Narrating Reality in the
Ancient Greek Magical Papyri
Sarah Iles Johnston

Those who study the ancient Greek magical papyri (a collective term for ancient handbooks of spells dating to the first six or seven centuries CE) are met with a bewildering array of gods and demons from different cultures who are described by an equally bewildering array of epithets, adjectives and descriptive phrases. Even within a single papyrus, moreover, and sometimes even within a single spell, there is no clear hierarchization or organization of these entities. Scholars have often invoked bricolage and syncretism to explain how such a culturally broad span of entities could be assembled, but these principles don't help us understand how any single ancient practitioner made sense of the whole.

I will suggest that the very *narrative richness* of the spells, which so often confuses scholars with its panoply of entities and descriptions, conditioned the magicians to experience and interpret the cosmos in a manner that persuaded them that they had the ability to draw on its powers. To do so, I will look to studies of contemporary neopaganism that discuss how narratives similarly enable practitioners to envision another world and to draw upon the power that it contains, particularly Tanya Luhrmann's 1989 *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* and Sabina Magliocco's 2004 *Witching Culture*. I'll focus on the following characteristics of ancient magical spells:

1) Their underlying sense of an enchanted world and characters within it who have the agency to effect change.

2) Their vividity of description: that is, the poetic, picturesque language and sensorily rich descriptions of things seen, things heard, things felt that allow the magician to construct and suspend himself within that narrative world.

3) The propensity of their narratives to lead the magician to visualize a particular scene of power and the means by which he can bring that power into his own world.

4) The narratives' ability to convey a sense of unnamed or relatively undefined power that nonetheless has ontological and functional weight.