CHAPTER SEVEN

TOWARDS A MODEL OF TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION

For the most part, Demotic texts tend to be very different from Greek texts and to fulfil different functions; they are not simply Greek papyri in Egyptian.¹

It has become abundantly clear in the foregoing chapters that, although similar in the type of spells, the Demotic and Greek sections on the two manuscripts under study differ in a number of important respects. The two corpora are not only different as far as their base language and script are concerned, but also with respect to the way the reader is made to believe in the efficacy of a given spell. The analysis of the ‘marketing’ techniques at work in the introductions to the spells has demonstrated that both text corpora make use of the same rhetorical devices, which are firmly rooted in pharaonic magical thought, but the realization of these devices or, their textual content for that matter, may differ for each corpus. For example, the Greek spells address as prestigious authors the same range of international miracle workers and gurus that occur in Greek and Latin texts of the Greco-Roman period: Persian magoi, Greek philosophers, Semitic magicians and Egyptian priests. However, pseudepigraphy is far less attested in the Demotic spells and, in those rare cases where it does occur, a spell is attributed to a person who fits into the local Egyptian tradition. It is therefore warranted to conclude that the Greek spells were written with a readership in mind that differs from that of the Demotic spells. Given the striking similarities between the text corpora regarding prescribed ritual techniques and claimed magical effects, their respective user groups cannot be differentiated on the basis of the type of spell; this is to say, the two groups had more or less similar magical aspirations, namely, contact with the divine, control over other persons and healing. It is primarily in their view on the nature and the origin of authoritative ritual specialists that they differ.

Egyptian ideas about ritual efficacy and ritual specialists were grounded in the conviction that an Egyptian priest is a servant of god, whose attitude to life is in agreement with the priestly ethos of purity and who, on account of this morality, is in close contact with the divine. Even in the fictional and somewhat burlesque narratives Setne I and II, the main character is only able to perform extraordinary magical feats because he is a ‘good scribe and wise man’. Greco-Roman discourse on the nature of ritual experts takes a different approach: Egyptian priests are not admired because of their supposed high moral standing, but primarily on account of their otherness: like the Persian magoi, Greek philosophers and Semitic magicians, they are regarded as withdrawing from Hellenistic communal life and, through study, seclusion and initiation, being knowledgeable in the workings of nature and in ways to manipulate the course of events. As I argue in chapter 6.1, the introduction to the list of coded ingredients not only falsely attributes a non-existent custom to Egyptian temple scribes, but also represents these temple scribes as outsiders to the narrator and his intended readership. In this fashion, this short text aims at appealing to readers who are acquainted with, and believe in, the exoticised image of Egyptian priests as it is propagated in Hellenistic texts, rather than to readers who are truly versed in Egyptian priestly lore.

This observation is at odds with the conclusion of chapters 3 and 4, that the scribes engaged in editing and copying the Demotic spells of the two magical handbooks must have been native priests, who had gone through an Egyptian scribal training at an Egyptian temple school. The extant Demotic spells are clearly the result of a complex process of compiling, consulting, adapting, copying and editing religious and magical texts in hieratic, Demotic, Old-Coptic and Greek. The former two languages were taught and used only among the native clergy. The short titles in Demotic added to the two Greek ring spells and the Greek separation spell testify to the fact that the extant Greek spells were also edited and copied by a scribe literate in the Egyptian language and scripts. It then follows that any user of the manuscripts must also have been familiar with the Egyptian scripts and, as a consequence, with native priestly life. Therefore, it is remarkable to discover that the list of coded ingredients is validated by means of an image of the Egyptian priesthood that is not authentic to Egyptian culture. The Egyptian editors and users of the extant handbooks must have perceived this incongruity. How then to explain this incongruity?