

## Mages, Magicians, and Kin Identity

Below the cut, a long (almost 2000 word) essay exploring the differences between the historical therian/otherkin communities and the “tumblrkin”/“kinnie” community and subculture, through an extended metaphor about magic. At full disclosure, I am personally very much an “old school” therian. Nevertheless, the essay, to the best of my efforts, is not an attack and does not take sides, instead hoping for honest discussion. I know there are other communities I might not know about or be active in, I welcome people to share this there (with proper credit).

Say you have a Mage (think Harry Potter, Dungeons and Dragons, and similar). In their experience, magic is an inextricable from their life: it affects how they perceive the world around them, how they interpret and understand things, and it can manifest effects (spells) through them, either voluntarily or reflexively. The visible, tangible acts of “magic” are a direct expression and consequence of the natural state “being a mage”. They don’t “do magic”, they “are a mage”, and magic happens as a result. A mage remains inherently a mage, even when they are asleep or having breakfast or otherwise not doing anything obviously magical.

Then, say you have a magician (Harry Houdini, David Copperfield, etc.). For them, “magic” is a thing you do. Some people may have more talent than others, and people may have different reasons for doing it (some make it a career, some put on performances, some just do it on their own out of personal interest or fun), but at the end of the day it’s an activity, a practice.

Then, say, these two completely different people meet, and start discussing “magic”. Here, a sudden conflict arises.

It would be *very* tempting for the mage, seeing the magician using scarves and cards and coins, to say “What *I’m* doing is *real* magic, what *you’re* doing is fake”. The mage might remember really struggling to understand and control their magic- early accidents and mishaps, unintended reflexive spells- and think “This is something I live with, good or bad. Something that, in certain situations, I have to work to manage, and it’s all just a game to you.” If the mage runs into someone who is only familiar with magicians, who, upon seeing them cast fireball, says “oh, neat trick with the flash paper!” the mage might get frustrated, angry, defensive. Insisting that no, they’re doing something *very* different. The mage might try to draw the line between identity an action, or even try to insist on differentiating terms (“*I’m* doing magic because that’s what magic means, *you’re* doing legerdemain”).

But the magician might argue back that the magic he does *is* what magic means to him, what it has meant for as long as he’s known it, and what it means to his community. There’s no deception, trickery, or malicious intent involved. When he meets with other magicians, they’re all discussing magic as a practice, their tools and skills, not pretending or claiming to be supernatural. And even the audience to magic performances ultimately understands and expects that it’s all illusion and a demonstration of clever talent. It’s just as ‘real’ in that sense. Furthermore, the magician might argue that, just because magic is an activity, that doesn’t mean it’s shallow or meaningless. There are magicians that take their craft very seriously, and for whom it’s a really significant part of their life. Furthermore, it’s not so easy to distinguish action from identity: nobody is born a “writer” or an “artist”, but these can be as much

core identities for a person as their inborn traits. Some magicians might accept 'legerdemain' as a term, but it would be very difficult to convince all magicians to suddenly stop using the term "magic", especially if that is coming as an external pressure and not a natural linguistic shift within their own community.

If the magician assumes that the mage is using stage magic whenever they make grass grow or call down a lightning bolt, then the mage will seem to be too authoritarian- why are they so angry? Why are they so insistent on using different terminology? Why do they pop up with "No, that's not how it works" every time someone mentions doing magic for fun? How rude! The magician would see that mages see magic as an identity- which, yes, some magicians do- but might think "why can't they accept that that's not how everyone does magic?".

What the magician fails to see, in this case, is that this is not a shared identity with different perspectives, but a fundamentally different experience. The magician sees their difference in the use of the term "Magic" as a difference in connotation and interpretation. Really, what's happening is more like a homograph: two words with different meanings and origins that look or sound the same (e.g. "dove" the bird vs. "dove", past tense of "dive"). And in discussion, mixing up "lead" as in the metal and "lead" as in "leader", or using them interchangeably, isn't an alternate definition or linguistic drift, it's misinformation and misunderstanding.

The above extended metaphor is the closest I have come to explaining the difference between the "old school" therian/otherkin community, and the subculture commonly referred to as "tumblrkin" (which I use as a point of reference here, not derogatorily). For the sake of clarity, I will be referring to these as "mage kin" and "magician kin" from this point forward. My observations and direct experience in this come from Therian Guide, Werelist, Youtube, Therian Wilderness, a few therian Telegram groups, and, yes, Tumblr. As you can see there will still be gaps in my knowledge (especially as I am far less familiar with non-therian, otherkin communities).

Mage kin see therianthropy/otherkinity as an inherent identity. Language reflects that- one has a kintype or is \_\_kin/a \_\_\_ therian, and might be discouraged from saying "my wolf" or "my dragon". A lot of emphasis is placed on distinguishing kintypes from 'external' forces, whether personality traits, likes/dislikes or distinct spiritual entities. A kintype in this community is (almost) always *discovered*, not created and definitely not chosen. It is found the same way a new continent is found- it was always there, and simply needed to be mapped. Mage kin communities are, broadly speaking, older and more interconnected. The various forums tend to share some members, and this is usually where you will find the community elders that have been around since the Elf Queen's Daughters and alt.horror.werewolves. While terminology has shifted slightly with time (from elvenkind and weres to otherkin and therians), and broadened to include things like fictionkin, this has been natural drift, and mage kin have a shared definition/understanding of kin identity, whether on Tumblr or TG: an inherent, internal, nonhuman identity. A mage kin is always kin, whatever their shifts or self-expression.

In magician kin communities, "kinning" is a verb. It is a thing someone does. "X kins Y" or "I'm kinning \_\_\_" are common statements. This is how it was expressed by someone who identified as kin, and was earnest as far as I could tell (not trolling)- that people can "kin" for various reasons, including mental health or for fun. Because of this action aspect in the general understanding, the magician kin

community is much more open to the idea of choosing a kintype- both in picking what to “kin”, and in being able to say things like “don’t kin outside of your race/culture”. It also broadens the umbrella of what a kintype can be, with people further subdividing into things like “ID’s”. The magician community is more insular- as far as I can tell it is fairly localized to tumblr (and personal discords/aminos) but has little to no overlap with other therian/otherkin websites and forums. This leads to a lack of exposure to terminology and history (I’ve had someone ask me, in earnest, that wasn’t fictionkin different from otherkin?). And much like on islands in biology/ecology, being insulated in that way leads to very sharp, extreme differentiation. Magicians rarely meet mages (and when they do, often assume them to just be belligerent magicians) and have branched off to the point of being nigh-unrecognizable from the mage perspective.

Hence, conflict. Notice how often discourse boils down to whether kin is a noun or a verb. Mages see magicians as disconnected from the community history and terminology, and thus misinformed- and put time, effort and energy into ‘educating’ and ‘correcting’ (whether politely or angrily). They blame magicians for muddying the water of what ‘magic’ means, causing confusion, and for making a mockery (in their perspective) of magic- making a game of what was often serious and sometimes even painful for them. Magicians have their fellow magicians and are perfectly happy with their magic, and don’t see why some other ‘magicians’ feel they have any authority to barge in and tell them they aren’t doing real magic and should start using words like “legerdemain”. From a complete outsider’s perspective, it’s all chaos. Because the two groups aren’t using neatly distinct terms like mage and magician, they are all just using “magic” and arguing with each other (and of course, the worst extremes will always be the most visible). And, as tempting as it is to think so, magicians aren’t responsible for trolls and aggressors attacking the ‘magic’ community as a whole; and strictly enforcing only mage terms wouldn’t stop willful misunderstanding and attacks. People that want to be jerks and bullies would be jerks and bullies, even to the most respectable.

So...what do we do? I’m solidly in the mage kin camp. I found the tumblr kin community first, and felt alienated and out of place in it. Finding fellow mages is where I have found community and shared understanding that matches my experiences. And, like many of my peers, I’ve spent time and energy being angry at tumblrkin, and aggressively defensive of terminology. But here’s the thing- that’s wasted effort. However the linguistic divergence came about, it happened. There’s no point closing the barn door after the cows get out. Contronyms (words that are their own opposite) are a known linguistic fact. In some cases, it’s a matter of a specific word broadening until it contains its own opposite. In other cases (which I think are closest to what’s happening with “otherkin”), a word with a broad meaning splits into more specific sub-definitions, which relate to the original meaning but develop separately in parallel until they ultimately contradict one another. And, well, as to how that will end in the long term: how well is the fight to get people to stop using “literally” figuratively going? Does “sanction” mean to permit or penalize?

I don’t know what the answer is. As someone who likes labels, terminology, and clarity, I’m tempted to hope that labels (maybe even ‘magician’ and ‘mage’) can help clean up the overlap between these two very different camps. But I’m doubtful adding more words into the mix will really help this terminological clusterfuck. From the perspective of mental and emotional health, I’m tempted to let the island be an island, and just stick with the community that I’ve found, that fits my needs and

experiences, and clarify on an individual level if someone asks me about my identity and what it means to me. It matters for people just starting to question their identity- there is a lot of contradictory information they would be blasted with. And I know there is a fear among mage kin that fellow 'true mages' would get lost in the weeds. But I found my way, and I'm going to continue presenting as the kind of therian I am, so I can act as that example to others. I don't know what else can be done.

So I guess my final thoughts would be: To any magicians reading this- please try to understand and respect that there really *is* a fundamental difference in experience here, not just a parallel perspective. To my fellow mages- is it really worthwhile to mount a crusade, or more important to lead by example and be a beacon?

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Requested edit: Reminder that all of the above is an extended metaphor. I am talking about otherkin/therians using the idea of "magic" to illustrate my perspective. Which, again, is my own and based on my own experiences, with the intent of being fair, but is neither universal nor perfect.