

Plutarch. *Moralia, Volume VIII*, Translated by P. A. Clement, H. B. Hoffleit.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969.

Table-Talk, Book 5 - QUESTION 7: *On those who are said to cast an evil eye*

1. Once at dinner a discussion arose about people who are said to cast a spell and to have an evil eye. ... [Discussion of how this topic is scoffed at.] ... “Now, many instances of such unexplained phenomena as the evil eye are on record. We know, for instance, of persons who seriously hurt children by looking at them, influencing and impairing their susceptible, vulnerable constitutions, but who are less able to affect in this way the firm and established health of older persons. ...

2. “... For odour, voice, and breathing are all emanations of some kind, streams of particles from living bodies, that produce sensation whenever our organs of sense are stimulated by their impact. ... In all probability the most active stream of such emanations is that which passes out through the eye. For vision, being of an enormous swiftness and carried by an essence¹ that gives off a flame-like brilliance, diffuses a wondrous influence. In consequence, man both experiences and produces many effects through his eyes. He is possessed and governed by either pleasure or displeasure exactly in proportion to what he sees. ...

“Finally, diseases of the eye are more contagious to those exposed and more instantaneously so than other diseases, so penetrating and swift is the power of the eye to admit or communicate disease.”

3. “You are indeed right,” said Patrocleas, “so far as the physiological effects go. But as regards the psychical, including the casting of spells, how precisely can harm spread to others by a mere glance of the eye?” I answered: “Don’t you know that the body is sympathetically affected when the mind is subjected to any influence? Amorous thoughts will excite the sexual organs; the frenzy of hounds in their struggle with their prey often dims their sight and even blinds them; and pain, greed for gold, or jealousy will cause a man to change colour, and wear away his health. Envy, which naturally roots itself more deeply in the mind than any other passion, contaminates the body too with evil. ... When those possessed by envy to this degree let their glance fall upon a person, their eyes, which are close to the mind and draw from it the evil influence of the passion, then assail that person as if with poisoned arrows; hence, I conclude, it is not paradoxical or incredible that they should have an effect on the persons who encounter their gaze. ... What I have said shows why the so-called amulets are thought to be a protection against malice. The strange look of them attracts the gaze, so that it exerts less pressure upon its victim. Count this, Florus, as my contribution toward the expense of the entertainment.”

4. “Very well,” Soclarus replied, “if and when we accept it as good coin, for I detect something counterfeit in the argument. If we do set down as true what many say about victims of the evil eye, surely you are not ignorant that some people believe that friends and relatives, and in some cases even fathers, have the evil eye, so that their wives will not show them their children nor allow the children to be gazed upon by them for very long. How under those circumstances can we still believe that this affliction derives from envy? And in Heaven’s name what will you say about those who are alleged to bewitch themselves? ...”

5. “... Habit is powerful to influence disposition according to a set pattern, and it is inevitable that a man prone to lapse will trip over every temptation that falls in his way. Accordingly there is no reason for surprise if those who have brought themselves into a state of envy and malignity are activated even against their near and dear as befits their special pathological condition. In these circumstances they are acting as their nature but not as their will directs. As a sphere by its distinctive shape is forced to roll like a sphere, and a cylinder like a cylinder, so a man whose disposition is envious has to act in an envious manner in all things. Besides, it is natural for him to

¹ *Pneuma*.

cast his gaze oftener on those near and dear to him and consequently to hurt them more than he does others.

“To my mind it seems reasonable enough that ... all others who are said to have cast a spell on themselves should have encountered such a misfortune. For supreme good health is, according to Hippocrates,² precarious. When the body reaches the pinnacle of health, it does not remain there, but wavers and sinks towards the opposite condition. Therefore, when people experience a complete improvement in health and find themselves better off than they had expected, they marvel and look closely at themselves; but actually they are now near a reversal, and when their condition takes a sudden turn for the worse, they are thought to have put themselves under a spell. Self-bewitchment is most frequently brought about by the streams of particles reflected from sheets of water or other mirror-like surfaces; these reflections rise like vapour and return to the beholder, so that he is himself injured by the same means by which he has been injuring others. And perhaps when this happens in the case of children, the blame is often wrongly fastened upon those who gaze at them.”

Select Papyri, Volume I: Private Documents. Translated by A. S. Hunt, C. C. Edgar.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932.

[2nd century CE] 121. Sempronius to Saturnila, his mother and lady, very many greetings. Before everything I pray for your health and that of my brothers, unharmed by the evil eye, and withal I make supplication for you daily before the lord Serapis.

[circa 25 CE] 106. Theon to the most honoured Tyrannus very many greetings. Heraclides, the bearer of this letter, is my brother, wherefore I entreat you with all my power to take him under your protection. I have also asked your brother Hermias by letter to inform you about him. You will do me the greatest favour if you let him win your approval. Before all else I pray that you may have health and the best of success, unharmed by the evil eye. Goodbye. (Addressed) To Tyrannus the dioecetes. [a financial administrator].



Possibly Byzantine amulet. Silvery copper.
“Seal of Solomon, remove all evil from the wearer. Envy.



“Raised mosaic panel from Room 2 apotropaic scene with the Evil Eye.” *Archaeological Archives*, accessed April 25, 2021, <http://vrc.princeton.edu/archives/items/show/17708>.

² *Aphorisms*, 1.3; Celsus 2.2.