

Oaths. The Yays, Nays, and Maybays.

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I'm a member of an online chat group called the Guild of Experimental Magicians. It goes through its active and passive phases, but when it is active there are lively online discussions. One very interesting topic was oaths. In specific, it discussed whether GEM members should take an oath. The talk was animated, well thought out, and varied. For, against, or somewhere in the middle, no one came across as though there was a single answer to the questions posed. We differed in whether we started from the perspective that oaths were a good thing in general, or a bad thing in general. Though the original discussion considered oaths in general and a GEM oath particular, this article focuses on the issues surrounding oath taking in general. I draw on many posts from that thread, add my own commentary and observations, and hopefully, present the material in a neutral light.

(Disclosure: I'm one of the Yays.)

Collen A'Miketh

“Oaths have nothing to do with the type of magick and more to do with working with others in general... ...Not having an oath only demonstrates that people aren't willing to put their money where their mouth is.” – Solis

“The oath is a statement of one’s will. It begins with every magical operation. So it is important even in solitary magick.” – Xi O’Teaz

To make a long story short, we’ve taken ‘em. We’ve had varying levels of success or failure with them. We’ve had good or bad experiences with them. And, last but not least, we all have very definite opinions on the subject. Whether for or against, it was clear that GEM magicians are serious about oaths. We all tended to be of the opinion that an oath was a powerful “statement of intent” on par with the casting of a spell. The consensus was that oaths had consequences and created limits.

“Choosing to take an oath does something, within and without. This something, especially in relation to experimental magic, is a complicated topic because results are ~not~ pre-defined.” - smokerofgods

Several participants noted the similarity between the oath and the magical “statement of intent.” It was pretty clear a statement that proclaims, “I cast this particular spell for XYZ” was not an oath. Even so, if done properly, it was just as binding. In either case, the general consensus was that there were consequences attached to either act.

“Oaths have to do with a movement which occurs. You speak of consequences in the social reality. These are results of a movement, and they occur all the time, even without oaths. There are natural consequences for not participating, and that is not gaining the experiences involved in doing the work.” - smokerofgods

The majority felt that there were consequences for breaking an oath. The Yays thought this a good thing and a prod to one’s conscience to do the right thing. Right or wrong, I noted an undercurrent that implied an unwillingness to take an oath was an unwillingness to accept consequences. There *is* a kernel of truth in this, but it isn’t the entire picture. All things being equal, I think it fairer to say that when a responsible and mature magician is doesn’t take an oath, the magician is, in reality, disinclined to accept the consequences of that particular oath. It doesn’t mean the magician is unwilling to accept the consequences of their actions. Not at all. These are two very different things and, when viewed from this perspective, it makes sense when someone passes up a vow.

I also noted undercurrents present in the Nays position in regards to consequences. There appeared to be a tacit assumption that the consequences were always bad. I think it is correct to state that that there are always consequences for a person’s actions, whether an oath is taken or not. In fact, an oath taker may have signed up for consequences that were not bargained for. However, there is no rule that makes the consequences good or bad from the git go.

It was also noted by many (but not all) that oaths were neither inherently magical, nor necessary for effective magic. A magician's Will was made manifest by the magician. In other words, if we (as magicians) intended to do something, then it got done. Some folks pointed out that being bound by an oath could help us finish what we started, others replied that over reliance on an oath for that purpose made it a crutch to lean upon.

When does an oath switch from a tool to a crutch? What does it look like? The main symptom I've seen in oath takers is the "*I've taken the oath and that alone makes me a good person*" syndrome. It was assumed that somehow the oath itself was supposed to do the work. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. Oaths don't keep their vows, people do.

"If you are going to work in a group, coming to a consensus of reality seems crucial." - Solis

"The purpose... .. would be to enforce consistency and sincerity, and intent to follow through." - Shin/Solo

"Oaths are something a person pledges before their peers to their own gods. It is a measure of a person's ability to keep their word. It is a promise to do a certain thing in a certain way." – Solis

We considered the idea that oaths facilitated groups of people working together. Several observers noted that oaths helped to define a baseline for "right action" and provided a framework of trust on which each participant could rely. In effect, an oath took the arbitrary gray areas of human interaction and placed very clear black and white borders upon them. When it worked, the baseline was a good thing.

One day, I walked out the front door of my house with a buddy. I had to turn around and go back to lock the door. I made a comment about the lock not stopping a determined criminal. He observed that the locks were there to keep honest people honest. His comment gave me pause. Do honest people need the help? The more important question was: did I? My *honest* answer was that yes, on occasion, I could use the help. Oaths are a lot like door locks. In tight spots they might help us do the right thing when other options seem easier or more palatable. If we aren't interested in doing the right thing, nothing... not even an oath, can stop us from doing whatever it is we intend to do.

We were all in agreement that trust and dependability were imperative for a magical group to be effective. We weren't in agreement as to whether vows were the right way to make it happen. There are two ways to build trust and camaraderie. There is the long way, which entails working, working, working (and working) with each other. Then we work through the mistakes each person makes until a baseline of trust and dependability can be established. And, there is the short way. It entails taking an oath designed to provide an instant framework for trust and dependability.

In essence, a group could use an oath to carve out a little space of consensus reality and then work within it. However, group consensus happens whether or not an oath is used and it isn't clear that one path is more desirable than the other. The more I studied the Nays position, the more I thought that maybe they said a magician who didn't take an oath saw it for the social contrivance it was.

Of course, once a group of magicians take an oath, it has the potential to create a difficult situation. Though we as a group never discussed it, the question that comes to my mind is, "at what point does group consensus regarding the fulfillment of an oath take precedence over a single person's opinion as to whether they are fulfilling the oath?" It is a very difficult question to answer because, for an oath to be effective, it must introduce black and white into the gray equation.

This means the group has the potential to be judge, jury, and executioner. I think we instinctively realized that any situation that devolved to a point where a judgment was needed wasn't Scottish, it was CRAP! (R-r-roll that R. I knew you could.) The reason is that the emotional and spiritual investment of an oath has a higher price in this situation than in circumstances where expectations were not set in black and white.

"When there is membership involved in anything, some things must remain a privilege of membership." - cyanthropos

Like it or not, an oath imposes black and white rules on the gray of human interaction. Taking an oath creates a dividing line between the oath taker and others. If we aren't careful, that oath becomes exclusionary in all the wrong ways, and being excluded doesn't sit well with most people. Oaths themselves aren't bad, but having a working group of magicians where some have taken vows and some have not is a recipe for disaster because it can create an "us vs. them" schism that eventually overwhelms the group. This brings us to a very pointed, and very honest, appraisal of groups that have abused oaths:

"Many of the oath-bound groups I have had the misfortune of knowing, were elitist wankfests that used oaths as a way to make outsiders grovel for their entry. Silence and secrecy were (ab)used so that outsiders won't discover that what they are actually doing isn't anything new, but derived from widely available information."
- socratesmustdie

Yup. Groups do that. People misuse and abuse oaths. It's a risk posed to any organization that uses them. It should be pointed out that many groups survived for very long periods of time by making use of oaths. I think perhaps this wasn't because of the oath itself, but because of other safeguards built into the organization intended to prevent just such abuse. In fraternal organizations, the primary safeguard I've seen is that the members took oaths to each other as individuals and not to the organization itself.

"An oath can suggest we are quite self-important, discovering something wonderful like GEM and then being told I have to swear an oath would turn me off it completely, even if

its intentions can be quite innocent.” - socratesmustdie

Ain't that the truth? Oaths draw a definite line in the sand that some folks (for any number of good, bad or indifferent reasons) refuse to cross. It was also pointed out that requiring an oath implies that someone isn't trustworthy. In the end, I think that the implication is in the eyes of the beholder and the intent of the person requiring the vow. I suppose it depends on whether we decide the locks are there to help us keep ourselves honest, or there because someone thinks we are scoundrels.

Some of our concerns revolved around flexibility. Does an oath make the magician less flexible? I believe it does. The tradeoff is that water in a puddle has no force. It just sits there stagnant and waits for someone to name a rock band after it. Yet, when the water from the puddle is stuck into a bottle, put under pressure, and given a single outlet, the water is then capable of doing something. In other words, the imposed limitations in conjunction with limited outlets, creates pressure that can be applied in specific directions and for specific purposes. An oath excels because of this pressure and release.

“A vow can be inspirational, a source of energy, or act as a focus of self-examination and contemplation.” – Bill Whitcomb

“An Oath is like a super-sized promise...” –Xi O'Teaz

“Static oaths have not made a lot of sense to me.” - Soror Mystica

“I think it is just a matter of us having different ideas of what oaths are, different values placed on them and different experiences with oath-bound groups.” - socratesmustdie

Different ideas indeed. The Yays seemed focused on oaths as tools for creating a common feeling of respect, dependability, and trust. They also favored using vows as the driving force behind magical work and/or self-improvement. The Nays focused on the limited flexibility, implied distrust or disrespect, arbitrary creation of black and white standards, dangers of abuse, and the unnecessary nature of oath taking in general.

One point in particular struck home:

“An Oath that can be more restrictive on the magic... ...you obviously want to be careful of how far those go – because you can kill the experimentation.” – Steven Savage

An oath might hamstring the magic before it starts. Hell, take the wrong oath and you've doomed the entire group before it starts. So, is the question whether a restrictive or open oath is more appropriate? Is it even an oath if it is open ended? I think the answer depends on the circumstances.

“I disagree with those who say that anyone who doesn't keep their word is an impotent magickian.” –Xi O'Teaz

This is a very good point that needs to be highlighted. Oaths do not the magician make. Trustworthy and dependable people don't need them because they aren't meant to take the place of human action. End statement. GoTo NextParagraph.

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I personally believe that blind adherence to an oath, no matter the cost, can take us in the wrong direction. On occasion, I've concluded that the myths which tell of the hero who keeps an oath at any cost are intended to convey a simple truth: sometimes the cost is too great (as opposed to the viewpoint that an oath should be kept at any cost). After all, if it does more harm than good... why *are* we doing it? I think that perhaps the moral of the story is that, at some point, we all must make value based decisions. If we can't think for ourselves and weigh the consequences of our actions, oaths aren't going to do it for us.

This leaves us with the question: What constitutes a good oath? I don't think there is a single definitive answer. Instead of an answer, I leave you with a post that has the ring of truth and the echo of an oath:

"I hope I can demonstrate my sincerity through my dedication to my work. That will take me a lifetime to prove myself." – socratesmustdie

Me too. Me too.