced by these xenophobic sensibilities. The conforming of rabbinical practice with the accepted norms would then maximise the authority of the rabbis. Naturally the women also find a place in this chapter. In the rabbinic writings there are associations between women and harmful magic. These Stratton sees as connected with anxieties over the preparation of food and the increasing authority of the rabbi to maintain kashrut.

The epilogue has some further reflections on stereotyping women and magic, and with this the book comes to a close.

Stratton's lines of argument are many faceted and very detailed and move through a lot of material. I have hardly done justice to the richness of the book here. I found it really interesting and it covered a lot of known and (for me) unknown literature. I also like its social and political groundings of the discourses of magic.

One thing I have been pondering is the question of readership. Whom does this book address? While the contemporary theoretical input may indicate an audience well versed in post structuralist and gender theory, several things indicate that a more conservative crowd is on the horizon. The dry style and detached analysis goes very well with (admittedly my very stereotypical notions of) conventional scholarship. The historical, local, and political circumstances of the various discourses are reconstructed along fairly conventional lines and thus provide a 'secure' context within which these discourses can be seen to operate. So while Stratton at times points to the ideological discursiveness of representations of women's behaviour (78, 83, 107, 137, 139), she also gives Livy credit as a reliable historian, writing three centuries after then events in question (207, n. 10) and does not hesitate in dating the Babylonian Talmud as well as using historical critical analysis to construct her argument.

Naming the Witch certainly contains elements which may be seen as relatively controversial within a conventional academic history of religions study programme. It is a very cross-disciplinary study and makes extensive use of gender and discourse analysis.

And this is where I get confused.

Gender patterns and gender stereotyping, however pervasive in every chapter and nearly every analysis, are not mentioned in the title. Of the three topics in the subtitle: magic, ideology and stereotype, magic and stereotype are heavily used and discussed, while ideology seems to be put in as a buzzword. Gender on the other hand would have been a much more appropriate heading, when one considers the omnipresence of the concept. And in case you were wondering, I am not trying to nitpick and say that this is a better word and so on. I actually think that this is an important point, because this makes me wonder where the investment lies. There seems to be no struggle, the narrative voice is without compassion, drive and engagement. There are no personal insertions; feminist observations are held at an arm's length (166, 174); in fact you would never guess that the author was a woman writing about gender. Is this on purpose? It leaves the impression that while it actually is a book about gender (using the work of Burrus,

Castelli, Schüssler Fiorenza and Boyarin) it seemingly *isn't* or should most definitely *not* look like a book about gender, but about discourses of magic and incidentally their deployment of gender.