

The adventures of Harry Potter at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry introduce us to a magic world of potions, spells, curses, and dark arts. While the story is set in modern times, many of its concepts originated in the classical world.

The use of magic was widespread in ancient times, but some forms of magic were more acceptable than others. No one would complain if you used magic to make your fields more fertile, or to produce rain during dry weather, or to cure disease; this was helpful magic, what we today might call “white” magic. However, the use of “black” magic, magic intended to hurt others, was illegal. The earliest Roman law code, the Twelve Tables (450 BC), forbids two kinds of magic: using a harmful charm, and making a neighbour’s crops move into your field.

Wizards and witches were well known in Roman times. The philosopher Philostratus, in the 3rd century AD, notes that wizards claim to be able to change the future by torturing demons or by using weird rituals and charms. Some actual charms are recorded in magical papyri. Here, for instance, is a charm to prevent your victim from sleeping: Take a bat and paint on its wings the seven names of the god, as well as the name of the victim. Release the bat. Repeat this spell at the waning of the moon, and your victim will die from lack of sleep.

Magic herbs were often used, and there were detailed rules for how to collect them. Some herbs could only be picked at certain hours or seasons to be effective; the herb-gatherer must wear loose clothing, abstain from sex, and in some cases spend the night sleeping beside the plant he intends to pick. Another way to work magic was to get hold of a piece of someone’s clothing or hair. You could then place a charm on it, and it would affect the person it came from; for example, you could make them fall in love with you, or you could injure them.

Another magical device was the use of words – especially mysterious, made-up words that were thought to have supernatural power, like the modern magician’s words *hocus-pocus* or *abracadabra*; or a series of mumbo-jumbo names belonging to a deity. A string of these special words could be put together to make a magic spell that could be used for various purposes. Cato (2nd century BC) tells us that to heal a fractured bone or dislocated joint, you take a long green reed, split in half, and chant the magic words, “*motas vaeta daries dardares astataries dissunapiter.*” Wave an iron knife above the reed. When the two halves come together, cut the reed into strips and tie it to the broken limb or joint. It will heal.

Magic numbers, especially 3 and its compounds, were a powerful device, and often occur in spells for healing human, plant or animal diseases. This

may involve repeating a spell 3 times, or spitting 3 times, or touching the earth 3 times, or mixing 3 ingredients to make a potion and giving it to the patient 3 times. For instance, warts can be cured by touching them with 3 beans and then burying them in a manure pit; as the beans decompose, your warts will disappear. Also, sore eyes can be cured by touching them 3 times with the water left over from washing your feet (Don't try this at home!)

Curses, which usually call upon an underworld deity to make them work, were written on a thin tablet of lead, which was then pierced with a nail or tied with string. Piercing or binding the curse tablet would produce a similar effect on the victim, causing him sharp pain or preventing him from moving. The tablet was often placed in a tomb or thrown into water, to help it reach the underworld. Sometimes the curse called for the victim's tongue to turn into lead so that he could not speak; or for his possessions to turn into lead and thus be worthless. Curses could be used to cripple a political enemy, a love rival, a business competitor, an opponent in a lawsuit; or to disable a race horse or athlete you had bet against; or to ruin someone's crops or property.

Roman literature often refers to witches. Vergil (Eclogue 8) writes about a lovesick peasant girl abandoned by her boyfriend; she recites a magic spell and makes a wax image of him, which she binds 3 times with magic knots and carries 3 times around an altar. In the heat of the altar fire, the wax image melts, while a clay image representing the girl bakes hard, giving her greater strength and power than her unfaithful lover. She also takes a piece of his clothing and buries it under the door sill, so she can walk over him and thus control him. Horace writes in two poems about a witch named Canidia, who gathers herbs in a garden that used to be a cemetery. On one occasion, Canidia meets with two other witches to bury a living boy up to his shoulders and let him starve, until his unquenched desire for food penetrates his liver and the marrow of his bones – which the witches then use as love charms.

However, our most vivid description of a witch is provided by the poet Lucan (1st century AD). He describes her as an old hag with disgusting face and long, uncombed hair, who rifles abandoned tombs on stormy nights. Her footstep spoils seeds in the field, and her breath poisons air that used to be clean. She shuts the living into the tomb, or brings the dead back from the grave. She is especially fond of corpses buried in coffins of stone,

which dries out the flesh. She gleefully gnaws their withered fingernails and scoops the eyeballs out of their sockets. This is a more gruesome tale than anything you will find in J.K. Rowling!