ΨΥΧΑΓΩΓΙΑ IN PHILODEMUS*

ABSTRACT
This article argues that the word ψυχαγωγία and its cognates which are found in the writings of Philodemus retain a semantic connection to the domain of magic and are best translated in terms of ‘enchantment’ rather than the more generic sense of ‘entertainment’.

Keywords: Philodemus; ψυχαγωγία; magic; enchantment; aesthetics; rhetoric

The term ψυχαγωγία and its cognates show up with some frequency in the fragments of the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus. Like many other Hellenistic authors, Philodemus uses this language to mark out a certain effect produced by forms of rhetoric and especially by poetry.¹ There is a tendency in scholarship to translate this term as ‘entertainment’ and, thereby, to erase its semantic connection with the domain of magic. In this article, I argue that when Philodemus uses language related to ψυχαγωγία it is more accurate to translate these words in terms of ‘enchantment’. This translation maintains the semantic overlap, found in Philodemus and elsewhere, with words such as θέλειν and ἐπιθέειν, and does so without losing the generic sense of entertainment.

The general concept of ‘psychagogic’ speech with which Philodemus works is already familiar to us from the writings of Plato (Phdr. 261a8, 271d1; Ti. 71a6; Leg. 909b2–3), Isocrates (Nic. 48–9; Ev. 8–11) and Aristotle (Poet. 1450a33; cf. 1450b16). It probably goes back to Gorgias of Leontini, who, despite not using the word ψυχαγωγία explicitly, provides the earliest conceptual model for how speech (λόγος) might move the soul (ψυχή, Hel. 8–14).² In addition to describing certain rhetorical and aesthetic effects, ψυχαγωγία also has a strictly magical meaning; in its earliest appearances, it denotes the practice of necromancy.³ Plato explicitly plays on this breadth of meaning when he describes how impious citizens ‘persuade many of the living while claiming to raise the dead’ (ψυχαγωγόσι μὲν πολλοί τῶν ζῶντων,

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τούς δὲ τεθνεώτας φάσκοντες ψυχαγωγεῖν, Leg. 909b3–4). 4 Gorgias, too, frames his model of ‘psychagogic’ speech with a collection of magical terms (ἐποδή, θέλγειν, γοητεία, ἐκγοητεύειν, μαγεία), as well as with terms closely allied with magic (φάρμακον, φαρμακεύειν, ἐπαγγελματικοὶ, ἐπαγγελματικοί). For this reason, ψυχαγωγία is often translated by the English word ‘enchantment’, which covers the same semantic range between rhetorical effect and magical effect.

In scholarship on Philodemus, there is some dispute over how best to translate ψυχαγωγία and its cognates. Wigodsky, for instance, argues that, by the time Philodemus wrote, ψυχαγωγία had lost all magical connotations and had, as early as Aristotle, come simply to mean ‘entertainment’. 5 Although many follow suit and translate ψυχαγωγία as ‘entertainment’, 6 some express doubt. 7 Janko has taken a middle path and translated the word as ‘enthralment’. 8 I suggest that ‘enchantment’ is the superior rendering as long as we understand it not as referring to the actual performance of magical rituals (such as those found in the Greek Magical Papyri) but to certain sensory/psychological experiences felt to be analogous with the experience of being affected by a spell or incantation. Philodemus’ usage is more in line with the way in which modern authors such as Felski or Bennett might speak of the way in which a text or an aesthetic experience ‘enchants’ and they do so without committing to the notion of ritualized spells, curses and the like. 9

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7 K. Gutzwiller, ‘The bucolic problem’, CPh 101 (2006), 380–404, at 396 n. 54; C. Chandler, Philodemus’ On Rhetoric, Books 1 and 2: Translation and Exegetical Essays (New York and London, 2006), 206 n. 5; Gutzwiller (n. 1), 340; Halliwell (n. 5), 324 n. 155. See also P.M. Fraser, Ptolemaic Alexandria [Oxford, 1972], 1.759: “psychagogy”—the adoption of the Greek word may be permitted as conveying more of the sense than the colourless “pleasure” or “entertainment”.


There are a number of reasons to question Wigodsky’s argument. The first reason is that **ψυχαγωγία** never entirely sheds its strictly magical or supernatural sense, but rather continues to denote a form of necromancy or divine soul-guidance in the writings of such authors as Cornutus (Theol. Graec. 22.9), Plutarch (De sera 560F1), Lucian (Dial. D. 7.4, 24.1), Polyaenus (Her. 43.13.1; VA 4.16.3) and other post-Philodemian authors.10 Thus by the time Philodemus uses the term, the magical flavour would not have been lost.

A second reason is that, even when **ψυχαγωγία** and its cognates are not used strictly to refer to necromancy, they are still quite often used synonymously with other words—such as those related to κόλπος, θέλεις, ἐφωδή, γοητεία—which tend to mark out experiences of ‘enchantment’. These experiences range from the effect produced by actual ritualized spells to the analogous effects triggered by powerful speech acts.11

Even within Philodemus’ own writings, **ψυχαγωγία** is closely allied with these other terms for enchantment. In On Poems, for instance, Philodemus describes the desired effect of poetry as **ψυχαγωγία** and links this effect with the capacity to enchant (**θέλγειν**/ἐπάθειν, 1.166.1–3 Janko):

\[\text{τὰς ψυχὰς θέλγοι[,] τῶν ἐ-<}
\]
\[\text{παθομένων. καὶ καθο-<}
\]
\[\text{[λο] δὲ τὴν ψυχαγωγίαν ἀ-}
\]
\[\text{[κοίν πτ]έγ ψυχῆς ἄγοφόγν]v}
\]
\[\text{καλοσιν]}
\]

(poeetry would succeed if) it enchants the souls of those who are being spellbound. In general, people call **ψυχαγωγία** ‘a kind of hearing that moves the soul’.12

Here, Philodemus acknowledges not only the Gorgianic psychological model which underpins the word **ψυχαγωγία** (≈ πικα ποιητῆς ἄγωγόν) but also the magical flavour which the word still retains (≈ θέλγειν/ἐπάθεισθαι).13

Philodemus’ opponents in On Poems similarly use the term **ψυχαγωγία** to describe the goal of poetry.14 Also like Philodemus, they draw on other words for enchantment to

10 Paus. 3.17.8; Maximus of Tyre, Or. 8.2.10; Porph. De antr. nymph. 28; Etym. Magn. 819.25 Gaisford.

11 On this larger semantic family, see P. Lain Entralgo, The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity (transl. L.J. Rather and J.M. Sharp) (New Haven, 1970); J. de Romilly, Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece (Cambridge, MA, 1974), especially 15; R.J. Barnes, ‘Speech and enchantment in early Greek thought from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period’ (Diss., Bryn Mawr College, in progress).

12 My translation is adapted from Janko (n. 8), who generally differentiates between ψυχαγωγεῖν ‘to enthral’ and θέλειν, ἔπαθεν and κηλεῖν ‘to enchant’. The line between the two, however, is not strictly upheld. Here, he translates θέλειν as ‘it enthralled’. In the index of his newest edition he has ‘enchantment see enthralment’ (R. Janko, Philodemus On Poems Book 2 with the Fragments of Heracleodorus and Pausimachus [Oxford and New York, 2020], 706).

13 Similarly, in his History of the Academy, Philodemus speaks in one place of how Arcesilaus’ audiences were enchanted (κηλευμένων, 19.37–41 Kalligas–Tsouna) and in another of how a certain Phanourites of Tralles was ‘well-known for his enchantment of the masses’ (ἐν πρὸς ὅξι[λ]ον ψυχαγωγον ἴκον[φ]ιμον, 36.3–5 Kalligas–Tsouna). This habit of swapping out a word like ψυχαγωγεῖν for γοητείας, κηλεῖν, θέλειν, vel sim. is not at all uncommon in authors writing both before and after Philodemus.

14 Wigodsky (p. 4), 67–8) claims that Philodemus is only using the language of his opponents when he speaks of ψυχαγωγία, but Epicurus himself used the language of ψυχαγωγία in a way similar to both Philodemus and Philodemus’ opponents when he speaks of the ‘enchanting’ effect of sophistic rhetoric (De rhet. 3; P.Herc. 1426, 3 a, 7–5 a, 4 [= P.Herc. 1506, 50, 22–52, 6], in J. Hammerstaedt, ‘Der Schlussteil von Philodemens drittem Buch über Rhetorik’, CronErc 22 [1992], 9–117, at 27–9).
label this same goal—such as θέλγειν (1.37.11, 1.164.7–8, 2.76.26 Janko), ἐποδή (1.12.18 Janko), ἐκγοητεύειν (1.111.25 Janko), κατακηλεῖν (2.191.2 Janko).¹⁵ Thus for both Philodemus and his predecessors ψυχαγωγία fits comfortably within the larger conceptual domain of enchantment and need not be watered down through the translation ‘entertainment’.

One final reason for preferring the translation of ‘enchantment’ over ‘entertainment’ is that the former already entails the latter and we lose nothing by sticking with the more traditional sense. Janko’s ‘enthrallment’ is certainly closer to the mark; however, in the end, there is no precise reason to divorce the language of ψυχαγωγία from the semantical family of ‘enchantment’ of which it is clearly a part both in Philodemus and elsewhere.

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¹⁵ Philodemus quotes Megaclides’ claim that ‘poetry produces enchantment and that enchantment is the subjection of the soul’ (τὴν ποίησιν κήλησιν φέρειν, τὴν ἥδε κήλησιν ψυχῆς εἶναι καὶ τάσσειν, De poet. 1.130.20–3 Janko).

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