CHARMING CHILDREN: THE USE OF THE CHILD IN ANCIENT DIVINATION*

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In Memoriam William M. Brashear

In the 1982 film *Poltergeist,* the arrival of spirits in a suburban neighborhood first manifests itself to a little girl who is watching TV in a darkened living room: "They're here," she announces, gazing at images that only she can see on the glowing screen. The director, Tobe Hooper, represents the television as a window through which the inhabitants of another world can be seen. The little girl is our medium—a human agent who has a special ability to look through that window and tell us what she sees.

What makes the incident especially intriguing is not just the possibility of stealing glimpses into this other world but the nature of the medium who does so. Using a child in such a role, to quote Henry James, gives the effect another "Turn of the Screw." Both James' tale and Hooper's film, however, build on quite a tradition: in many cultures around the world, both modern and ancient, children have been credited with a special ability to see spirits, either spontaneously or when induced by a spell.[1]

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1 For a start on this topic, see Lang 1905, Lang 1894.212–25, Thomas 1905, Delatte 1932, and Dodds 1973.185–205; on private mediums in late antiquity more generally, Dodds

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Ancient Greece and Rome were no exceptions. Beginning in the first century B.C.E., we hear about the use of children[2] in mediumistic divinatory processes during which they were able to see gods, demons, and ghosts that other people could not. The earliest descriptions of these processes are little more than allusive because they are embedded in discussions of other matters by the authors who use them,[3] but, not much later, we find a veritable treasury of spells to induce mediumistic trances in children in the documents known collectively as the magical papyri. In this essay, I will interpret these rituals from the papyri, supplementing them on occasion with remarks made by other late antique authors who discuss the phenomenon. I will suggest why it was that children came to be used as mediums and what such a choice can tell us about the way children were viewed in antiquity and the ways in which divination worked.

RITUAL INNOVATION IN THE PAPYRI

Before I do that, however, some general comments on the nature of the rituals we find in the papyri are in order. As I have shown in another article (Johnston forthcoming), most rituals in the papyri represent not intentional inversions, reversals, or perversions of mainstream rituals, as

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1951.296–99. The theurgic sources discussed in Dodds 1951 do not specify the age of the medium, but since we know that the founder of theurgy used his own son as a medium (cf. n. 37 below), it is probable, I think, that other theurgists, like the practitioners of the magical papyri, were using children as well. These theurgic sources add quite a few details to our knowledge of how mediumistic procedures operated. In particular, I think it is quite likely that the apparitions described by the *Chaldean Oracles* (esp. frs. 146, 147, and 148) were seen by a medium gazing at a flame or bowl of liquid, as Dodds suggests at 1951.299. Thus the procedures used by the theurgists were virtually identical to those of the papyri practitioners that we will be examining in this article.

2 Throughout this article, whenever possible, I will leave the gender of the child indeterminate, although for concision I will resort to using male pronouns rather than the bulky "he or she," "him or her" combination. In the translations found in Betz 1986, the mediums are always called boys, but the Greek text consistently uses *pais* or *paidion,* both of which can refer to either gender. Byzantine Greek spells that are probably descendants of the papyri spells specifically indicate that either gender of child can be used, as do Jewish spells from an eighteenth-century manuscript found in Tunis. See Hopfner 1932 and Daiches 1913. Looking even more broadly at evidence for child mediumship throughout the world, we find that the two genders are used about equally. See Lang 1905, Lang 1894.212–25, Thomas 1905.

3 Varro ap. Apul. *Apol.* 42.6–8 and Aug. *CD* 7.35. Cardauns 1960.54–50 discusses which of Varro's works Apuleius and Augustine may have been reading.

some scholars have argued,[4] but rather innovations based on older rituals, developed by the practitioners who copied and used these papyri. The practitioners innovated for several reasons. First, they thought that they knew more about the manner in which the divine world worked than the average person did.[5] Second, because of this greater knowledge, they felt capable of extending traditional practices in new directions to accomplish new goals for which there were no existing rituals. This does not mean, I hasten to add, that the practitioners innovated unreservedly, without any guidelines at all: rather, they improvised upon existing rituals in much the same way that the bards of archaic Greece improvised upon existing myths. Each bard drew on the same body of traditional myths when constructing his poems, but each adapted those myths to suit particular occasions or themes. A bard who changed a story too significantly would surely have been censured (Hector cannot be allowed to survive the Trojan War), but skillful changes within the proper limits enhanced his story and its ability to convey meaning.[6] So, too, for practitioners of the papyri: they altered rituals with both definite purposes in mind and an awareness of the limits beyond which they could not go.

Third, and perhaps most important for the purposes of this essay, the practitioners improvised because the nature of their business required it. The practitioners whom we glimpse behind the spells of the papyri fell into two types (which were not necessarily mutually exclusive). One was the "freelance" ritual specialist who was called in to help with quotidian problems of various kinds: arousing love, curing illnesses, cursing enemies, and divining the future. This type of practitioner was necessarily mobile, moving his operations from place to place as his clients required, often performing

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4 Most recently Graf 1997, esp. 229–32. Further discussion of the problem and its history in Johnston forthcoming.

5 This is self evident from numerous comments made in the papyri themselves, but is also demonstrated nicely by Apuleius' description of what a *magus* ("magician") is: the *magus* has an enhanced ability to communicate with the gods, is unusually interested in the workings of providence within the cosmos, and worships the gods excessively (*Apol.* 26.11–15 and 27.5–12). More on this in Johnston forthcoming.

6 For example, as Homer's Achilles tells the story at *Il.* 24.602–17, Niobe assuages her grief with food before being petrified. Within the immediate story as narrated by Achilles, the point of the change is to convince Priam to eat despite his grief; within the larger span of Homer's poem, the change serves to accentuate the theme that death is an inevitable part of human life and must be taken in stride (cf. Schein 1984.161). I owe the bard analogy to Victoria Wohl.

his rituals in the open air or within domestic spaces.[7] The other type was the "seeker after truth" who wanted to acquire greater knowledge of the way in which the divine world worked, to improve his soul, and, eventually, to enable it to ascend to the heavens where it could enjoy companionship with the higher powers. The goals and, therefore, the rituals of this practitioner were by their very nature private and individually oriented.

Working independently and outside of established religious spaces, both of these types of practitioners had to substitute what was readily available for what they couldn't obtain. Rather than perform their rituals in already pure temples, for example, they created purity within the settings they used by placing clean linen, fresh sand, or new bricks on the floor, or they sought out places that were naturally pure, such as the recently inundated banks of the Nile. Rather than use a full-size altar, they used smaller, "table-top" models.[8]

Remembering the innovative tendencies of the practitioners who developed and used the papyri spells will be crucial to interpreting those in which children were used as mediums, for, as we shall see, those spells combined the best features of several other, pre-existing techniques and then improved upon them.

DIVINATION IN THE PAPYRI

There are more divinatory spells in the papyri than any other type of spell, and they use a wide variety of methods: oneiromancy, kleromancy, necromancy, and direct vision are just a few of the options available to the practitioner. Clearly, the desire for knowledge was very strong, and those

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7 In addition to Johnston forthcoming, see Smith 1995, esp. 22–27, who emphasizes the fact that many details in the spells indicate the expectation that they will be performed in a domestic setting—the house of the client or of the practitioner himself as needed—and Frankfurter 1997.115–35, who argues that, in many cases, the practitioners were priests of local Egyptian temples who, as their traditional roles as priests became eroded under Roman rule, increasingly functioned as local ritual experts, hired by individuals to solve quotidian problems.

8 Purity: e.g., *PGM* IV.171–72 and 1861; *PDM* xiv.63–64, 283, 288; *PGM* IV.26–30. The same logic lies behind a detail in Porphyry's tale of a séance that Plotinus was once persuaded to attend. The Egyptian priest in charge convened it in the temple of Isis—not because that goddess had any connection to the procedure, but rather, the priest said, because her temple was the only truly pure (*katharos*) place in the whole city of Rome (*Vita Plotini* 10 [16.12 ff. Volk]). On table-top altars, see Smith 1995.

who used the rituals of the papyri pursued it vigorously—no surprise, seeing as how such knowledge, once obtained, usually enabled the practitioner to perform yet further rituals and accomplish yet greater aims.

Amidst all these divinatory procedures, those that use children as mediums are among the most common.[9] Because those who copied spells into the papyri often omitted instructions that they thought were self-evident, not all examples of child mediumism include a complete and detailed description of the procedure. By combining and comparing our examples, however, we can construct the following sequence: (1) the practitioner carefully selects a child who meets certain specifications, (2) the practitioner blindfolds the child and then calls a god or spirit into him, using various incantations and applying various materials, (3) removing the blindfold, the practitioner tells the child to gaze at either a lamp's flame or at a bowl of specially prepared liquid (oil, water, or a combination of the two are the most common choices;[10] hereafter, I will refer to this practice simply as "gazing"),[11] (4) the god or spirit appears in the liquid or flame and speaks to

9 A complete list, so far as I know, is: *PGM* III.633–731 (fragmentary, but with mention of a child and other accoutrements associated with the process in other spells), *PGM* IV.850–929 (which claims that it also works on adults), *PGM* V.1–53, *PGM* VII.540–78, *PDM* xiv.1–92, *PDM* xiv.150–231, *PDM* xiv.239–95, *PDM* xiv.395–427 (which can also be used by the practitioner himself), *PDM* xiv.459–75, *PDM* xiv.475–88, *PDM* xiv.489–515, *PDM* xiv.516–27, *PDM* xiv.528–53 (which can also be used by practitioner himself), *PDM* xiv.627–35, *PDM* xiv.750–71, *PDM* xiv.805–40, *PGM* LXII.24–46. Cf. also a few spells in which the child is made to gaze at the sun and then sees the gods: *PGM* IV.88–93, *PDM* xiv.856–75, *PDM* xiv.875–85 (which can also be used by the practitioner himself and, in fact, claims to work better that way). There are also spells that use a child to obtain visions without mentioning specific techniques: *PGM* VII.348–58, XIII.734–1077; *PDM* xiv.695–700, cf. xiv.701–05.

10 Sometimes other materials were added to the liquid to increase its power: *PGM* LXII.24–46 and cf. Pliny *HN* 37.73 §192, which describes gemstones that are added to divining water in order that *evocari imagines deorum* or *teneri umbras inferum evocatas*. Apparently, engraving a picture of a particular god on the bottom of the cup also helped: e.g., *PDM* xiv.412.

11 The formal terms, as found in the papyri and other ancient sources, are *lekanomanteia* and *lychnomanteia*. Lecanomancy, as it is called in modern treatises on the topic, is but one variation of a broader phenomenon found in virtually all cultures, ancient and modern, whereby one gazes at any of various translucent or reflective surfaces. The most familiar forms, for contemporary Western cultures, are probably crystallomancy (gazing into a crystal ball) and catoptromancy (gazing into a mirror); an example of the latter, involving a child engaged in a practice much like that described in this article, is found in SHA *Did. Jul.* 7.8–11. For further examples from a variety of cultures, see the works cited in n. 2 above.

the child, who then relays information back to the practitioner. *PGM* VII.540–78 is one example; the following is a translation of its most important passages:[12]

> *Lines 540–50:* Lamp Divination: Put an iron lampstead in a clean house at the eastern part, and place upon it a lamp that is not red. Light the lamp. Let the lampwick be made of new linen. Light the incense burner and make an offering of frankincense on grapevine wood. The child you use should be uncorrupted and pure. Formula: PHISIO IAÔ AGEANOUMA SKABARÔ SKASABRÔSOU ASABRÔ, because I implore you this day today, this very time, to let the light and the sun appear to this child [more magical words here], Anubis servant of all the gods; and make this child fall into a trance and see the gods, all who are present at the divination . . . *Lines 560–64:* Come to me, you who fly through the air, called in secret codes and unutterable names, at this lamp divination that I perform, and enter into the child's soul, so that s/he may receive the immortal form in mighty and incorruptible light . . . *Lines 571–78:* Hither to me, O lord, riding on immaculate light without deceit and without anger. Appear to me and to this child of yours [more magical words]. If the child says "I see your lord in the light," say "O holy [magical words]" and thus he will answer.

The first question we must ask about spells of this type is why the practitioners chose to use a method of divination that relied on mediumistic prophecy to begin with. According to some of our sources, this method required not just the presence of a second person, which the papyrus texts repeatedly tell practitioners to avoid whenever possible, but a second person with particular assets, such as excellent hearing, an attractive appearance, and eloquence.[13] Why go to the trouble of finding such a medium, especially

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12 I drew on J. P. Hershbell's translation of the spell in Betz 1986, but made a number of minor changes.

13 Good ears: *PDM* xiv.68–69, 73–78, 287. Attractiveness and eloquence: Apul. *Ap.* 43.12–20. The Byzantine Greek spells that look like direct descendants of those in the papyri (see

when, as some texts indicate, the practitioner could try to work the spell without a medium if he had to?[14]

The answer is probably that the practitioners were adapting for their private, local use what had long been considered the most prestigious forms of prophecy—namely, those practiced at Delphi and Claros.[15] In this respect, the practitioners were men of their time, for, as Peter Brown, J. Z. Smith, and others have demonstrated, the focus of religious power was moving away from famous cult sites and towards individuals in late antiquity. In fact, Iamblichus and Eunapius explicitly make this point about mediumistic prophecy. Iamblichus claimed that a god could enter a properly prepared medium wherever he might be, and Eunapius emphasized that the holy woman Sosipatra could give inspired prophecies as good as any obtained from an "unmoveable oracle."[16]

Further adaptations show up when mediumism is combined with gazing. In and of itself, gazing would have been attractive to our practitioners, who changed location as their needs or the needs of their clients

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n. 2 above) add that the child's sight should be tested as well, that his eyes should be blue, that he should be literate, or that he should not be of too nervous a temperament, although they concede that this sort of temperament often is found in children who have proven their success as mediums, which I can easily imagine—after a few sessions of seeing spirits a child might well become rather jumpy. All of these spells, which are recorded in Delatte's *Anec. Athen.*, are assembled and discussed by Hopfner 1932. On Byzantine bowl-gazing spells, see also Greenfield 1988.159–63 and 295–96 and, more briefly, Greenfield 1995.117–54, esp. 146–50.

14 Practitioner divines himself: *PGM* I.262–347, *PGM* IV.154–285, *PGM* IV.930–1114, *PGM* IV.3209–54, *PGM* V.54–69, *PGM* VII.319–34, *PDM* xiv.117–49, *PDM* xiv. 295–308, *PDM* xiv.805–40, *PDM* xiv.841–50, *PDM* xiv.851–55, *PGM* CII.1–17. Cf. also *PDM* xiv.670–74, which does not specify who is to do the gazing.

15 That Claros and Delphi were still esteemed at the time the papyri were composed, and by practitioners themselves, is indicated by the fact that in *PGM* I.262–347 and *PGM* II.64–183, both of which are spells where the practitioner invokes Apollo to prophesy to him, the oracular god is asked to "leave Mount Parnassos and the Delphic Pytho" (*PGM* I.292–99), addressed as "Phoibos of Colophon, Phoibos of Parnassos, Phoibos of Castalia" (*PGM* II.133, cf. 82), and defined by the adjectives "Clarian," "Pythian," and "Castalian" (*PGM* II.140). Cf. also *PGM* III.230–62. Generally on the state of these oracles during the first few centuries C.E., see Athanassiadi 1993, Athanassiadi 1992, and Lane Fox 1986.chpt. 5.

16 Iamb. *Myst.* 3.1–11, 22, and 31, Eun. *VS* 469.5–6: καὶ τὰ λεχθέντα οὐδὲν διέφερε τῶν ἀκινήτων μαντειῶν, πάντα γὰρ ἐγένετο καὶ ἀπέβη καθάπερ γεγενημένα. On the shift towards locating inspired prophecy in the individual, see Athanassiadi 1993 and Athanassiadi 1992. More generally on the shift towards the individual, see P. Brown's several publications on the topic, most notably Brown 1981, and also Smith 1987, Smith 1978, and Johnston 1997.

demanded, because gazing was a highly transportable method of divination. If you had the right gear and knew the right words, you could divine anywhere you pleased.[17] Gazing was also versatile: by changing the liquid or the type of bowl, you could change the entity upon whom you called. One spell, for example, instructs the practitioner to use rainwater for heavenly gods, seawater for gods of the earth, river water for Sarapis or Osiris, and springwater for the dead.[18]

But in developing this method for their own uses, the practitioners introduced further advantages as well. Most notably, there is what the medium sees when he gazes. In many forms of divinatory gazing, including ancient Babylonian forms that are likely to have influenced Greek and Roman forms, the gazer sees only hazy shapes that he then must interpret—it's somewhat like reading tea leaves.[19] Or, at best, the gazer sees something happening simultaneously elsewhere on earth—it's like watching live television.

In the papyri spells, the practitioner expects the child who gazes to see much more, including the gods—not their pictures, but the very gods themselves. In *PDM* xiv.528–53, for example, the practitioner first *calls* the god Anubis *into* a bowl of water, then tells the medium to *send* Anubis to gather together the other gods, to bring *them* back into the bowl, and, finally, to *dispatch* Anubis to *fetch* a table and food so that the gods can dine. The gods can even respond to the outside world from inside the bowl: when the child inquires which one of them is willing to prophesy that day, the god

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17 This is stated outright at *PGM* IV.154–285, a bowl-gazing spell: "You will observe through bowl-gazing on whatever day or night you want, in whatever place you want, beholding the god in the water and hearing a voice from the god which speaks in verse in answer to whatever you command" (lines 162–65).

18 *PGM* IV.154–285, esp. lines 225–27. Cf. *PDM* xiv.82–86 and 156–58.

19 The most recent work on Babylonian lecanomancy is Pettinato 1966. Our earliest evidence comes from the second millennium B.C.E. It disappears from Babylonian documents in the first millennium, but as Tzvi Abusch has suggested to me, this may mean only that the official Babylonian diviners, who produced the documents, moved on to the other methods that begin to show up in official documents at the time. Lecanomancy may have remained a popular method for private, domestic use in the ancient Near East, and it may have been from there that the Greeks and Romans adopted it at some point, for Greek and Roman authors are unanimous in calling it an invention of eastern peoples, especially Persians. Varro ap. Aug. *CD* 7.35, Athen. *Deipn.* 478a (quoting Hermippus *FHG* iii.54), Str. 16.2.39. Cf. Psell. ap. Bidez *CMAG* p. 129, 26, who ascribes its invention to the Assyrians, a term that he used to mean both Babylonians and Persians at times, and Pliny *HN* 37.73 §192. Gen. 44:4–5 alludes to lecanomancy as well: Joseph describes the cup that he planted in Benjamin's luggage as the one that he used for prognostication.

who agrees signifies this by raising his hand and then answers whatever questions are asked.[20]

What is going on here is that the practitioner has combined gazing not only with mediumism but also with direct vision, the most highly valued form of divination of all in later antiquity, during which a god appeared right in front of the worshipper who invoked him. Part of what made this form of divination so highly prized was, as the term implies, its directness: if you heard something from a god who was standing right in front of you, you had to assume it was correct.[21] Once again, however, in combining the forms, the practitioner has improved upon them: after the gods have arrived in his bowl or lamp, he can get them to do all sorts of things, as we have seen: fetch tables, food, and other gods, for example, as well as answer questions. In ordinary direct vision, the recipient usually just listens and looks.[22]

One final remark on gazing as we see it in the papyri. It is a mediumistic form of divination and yet, as I have mentioned, the child gazes *at* the god who appears in the liquid or the flame and converses *with* him. This is different from mediumism as we know it elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world, where a god takes control of the medium and speaks through him or her. Somehow, although the god has "come into" the medium, the

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20 Cf. *PGM* V.1–53, *PGM* VII.540–78 (the gods will be present, *paraginomenous,* at the divination), *PDM* xiv.1–92, *PDM* xiv.528–53, and also *PGM* IV.930–1114, a spell where the practitioner gazes at the lamp himself and sees the god sitting on a lotus. Similar things happen in the Byzantine gazing spells: Hopfner 1932.228.

21 It is notable that even the spells themselves betray their hybrid background: *PGM* V.54–69 is given the title *autoptos logos* or "spell for direct vision" and yet directs the practitioner to have a medium gaze at a bowl, for example. *PGM* IV.154–285 describes itself as bringing about a "direct vision through a bowl"—literally a *lekanê autoptos* (see line 162: *skepsêi dia lekanês autoptou,* and cf. line 222). Cf. also *PGM* I.262–347, *PGM* III.633–731, *PGM* IV.930–1114, *PGM* VII.319–34, *PGM* VII.644–85 (where lamp-gazing is combined with a dream). In many other cases, a spell talks about "calling the gods to be present," but later makes it clear that it is in a *bowl* that the child will see the god. Thessalus of Tralles enjoyed one of these hybrid prophecies too: journeying to Thebes, he obtained what *he* described as a direct encounter with Asclepius, although the god actually appeared to him in a cup of liquid (*Cat. codd. astrol.* VIII.3, p. 134 ff.). See Smith 1978 and cf. Gordon 1997.84.

22 Interestingly, Iamblichus rejects the sort of light-gazing that we see in the papyri as a defective form of direct vision wherein vile demons trick the practitioner into thinking he sees gods in his lamp and then seize the opportunity to lie to him (*Myst.* 2.10, 94.1–5). He does, however, accept a form of bowl-gazing that sounds more like what I am positing was the older form, in which the gods send light into a bowl of liquid, making patterns that the gazer then can interpret. Thus, even as the practitioners of the *PGM* were combining forms, others still discerned them as separate.

medium remains separate, just as the recipient of a direct vision does. This seeming contradiction again prompts us to ask what the advantages of combining forms would have been—if direct vision was already so prestigious, and gazing was so convenient, why alter what seems like a perfect hybrid by combining it yet again with mediumistic divination? Why didn't the practitioner just gaze himself?

Part of the answer lies in remembering that the practitioner of the papyri lived in a world of empirical reality: he was wiser not to set his sights too high (Graf 1997.200). Although direct visions occurred often enough in the legendary claims of apocalyptic prophets, in reality it must have been a very unusual practitioner who was able to bring one on for himself. Combining direct vision with gazing, in which a god appeared in the ambience of glimmering fire or liquid, already set the bar of empirical reality a bit lower, but when this hybrid was combined again with mediumism, the bar fell lower still: if a medium said that he saw something in a bowl or lamp, why should the practitioner doubt it? Especially when, as we will see in the next section, he considered his medium to be highly reliable.

THE CHILD

The few scholars who have tried to explain the use of children as mediums have emphasized that children are likely to be purer than adults, particularly in a sexual sense, and have supported this by noting that some spells, including the one quoted above, specify that the child must be *aphthoros kai katharos*—sexually uncorrupted and pure.[23] The fact that the spells in which the practitioner himself divines require him to abstain from sex for several days would seem to support this.[24]

But two things—the child *per se* and purity *per se*—must be kept separate. The insistence on purity, including sexual purity, is so common in the papyri as to be considered a standard operating procedure; it is not a trait

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23 *PGM* VII.540–78 (line 544), *PDM* xiv.1–92 (lines 68–69), *PDM* xiv.750–71 (lines 769–70), *PDM* xiv.856–75 (line 857). Among the scholars who have emphasized the purity of the child are Abt 1908.258–59, Hopfner 1932.219–20, Hopfner 1926.65–66, Dodds 1973.190, and Lane Fox 1986.208 (although the latter two are more nuanced in their opinion, and Dodds briefly refers to another feature of children that I will develop below). Cf. the comments of Greenfield 1988.286–90.

24 *PGM* IV.850–929 (line 898), *PGM* IV.930–1114 (lines 1099–1101), *PGM* IV.3209–54 (line 3210), *PGM* VII.644–85 (line 680).

required of mediumistic children alone. The very fact that adult practitioners can bring themselves into an approximately equal state of purity by temporary sexual abstinence argues for this idea, as does the spells' insistent specification that the child be uncorrupted and pure—purity, including sexual purity, was apparently a state that was not automatically assumed to accompany childhood in antiquity.

Some ancient authors trace children's success as mediums to another quality altogether. Iamblichus says that people who are very straightforward and young—*haplousteroi kai neoi*—make the best mediums, and Olympiodorus similarly tells us that children make good mediums because they are artless and straightforward—*apheleis kai haploi.* These qualities, he says, make them less likely to imagine things that are not really there.[25] Theodore Hopfner and E. R. Dodds, who did some of the earliest work on child mediums in antiquity, expressed surprise at these remarks.[26] They didn't state their reasons, but I would guess that they presumed that a more imaginative person would find it easier to "see" things that others could not and that this would be desirable. This is looking at it the wrong way around, however. What Hopfner and Dodds forgot, in considering these matters from their modern standpoint, is that it is possible to believe that certain people have a greater capacity to see things that others cannot, *without* assuming that these people are more imaginative (or, to use phrases that I suspect lurk behind these scholars' use of the term "imaginative," more "gullible" or "self-deceptive") than those who cannot see them. All it takes is an assumption that things that are invisible to most people might nonetheless exist and be seen by others.

And, in fact, imagination would be detrimental in a medium. One big concern in ancient cultures, as in most cultures, was that a prophet might misrepresent or misinterpret the information that was conveyed to him—to say nothing of the fact that he might mis*imagine* the very existence of the

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25 Iamb. *Myst.* 3.24 (157.16–20); Olympiod. *in Alc.* p. 8 Cr.: διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ οἱ παῖδες μᾶλλον καὶ οἱ ἐν ἀγροῖς διατρίβοντες, ὡς ἀφελεῖς καὶ ἁπλοῖ, ἐνθουσιῶσιν· ἀφαντασίαστος γὰρ ὁ ἐνθουσιασμός, διὸ καὶ φαντασίᾳ λύεται ὡς ἐναντίᾳ οὔσῃ. Olympiodorus explains this fact with reference to the Platonic concepts he is interpreting about different ways of looking with the eyes of the body and the eyes of the soul, but behind his explanations we see the essential popular belief: children and farm workers are simpler and more straightforward than other people and therefore less likely to imagine things.

26 Hopfner 1926.66, Dodds 1951.309 n.114. Cf. also the surprise of Des Places in his 1966 Budé commentary on Iamblichus *Myst.* 3.24 (157.16).

information in the first place. Now, children are more susceptible to suggestions made either intentionally or unintentionally by those whom they trust—a parent or someone else who is acting *in loco parentis*. I will return to this point later. But, as children, they are also relatively closed off from people who might persuade them to lie, as Teiresias is accused of doing in the *Oedipus Rex* and the *Antigone*,[27] and they also are closed off from people who might *unintentionally* put ideas into their heads that would influence them. This is the logic behind Plutarch's description of the ideal Pythia as a simple farmer's daughter who, like Xenophon's bride, would enter her office with little experience or knowledge of the world (Plut. *Pyth*. 405c). In a similar vein is the ancient Greek proverb "Wine and children tell the truth" (which conveys the same idea as our own proverb "Out of the mouths of babes . . .") and anecdotes such as that narrated at Herodotus 5.49–51: Cleomenes is persuaded by his eight- or nine-year-old daughter's sudden and frank assessment of Aristagoras' moral character and intentions to cut off negotiations with him.[28] Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the emperor's new clothes is another illustration of my point: the only person who was willing to state the obvious truth about what he saw was a child, and that was because he hadn't yet been socially programmed to pretend to see something that wasn't really there. In many cultures, both ancient and modern, children are presumed to tell the truth because they haven't learned to do anything else.

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27 Teiresias: Soph. *OT* 398–403, cf. 525; *Ant.* 1035–64. Cf. tales that the Pythia lied because she had been bribed: Hdt. 6.66 and 75, 5.63 and 90–91, and 6.122, discussed by Price 1985.142.

28 On the proverb, Pl. *Symp.* 217e and Phot. s.v. *oinos aneu paideutôn*; both the proverb and the anecdote from Herodotus are cited by Golden 1990.10–12, who discusses the ancient perception that children are reliable prophets and honest advisors due to their inexperience and innocence. See Golden 1990 *passim*, more generally on the relatively restricted sphere of an ancient child's interaction with those outside his family. Interestingly, in the story from Herodotus, Aristagoras tried to get Cleomenes to send his daughter from the room before he began speaking, as though concerned that the child might present a problem for his case; Cleomenes insisted on her staying. Cf. also Artemidorus 2.69, who comments that of all the figures who appear in dreams, those of children are the most truthful because children have not learned how to lie and deceive, and Paus. 7.22.2–4 with Frazer's commentary. Our proverb, "Out of the mouths of babes," is developed from Ev. Matt. 21:16.

HOW DIVINATION WORKS

At this point, we need to step outside of the ancient evidence for a moment and consider how divination works—how any given method of divination succeeds in convincing people that it is valid and reliable. Emily Ahern, a scholar who has studied Chinese divination, suggests that all successful methods incorporate what she calls a "randomizing device," that is, an element that insures, at least in the eyes of the beholders, that no one has inappropriately affected the outcome of the divinatory procedure.[29] A simple example is shuffling a deck of tarot cards before dealing them out. Shuffling presumably prevents the dealer from prearranging the cards and also allows whatever supernatural agent is understood to deliver messages through the cards to take control of them. In most forms of gazing, the randomizing device is the tendency of liquid or flame to make shapes that cannot be controlled.

But we should also note that all successful forms of divination partake of yet another, but very different from the type Ahern discussed, sort of randomizing device that is not acknowledged—and usually not even recognized—by those involved. Tarot readings, traditional forms of gazing, and many other forms of divination produce vague results that are ripe for individualized interpretation: anyone who has read a tarot manual knows that each of the seventy-eight cards can mean such a variety of things that the same pattern of the same ten cards might be interpreted to mean either success or disaster, depending on the disposition of the interpreter. Shapes made by liquid and fire are obviously open-ended texts as well. Therefore, although interpretation is viewed by those who listen to it as a *de*randomizing device because it seems to organize and clarify the chaotic raw material of the divination, in reality, interpretation is often a *secondary randomizer* insofar as it allows the interpreter, consciously or unconsciously, to shift meaning in any of several directions.

In mediumism, the primary randomizer is understood to be the mediumistic state: so long as the medium is under the god's or ghost's control rather than under his own, then what the medium reports is considered reliable. That the medium is truly in this state is often proven by characteristics that, notably, also give those interpreting the divination plenty

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29 Ahern 1981, esp. 53. My attention was drawn to Ahern's work by Maurizio 1995, who usefully applies the concept to Delphi.

of opportunity to shift its meaning. For example, the words of the medium may be so obscured or ambiguous that listeners must rely on the experts to interpret—that is, to derandomize—them. And so again, the device that is viewed as *de*randomizing by the participants is also a *secondary randomizer*.

Our spells play interesting variations on these themes. To begin with, gazing as we see it in the papyri has had its natural primary randomizer bred out of it; as noted already, instead of seeing nebulous shapes in the liquid or fire, the child sees precise figures doing precise things. Randomization is then reintroduced by combining gazing with mediumism. The child is viewed as a particularly good medium—that is, a good randomizer—for the reasons I discussed earlier: he is considered unimaginative and closed to outside influences.[30] If he says he sees Anubis in a cup of liquid, then the practitioner believes that he sees Anubis. Thus again, in combining adaptations of mediumism and gazing, these spells offer two advantages that often are otherwise mutually exclusive: highly precise information and a guarantee of reliability.

But there is even more to discover. Some of the more detailed spells indicate that the practitioner implicitly *tells* the child what he will see by asking him questions. In a bowl-gazing spell, for instance, after he has recited the formula and removed the blindfold from the medium's eyes, the practitioner is to ask the child "Do you see the light yet?" If the child doesn't see the light, his eyes should be covered again, further measures should be taken, and then the child should be asked the question once more.[31] In other

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30 Notably, children are connected with another form of prophecy in the ancient Mediterranean that also reflects the assumption that their remarks are free from undue influence—i.e., that they are good randomizers. A common method of seeking divine advice was to stand around where children were playing and listen to what they said: the gods would encrypt an answer to one's question within the children's remarks (e.g., *Ilias Parva* fr. 2a, Xen. *Aeth.* 5.4, Call. *Ep.* 1, Plut. *de Is.* 356e, and Ael. *NA* 11.10. Cf. the story of Augustine's conversion as told at *Conf.* 8.12.29, which alludes to this common belief, although Augustine insists that, in his case, the childlike voice he heard was really that of God's messenger). The Jewish version of this practice, according to comments made by my colleague Michael D. Swartz following an oral presentation of this article, was to creep up beneath a schoolroom window and listen to the students reciting the Torah: God would put into their mouths a verse that could be interpreted in answer to one's question.

31 *PDM* xiv.32–33 and 53; cf. *PGM* V.1–53, where the answers are repeated until the child sees the proper apparitions; *PDM* xiv.205 and 212–13, where formulae are repeated until the light and gods appear to the medium; *PDM* xiv.500–02, where, if the light does not appear right away, the practitioner causes the medium himself to repeat formulae; and *PGM* LXII.29–35, where the practitioner is to repeat the formulae as many times as necessary until the desired *phasma* appears, causing the medium to close and reopen his eyes each time.

cases, the child is asked such things as "Do you see Anubis yet?" Surely, when asked enough times by a person in a position of authority, a child will eventually "see Anubis" or whatever else the practitioner wants him to see. In this capacity, the child's suggestible nature makes him a derandomizer—that is, a factor that limits the range of possible results. He functions as a derandomizer in a very different sense, however, from the derandomization that I discussed a moment ago, which occurs during interpretation, because the derandomization that arises from the child's suggestible nature is unacknowledged, and probably unrecognized, by those who are involved. They continue to view the child as closed to outside influences and therefore as a reliable randomizer.

There is yet another stage of these procedures. After the gods have entered the bowl or lamp, the child, acting on the practitioner's instructions, asks them questions and reports the answers they give. Here again, the perceived nature of children as unimaginative and closed to outside influences would serve as an excellent guarantee that the answers are accurately heard and repeated. But here as well, I suspect, there is a greater possibility that the practitioner will unconsciously influence the information that the child delivers than if the medium were an adult. Thus, again, the act of derandomization *implicitly* begins before the practitioner formally begins it through his conscious act of interpretation.

In short, I would suggest that the appeal of child mediums lies partly in the fact that they are *consciously* perceived as highly reliable and yet are more open to *unconsciously* applied forms of manipulation than adults, and thus are likelier to bring forth the message the practitioner hopes for. There are analogies for the argument that I am making within contemporary culture. In the last twenty years or so, there has been a rise in accusations of child abuse made against parents, daycare workers, and others who interact frequently with children, particularly in Great Britain and America. Although in some cases, unfortunately, the charges of abuse are valid, recent work by criminal investigators and social scientists has strongly suggested that, in many cases, they are not or that, if the charges are true, they have been exaggerated and distorted. Two things contribute to ensuring that the charges of abuse nonetheless succeed—that is, make it into court and result in convictions. The first is that children are highly suggestible; under the repeated interrogation of adults, especially adults in positions of authority, they begin genuinely to believe that they have experienced what the adults suspect they have experienced—the adults unintentionally implant their own fearful constructions in the children's minds. It is like the "Do you see Anubis?" predicament: if you ask a child a question often

enough, you eventually get the answer that you expect—indeed, the child himself starts to believe it is the correct answer.[32] Experiments outside the courtroom have substantiated this. In one study, children were asked, once a week, over the course of several weeks, whether they had ever gotten their hand caught in a mousetrap and gone to the hospital to have the trap removed; when they answered "no," they were asked to imagine what this would have been like. Eventually, more than one-third of the children began to claim that this series of events really had happened to them and even to embroider the tale with details of their own invention. To quote one pair of researchers, "Children attempt to be good conversational partners by complying with what they perceive to be the belief of their questioner."[33] These same researchers argue that children's greater susceptibility is due not only to culturally-determined factors such as the balance of power in relationships between adults and children (which might change somewhat over time and from culture to culture) but to cognitive and developmental factors that are unlikely to change significantly (Ceci and Bruck 1993).

The second thing that enables these accusations to succeed is that children are perceived to be very reliable witnesses: most adults tend to believe that children neither want nor are able to invent the details to which

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32 A description of a gazing procedure by the church father Hippolytus also suggests that it was at least partly the authority of the practitioner that caused the child to see what he was supposed to see. Hippolytus describes the practitioner as first frightening the child with odd noises and then speaking to the child the words he wishes the child to hear; the child, thinking in terror that he has heard the demons uttering the words, speaks them back to the practitioner. Although we must allow for Hippolytus' prejudices in evaluating the account, it does imply that such procedures were conducted in a far from peaceful manner (Hipp. *Ref.* 4.28).

33 An excellent overview of these studies is offered by Ceci and Bruck 1993 (there is a résumé of this article in *The New York Times* of June 11, 1993, A1, 9), although this should now be supplemented by American Medical Association Council on Scientific Affairs 1995, American Psychiatric Association Board of Trustees 1994, Bryant 1995, Ceci, Loftus, Leichtman, and Bruck 1994, Garry and Loftus 1994, Ofshe and Singer 1994, and Spence 1994. On the suggestibility of children in the particular context of Satanic abuse claims, which offers further interesting analogies to the phenomenon under discussion here due to the fantastic ideas that are suggested to the children under interrogation, see La Fontaine 1998, esp. chpt. 7; Spanos, Burgess, and Burgess 1994; and Frankfurter 1994. The mousetrap example is given in Ceci, Loftus, Leichtman, and Bruck 1994.306–07 and is based on the authors' research. Most of the studies cited above show that the younger the child involved, the more suggestible he or she is, although heightened levels of suggestibility (as compared with those of adults) continue into adolescence. The quotation is taken from Ceci and Bruck 1993.425.

they are testifying in these abuse cases.[34] The ubiquity of this principle is further illustrated by a plethora of proverbs and truth-finding techniques from around the world—not only the Greek proverb I mentioned earlier ("Children and wine tell the truth"), but also, for example, the way in which contested readings in copies of the Torah used to be settled: if scholars could not agree as to whether a mark represented one letter or another, a decision on which a whole reading depended, they would call in a child, whose decision was accepted as final.[35]

A FINAL QUESTION

In many cultures, then, both ancient and modern, children possess two characteristics that make them the ideal actors in procedures that—whether their participants consciously recognize it or not—succeed only when those actors exude an aura of integrity and yet simultaneously remain open to manipulation by the other participants. This would make children appealing mediums under any circumstances, which compels us to consider a final, double question: why we don't hear very much about child mediums in sources from the ancient world that are earlier than the magical papyri—and why do we suddenly hear a lot about them there?

Part of the answer lies in that fact that the magical papyri are our earliest extant examples of "recipe books" intended for use in private rituals. The sort of mediumism that we hear about in earlier sources is almost exclusively connected with important, official cult sites such as Delphi. Given that children virtually never served in important cultic offices, especially those associated with major cults, we cannot expect to find them mentioned in these earlier sources.[36]

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34 Ceci and Bruck 1993 take this problem as the starting point of their article; it is alluded to in most of the other articles cited in the previous note as well.

35 Sḥulḥan Arukḥ Oraḥ Ḥayim 34:16 (a medieval law code). (I thank my colleague Michael D. Swartz for this citation.)

36 Fritz Graf will discuss our evidence for the use of children in cults in "Child Priests," forthcoming in a conference volume edited by Robin Hägg, the working title of which is *The Child in Greek Cult*. I should emphasize that if we had documents from earlier periods similar to those of the papyri (i.e., instructions for performing private rituals), we might hear about child mediums sooner than we do. We do hear a bit about what are probably other, private mediums in the classical age: Plato and Aristophanes both mention "belly-talkers" (*engastrimuthoi*: Pl. *Soph.* 252c and schol., Ar. *Vesp.* 1019 and schol.) whom Dodds has argued were mediums whose second "daemonic" voice seemed to carry on a

But this observation really just turns the question around: if cults such as Delphi used adult mediums with satisfactory results, why were private practitioners, like those we meet in the papyri, compelled to discover the advantages of using children? Answering this takes us back to the description of the practitioners that I offered in the first section of this essay: they were freelancers, whose *modi operandi* had to remain fairly simple. The integrity of adult mediums who served well-funded, long-established cults like that at Delphi could be guaranteed by careful selection and isolation once they took office, but practitioners like those of the papyri had no access to adults of the proper qualifications and no means to preserve a medium's integrity over many years. Their solution was to choose mediums who were young enough to be uninfluenced by previous experience and, I assume, to replace those mediums once their integrity became questionable. After all, as long as one were not too picky about their pedigrees, children must have been readily available in the ancient world. The reminder in some spells to make sure that the medium was pure and sexually uncorrupted implies, indeed, that the pool of children from which mediums were drawn might have been providing children to other, less savory professions as well.[37]

In other words, in choosing children as their mediums, the practitioners of the papyri were substituting the best materials that were readily available for what they couldn't obtain, just as they did when they used clean

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dialogue with them from inside their bellies. The portrait we get of these belly-talkers sounds again like that of private, freelance practitioners (and we recall that, in some of the texts of the magical papyri, the practitioner was advised that he could work the ritual himself if a child were not available to act as medium for him). According to Plutarch, some of these belly-talkers called themselves "pythons," presumably in an attempt to borrow some Delphic prestige (Plut. *Def. Orac.* 9, 414e). See Dodds 1951.71 and Dodds 1973.199; cf. also Clem. Alex. *Protrept.* 2, Hesych. s.v. *engastrimuthos,* and Phot. *Lex.* s.v. *engastrimuthos*; Ch. Theodoridis, in his new edition of Photius (Berlin 1982 and 1998), gives further references to late antique discussions of the phenomenon. *Suid*. e 45 gives virtually the same information as Hesych. and Phot. but with the intriguing additions that it was souls of the dead who spoke through female belly-talkers and that the Witch of Endor was a belly-talker. See also Katz and Volk forthcoming for an interesting application of the idea to Hes. *Th*. 26–28.

37 Alternatively, the practitioner might use his own child of course. We hear about Julian the Chaldean "bringing together" (συνέστησε) the soul of Plato with his son, the boy who would grow up to become Julian the Theurgist; this may refer to mediumistic prophecy (Psellus *Aur. Cat.* 216.24).

linen to establish a pure environment outside of a temple or used a small, portable altar instead of a permanently situated one. Trustworthy, disposable, and highly likely to provide the desired results, children fit the practitioners' bill to perfection.

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