

Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler. *Theurgy in Late Antiquity: The Invention of a Ritual Tradition*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013. 325 pp. ISBN: 978-3-525-54020-6. €79.99.

In his paper “Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism” Georg Luck writes:

The need of pagan believers to enter into direct contact with their gods led to the development of a certain technique or a set of techniques codified during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, it seems, and given the name “theurgy.”<sup>1</sup>

Having read Luck’s exposition of Neoplatonic theurgy a decade ago his constructive assertions had an impact on me as imaginative, engaging, and critically challenging. However, as I began to expand into the domains of other established academic works on Neoplatonic theurgy I began to realise how bedazzled I was at times with the monolithic treatment of the historical category of theurgy. This I observed as manifesting through the perpetuation of the rigid dualism between belief and praxis, with the latter being maltreated as a thoughtless and superstitious form of religious expression by Protestantism’s exclusive insistence on the centrality of belief. Addressing this, and in particular responding to biases portraying Neoplatonic theurgy as purely acts of irrational ritual, Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler’s *Theurgy in Late Antiquity* challenges the traditional monolithic scope of the study of Neoplatonic theurgy.

Tanaseanu-Döbler introduces her study of theurgy in Late Antiquity in response to the recognition that:

Theurgy is commonly taken to denote a complex of rites which are based on the so-called Chaldean Oracles, a collection of oracles in hexameters, which were probably composed during the late second century AD. These rituals are mostly known through Neoplatonic sources, who engage in a passionate debate about their relevance to the salvation of the soul and thus to the philosopher’s ultimate goal. (9)

Continuing from this point she also presents the objectives of her thesis as a rectification of the dominance of the debate of rationality and irrationality that has historically characterised the study of theurgy deriving from unjust

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Luck, “Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism”, in *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 185.

“grand tales of late antique decay.”<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning of her book Tanaseanu-Döbler discusses the merits and criticisms of some prolific scholars investigating theurgy in Late Antiquity, such as Hans Lewy, Ruth Majercik, Gregory Shaw, Sarah Iles Johnston, and Polymnia Athanassiadi. In the endeavour to avoid indiscriminate references to ideas and practices that have come to constitute a historical category of theurgy in Late Antiquity she argues that her major methodological consideration is to limit her material mostly to Neoplatonic literature as the source of the emic representations analysed in terms of etic notions of ritual. To achieve this she advocates the employment of a meta-language terminology to enlist comparable phenomena at the object level in careful reference to specific vocabulary and synonyms employed by each individual theurgist located in source materials. In addition, she proposes to investigate the potential for a scholarly reinvention of theurgy as an experiential ritual tradition legitimised by “the assumption that there is a level of reality transcending the common everyday experience” (17) and how this may impact on the practices and worldview of the individual ritualist.

In her discussion of how theurgic philosophy and praxis is related to notions of spiritual ascent and ritual Tanaseanu-Döbler consults the *Chaldean Oracles* and commentaries in a thoroughly well-referenced fashion to identify some of the characteristic elements of theurgic discourse. From her research these are presented as variants of sacrificial acts and objects; purificatory initiations and transcendental ascents; ritualised signs, tokens, and verbal formulas; conjurations of what might be called hypercosmic and encosmic entities, along with their methods of manifestation in sacred space and visionary experiences.

As a critical response to previous assertions that theurgy is merely ritual performance in contrast to philosophical contemplation, Tanaseanu-Döbler radically argues that ritual, as observed from a careful reading of the *Chaldean Oracles*, is comparatively secondary in importance with the main textual basis dealing with metaphysics, cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology. Despite the general consensus regarding the ‘oriental’ character of the *Chaldean Oracles* Tanaseanu-Döbler argues, which in my opinion is a methodologically sound and magnificently insightful thesis, that:

The survey of the ritual aspect of the *Chaldean Oracles* has thus left us with a more restricted material basis for theurgy than the usual reconstructions which use later

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the opinion of E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 236–55.

material to fill the gaps: the initiation ritual, invocations and formulae triggering visions, apotropaic sacrifices. All the rites alluded to have their parallels in Greek religious thought and practice. What the Oracles do is to take up common ritual patterns and interpret and develop them along the lines of their Platonic-Stoic theology and their penchant for esoteric wisdom. (43)

To support her argument she then concludes that the *Chaldean Oracles* “play freely with various philosophical or ritual elements found in their historical context,” (43) with many theurgists appraising and drawing from Pythagorean, Orphic, and other esoterically inclined religious discourses of Late Antiquity. Hence, for further constructive analysis the *Chaldean Oracles* should not be consulted as a revelatory holy book of an established community, but rather as a text formulating a worldview accessed through philosophical contemplation and ritual praxis based on established esoteric discourses competing with other religious texts of the period, such as Gnostic and Hermetic texts, the *Greek Magical Papyri*, and so on.

In establishing this analytic framework Tanaseanu-Döbler engages in a systematic exhibition of the fundamental personalities of Neoplatonic theurgy. She commences with the Plotinian circle locating the foundations for the dialogue between Porphyry and Iamblichus. Her treatment of Plotinus demonstrates how he can be associated with the historical category of theurgy as an esoteric discourse by highlighting his interests in exotic Eastern religiosity, astrology and horoscopes, the significance of ascent as documented in the *Chaldean Oracles*, and his willingness to have his daimon summoned by an Egyptian priest.

Moving on to Porphyry she remains cautiously attentive to the development and variety of his thought through close examination of the remains of his written treatises. Here she skillfully avoids a monolithic representation of Porphyry produced normally in contrast to Iamblichus, with the former stressing philosophical contemplation as the ultimatum for salvation and the latter the specifics of theurgic ritual. By cross-examining his *Philosophy from Oracles* and commentaries on sacrifice, animating statues, signs and sacred space, conjurations, purifications, and divine possession, with the *Letter to Anebo*, which presents ideas in contrast to the ethos of *Philosophy from Oracles*, Tanaseanu-Döbler demonstrates the diversity of Porphyry’s thought and the need for methodological sensitivity when examining the diverse nature of Neoplatonic theurgy as both *technē* and *philosophia*.

Maintaining the same methodological tactic, Tanaseanu-Döbler aptly criticises the inconclusive use of the term ‘rationality’ and discriminative character

of the appellation ‘irrational’ when addressing the legacy of Iamblichus. Here she stresses that although Iamblichus did favour theurgy over purely theological speculation, his worldview embracing the miraculous is structured according to specific rules and patterns of philosophical argumentation. Although he responds to Porphyry’s *Letter to Anebo* with *De Mysteriis* defining theurgy as *technē* and *episteme* as a “universal Platonic science of ritual, with declared roots in ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Chaldean’ lore,” (107) she draws attention to the fact that Iamblichus elsewhere in his Pythagorising writings affirms the secondary status of ritual in favour of contemplative Pythagorean philosophy. For this reason Tanaseanu-Döbler attests that Iamblichus’ construction of theurgy is not merely a product of his rendition of the *Chaldean Oracles*, but also draws inspiration from more contemplative traditions.

In her discussion of theurgy in the fourth and early fifth century Tanaseanu-Döbler reviews theurgy, philosophy, and the priestly life from hymns, letters, and other writings of Emperor Julian. Salutius is also integrated into her study, along with Eunapius of Sardes and his *Vitae sophistratum et philosophorum*, which construes theurgy in a similar fashion to Iamblichus as “one of the generic terms used to describe religious skills that allow for immediate, flexible and delocalized contact with the gods.” (160) She then continues with Synesius of Cyrene and Hierocles, peaking with an outstanding evaluation of the works of Proclus, demonstrating how he draws on both Chaldean and Orphic elements in addition to his favourable stance towards the Greek philosopher to construct the praxis of theurgy as an initiation rite of purification and ascent. She ends by presenting some other late Neoplatonists, such as Hermias and Damascus, before arriving at her conclusive portrait of theurgy as a self-contained yet expansive ritual tradition encompassing an array of pagan theologies, philosophies, and practices of Late Antiquity.

Tanaseanu-Döbler’s journey through the evolving historical relationship of theurgy and ritualisation culminates with her conviction that it is a Neoplatonic discourse on ritual complete with theologies typical of the second century CE, a Platonic worldview, and elements drawn from magic and mystery cults. In regards to the authority of the *Chaldean Oracles* she reveals that they can either be read “ritually” or “doctrinally.” Speaking of the distinct ritual character of theurgy her hermeneutics encapsulate the desired effects as alluding to visible manifestations of divine presence, and/or purifications and initiations to assist the soul in ascents to its divine place of origin, connecting it with the gods. However, she clarifies that in emic self-representations theurgy is not understood merely as the ritual equivalent of theology, “but emerges from the

sources as something distinct [...] a specific tradition received from the gods, relying on the knowledge and expert use of symbola and synthemata sown by the demiurge into the cosmos.” (281)

A further distinct aspect of her thesis carefully posits that theurgy as a ritual tradition is in reality “rituals in ink” (278) by individual authors; each with their own preferences and dispositions providing a discursive array of possible representations and applications of metaphysics, cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology. Hence, to argue for theurgy as a coherent whole would be fruitless for further analysis. What one should instead focus on is how theurgy as a discursive product of Neoplatonism offers avenues for the pagan intellectual to experience the doctrines and truths of these “rituals in ink,” in an embodied fashion.

Despite *Theurgy in Late Antiquity* being an insightful and challenging publication engaging with necessary discursive elucidations and historiographic reconsiderations, Tanaseanu-Döbler could have extended the theoretical and methodological scope of her hermeneutic model by engaging with a far more interdisciplinary approach. Although she makes references to anthropological studies of ritual, and in particular the works of Catherine Bell and Kevin Schilbrack in the beginning of the book, she neglects a systematic consideration of theurgic ritual from the perspective of Bell’s distinct notion of “ritualization” and Schilbrack’s “embodied metaphysics.” Had she done so she would surely have presented a far more productive interpretation of ritual, illustrating why one should address Neoplatonic theurgy in terms of it being an inclusive tradition of ritual and philosophy as developed by the historical protagonists of Neoplatonism that she makes reference to. From this perspective she could have argued in a more precise fashion how her study constitutes a collapse of the rigid divide between belief and praxis and a critical reconsideration of the misguided attempts to contrast “rational” philosophy and “irrational” ritual. Furthermore, in her conclusion she writes that “theurgy, this product of Neoplatonism, has the advantage to offer the pagan intellectual a possibility of experiencing what he thinks and writes about,” and then refers to theurgic ritual as “an embodied, concrete way of experiencing doctrines and truths developed on paper.” (283) Unfortunately though, Tanaseanu-Döbler does not clarify how ritual embodiment may constitute a spatio-temporal environment defined by “a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’,”<sup>3</sup> and how theurgy as a model of participation and embodied metaphysics “serves as saving or liberating knowledge with which one can properly

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<sup>3</sup> Bell, Catherine, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74.

orient oneself in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Tanaseanu-Döbler’s research is systematic and resourceful when identifying and analysing the dialectics of emic representations of Neoplatonic theurgy unifying belief and praxis. However, Tanaseanu-Döbler fails to critically engage with how etic considerations of rituals as narratives of religious instruction addressed in disciplines such as textual criticism, and rituals as embodied modes of practice studied within fields of anthropology might differ in methodology and objective. Unfortunately this obscures her conclusion by not clarifying whether theurgy can be presented as a mode of action similar to Bell’s notion of “ritualization” and Schilbrack’s “embodied metaphysics,” rendering the study of theurgy as an experiential mode of embodiment an irrelevant discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> Schilbrack, Kevin, ‘Myth and Metaphysics’. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 48, no. 2 (2000): 69.