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Paper #2: Magic and Magicians in the Ancient Egyptian and Modern Worlds

Nowadays, if someone identifies himself or herself as a magician, thoughts immediately turn to the gimmicky nature of classic tricks, such as pulling rabbits out of top hats or producing bouquets of flowers from coat sleeves. Yet in Ancient Egypt, the idea of magic and the role of magicians were concepts held in high esteem. The Egyptians' fascination and respect for magic and those who performed it is something that is no longer echoed in American culture today, yet its importance remains, as the portrayal of magic as a mythological theme gives helpful glimpses into how individuals in this ancient culture viewed the world.

The magic portrayed in the myths of Ancient Egypt is a far cry from the "pick a card, any card" slight of hand boasted by today's amateur magicians. Instead, the magic described in myths like "The Boating Party" is a nature-defying feat of immense power. When the chief lector-priest Djadja-em-anekh moves the water in the lake to retrieve a lost turquoise necklace, the story's narrator does not skimp on the details that make such an act unbelievable. "He placed one side of the lake's water upon the other... Now the water that had been twelve cubits deep across had become twenty four cubits when it was turned back," the myth states. "Then he said his say of magic and returned the waters of the lake to their place." Similarly, in the story "The Magician Djedi," the equally

imaginative description of another seemingly impossible task — rejoining the severed head of a goose with its body — completed by the myth's titular character is described in vivid detail. "A goose was brought to him and its head cut off. The goose was placed on the west side of the great hall, its head on the east side of the great hall. Djedi said his say of magic: the goose stood up and waddled, its head also," the story states. While it is highly unlikely that either of these events occurred in reality, these stories provide the Ancient Egyptians with a way of comprehending inexplicable phenomena. Without the knowledge our modern society possesses of the way things work, the Ancient Egyptians had no choice but to subscribe to fantastic belief in magic and sorcery.

Unlike the somewhat derogatory view many Americans have of the street magicians who vie for the attention — and money — of bustling passerby, Ancient Egyptian mythology portrayed magicians and sorcerers in a positive light, lauding their accomplishments and praising their mastery of mystical arts. In "Setne Khamwas and Si-Osire," Si-Osire serves as the myth's protagonist, a gifted young magician famed for his abilities. "(When the) boy Si-Osire (reached) twelve years of age, it came to pass that there was no (scribe and learned man) in Memphis (who could compare) with him in reciting spells and performing magic," the story reads. As the myth continues, Si-Osire is viewed as a hero for his role in defeating the Nubian sorcerer before finally revealing his true identity at the end. "There is not a good scribe and learned man like Horus-son-of-Paneshe! Never, never will there be his like again!" exclaim the Pharaoh and Setne, Si-Osire's father, during the story's final sentences. The use of magic as a plot-enhancing device in literary works is something still seen today. While, generally, individuals who perform magic as a sort of act do not enjoy widespread fame in the public eye, the

exception lies with characters endowed with magical powers who appear in books, movies, and television shows. One could argue that the young wizards in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books or the superheroes that appear in cinematic remakes of Marvel comics are viewed by modern audiences in a way similar to how certain magic-related deities like Bes and Bastet were viewed by Ancient Egyptian audiences. In both cases, the portrayal of magic not only makes plotlines of stories more interesting; it also establishes identifiable iconography prevalent in popular culture.

For the most part, magic in the modern world is viewed with skepticism. Few people turn to a book of spells to solve everyday problems. Yet in the ancient world, it was a different story. Magic was seen to have everyday uses, from the mixing of a potion to cure an illness to the use of sorcery to influence the outcome of daily decisions. The spells included on the “Magical Papyri” studied in class provide a myriad of situations for which magic might be used. In “The Ritual of the Cat” spell, readers are directed through an extensive list of steps that include drowning a cat and resurrecting it in an attempt to create “a charm to restrain charioteers in a race, a charm for sending dreams, a binding love charm, and a charm to cause separation and enmity.” This diverse description of all that this spell could be used for shows how magic was often seen as a cure-all solution for everyday problems — a belief that we do not typically see in our modern world today.

Although viewed as a mostly recreational novelty now, magic and magicians played a prominent role in Ancient Egyptian culture. Through the fantastical feats and daring deeds described in stories studied in this class, it becomes clear that magic had an immense impact on this civilization's understanding of the world.