

REFLECTIONS

THE SOFTWARE OF MAGIC

Robert Silverberg

Last year, in the column for the July 2015 issue, I discussed *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft*, a multi-volume nineteenth-century collection of thousand-year-old Anglo-Saxon charms, spells, and medicinal recipes. The book, a quaint thing indeed, provides instructions for ways to avoid sterility, for aid in childbirth, for the interpretation of dreams, for gout, for curing the bite of a poisonous spider, and many another facet of life. (The original edition is rare, but it has been reprinted in a modern paperback by Cambridge University Press, and it's available at no cost at all at archive.org on the Internet.)

None of these spells work. At least, I assume they don't, because nobody today uses the remedies for gout or spiderbite prescribed in *Leechdoms*. What the book provides is software, of a sort—the codes and formulas for making things happen—but it is software for a computer that won't boot up. It's the software of magic, and magic, we have discovered over the centuries, doesn't actually accomplish anything real. (There's a hardware of magic, too, the wands and crystal balls and amulets and such, but they don't work either. As you know if you've ever dealt with a computer that doesn't have any programs on it, hardware won't do anything unless it's equipped with software, and it had better be software that really functions.) In my novel *Sorcerers of Majipoor* I invented all sorts of magical hardware—ammatepilas, hexaphores, ambivials, and plenty more, and those devices *did* work, because the software that went with them did, but the drawback is that they work only within the confines of the fantasy world that I had created. Shakespeare's Owen Glendower was able to call spirits from the vasty deep, too—"but will they come when you do call for them?" rude Hotspur asked.

Leechdoms wasn't the only reference book I used in dreaming up the charms and spells I used when writing fantasy. Another very useful item in my library, one that is in print today and has much to offer anyone who is interested in this sort of thing, is *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, edited by Hans Dieter Betz of the University of Chicago, and published in 1986 (with a revised edition in 1992) by the University of Chicago Press. It's a wonderful compendium of the charms and spells employed in the classical world two thousand years ago.

The spells that are offered here, in 352 closely packed pages, don't work, either, so far as I know. But what joy there is in roaming the book and testing them out, uttering things like ACHAIPTHOTHOTHOAIEIAEIA and AIEAIEOTHOTHOPHI-ACHA and hoping that one of these magical formulas, perhaps the one on page 160 that can turn a mixture of salt and alum into gold, or the one on page 125 that tells you how to win a woman's love by writing holy names (CHAUNA MOUCHLIMALCHA MANTOR MOURKANA, etc.) on a seashell with the blood of a black ass, will, in fact, do what it is advertised to do. I've had no luck so far, but I'm a long way from having tested all the spells in the book.

These texts, though they are lumped together as "Greek," actually come from Egypt—for they were all set down on papyrus, mainly between the second century B.C. and the fifth century A.D., and papyrus is a substance that survives best in Egypt's dry climate. That they have survived at all is a matter of great luck. Religious leaders and governments alike regarded magic with distaste in ancient times, the priests seeing the magicians as competitors and the rulers seeing them as threats

to the civil order. The burning of books of magical spells (and sometimes of the magicians themselves) was a common event. In *The Book of Acts* 19, for example, we read that there was a great burning of books of magic at Ephesus in the early days of Christianity, when the Apostle Paul prevailed upon “many of them which used curious arts” to burn their books before the citizens, “and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.” The Emperor Augustus had two thousand magical scrolls burned at Rome in 13 A.D. alone. There were many other such purges.

Therefore the magicians resorted to hiding their prized texts in subterranean caches, and some of these, lost and forgotten, remained hidden until modern times. Early in the nineteenth century one Jean d’Anastasi, Sweden’s consul in Alexandria, came upon a huge collection of these papyri and shipped them back to Europe, where they eventually were acquired by the British Museum, the Louvre and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and other museums in Berlin and Leiden. Scholars set to work on these almost as soon as ancient Egyptian script had been deciphered. A Dutch scholar translated the Leiden papyrus in 1830, the first English translation of another appeared in 1853, and a few years later several of the Berlin texts were put into German. More translations followed, the last of them in 1925, and in 1928 the first volume of a collected edition of the d’Anastasi papyri in a Latin translation was published in Germany. A second volume followed in 1931; work on a third was interrupted by World War II, but in 1973 and 1974 a new edition appeared containing translations of all the known Greek magical texts. It is from this that Hanz Dieter Betz drew the material included in his 1986 English-language version for the University of Chicago Press.

And what a treasurehouse it is! I often like to thumb through it on rainy days, looking for spells that might prove efficacious in solving some problem of the moment that I happen to be struggling with.

I do ignore, I must tell you right away, the copious quantity of love spells. They might have come in handy in an earlier era of my life, perhaps, but here in the second decade of the twenty-first century I am a sedately married man, quite content with the wife with whom I share my life, and in no need of inscribing magical names on a seashell with special ink and throwing it into the heating chamber of the nearest public bathhouse while urging the Greek god Typhon to attract me to someone, “on this very day . . . with her soul and heart aflame, quickly, quickly, immediately, immediately.” I am, I assure you, quite free of the desire to set anybody’s soul and heart aflame these days. But those of you who happen to be single and in need of supernatural assistance with a recalcitrant lover, the text of the spell is here, on page 131 of the Betz book, beginning with the resonant if incomprehensible words OKESE EERINIARE MIN, and good luck to you.

I’m not sure I have much use for the spell for invisibility, either, though I can see that it might be valuable to me at a particularly hectic science fiction convention heavily populated by insistent autograph collectors. It’s here, anyway, page 9, the “Indispensable invisibility spell,” instructing one to “take fat or an eye of a night-owl and a ball of dung rolled by a beetle and oil of an unripe olive and grind them all together. . . .” There’s a night-owl who perches in a tree outside our house and hoots all night, and I’d gladly catch it and use it in the invisibility ointment, and unripe olives are not particularly hard to find here in California. But we do have a shortage of Egyptian dung-beetles hereabouts, so for the time being I’ll pass on experimenting with invisibility. It got H.G. Wells’ Invisible Man into a peck of trouble, anyway.

Some of the other spells might be too exciting for a geezer like me. There’s one—it reminds me of the Hebrew Kabbalistic imagery that I was quoting in this space last year, the bit about the Sixth Palace and its lethal guardians—that describes the initiation rites of a magician, in which one utters words of power (“SOUSINEPHI

ARENBARAZEI MARMARENTEU," etc., etc.) and one sees "the doors thrown open, and seven virgins coming from deep within, dressed in linen garments, and with the faces of asps." These are the Fates, and one is advised to greet them very courteously: "Hail, O seven Fates of heaven, O most noble and good virgins, O sacred ones, O most holy guardians of the four pillars." It gets livelier from there, with lightning bolts and earthquakes and much, much else. You'll find the details on pages 48-52 of Betz, and if such things are your cup of tea, go at it with my blessing. It's not something I would want to try at home.

There's ever so much more: a restraining spell to keep skulls from speaking (don't ask), one to extract the venom from the heart of a man who has been made to drink poison, one to bring victory in the races, a whole host of love charms, one to cure gout (different from the one in *Leechdoms*), one that induces insomnia (what for?), one to avert the marriage of one's beloved to someone else—oh, my, a spell for every occasion, a fabulous compendium of magic.

Tolkien aficionados might be interested in one item in particular, the lengthy prescription for forging a ring of power, page 163. It's modestly described as "a little ring for success and favor and victory," which doesn't sound at all like One Ring to Rule Them All. But in fact, declares the text, "The world has nothing greater than this. For when you have it with you, you will always get whatever you ask from anybody. Besides, it calms the angers of masters and kings. Wearing it, whatever you say to anyone, you will be believed, and you will be pleasing to everybody." And so on: it opens doors, breaks chains, and, quite possibly, keeps the agents of the Internal Revenue Service at bay.

Of course, you have to make use of a stone of green chalcedony with flecks of red jasper, on which you inscribe the image of a snake with its tail in its mouth—the good old Ouroboros serpent—and some hieroglyphics, and then you must rise at dawn and hold it up where the appropriate god can see it, while uttering an intricate invocation, half a page of jawbreakers. ("SEISENOPHRANGES MASICHIOR IOTABAAS CHENOUCHI. . .") There's a lot more, the pouring of libations, the sacrifice of a rooster, and another set of spells ("IEOU ANCHERE-PHRENEPSOUPHRINGOGH. . . IEUO AMOUN EII OSIRIS. . ."), all very complicated, but if you do everything properly, quite possibly, you will find yourself owning a little ring that opens doors, breaks chains, and does ever so much else. Tell the appropriate god that Robert Silverberg sent you, and don't forget to give Hans Dieter Betz and Jean d'Anastasi proper credit, too.