

Name: Margaery Tyrell

Student ID: 173s5869

201103 Magic and Witchcraft

Classical World Essay (Roman Spell)

28 August 2017

The following spell is one of vengeance in ancient Rome. The cursed is a wealthy Roman, Plotius, who has stolen the wife, Drusa, of the commoner, Albanus, who has cursed him. The spell begins with a lead tablet inscribed, using a stylus or sharp nail, with an image of Plotius and the woman he has stolen. The image shows the pair bound together, pinned to the ground with nails while copulating. The tablet itself is rolled and pierced right through with a nail. Albanus then places the tablet and a large amount of powdered lead in Plotius' personal water supply.

I call upon Mercury, messenger of the Gods, to receive this sheet of lead, that he may assist me in seeking vengeance upon Plotius, who has taken away my heart. Let Plotius know no escape from swift justice. Let his blood run as cold as the water which once flowed through this lead. Let the powder speed the delivery of this curse through his veins to every part of his body. Let all of his parts become cold. Let phallus become long and sharp, as the nail is long and sharp, pinning both Plotius and Drusa to the ground where they lay. Steal away health (CSAD, 2017) and cause the limbs of Plotius to become weak and his body as heavy as lead (Gager, 1992). Let Plotius be unable to lift himself or free himself from ill-gotten embrace. Let Bacchus bring the revels to the house of Plotius, that all may see their foul deed laid

bare. Let me become intoxicated by jealous rage and free-flowing wine. Let Invidia guide my hand and grant me the courage to strike the villains down. Let those who know me bear witness that my vengeance is justified as I take their lives by mine own hand. To Bacchus, I offer all my worldly possessions, such as they are. To Mercury, I hand over the souls of Plotius and Drusa. Invidia may take my soul and do with it as pleases her. My life upon this world is already forfeit.'

Albanus believes he has nothing left to lose. Being taken by a richer man, Drusa has shown no desire for resistance to the advances of Plotius. Albanus cannot compete with the wealth, nor offer Drusa the lifestyle that Plotius enjoys. He also cannot let go of the feelings of betrayal and heartbreak. Albanus feels, after losing his love, he has no reason to go on living and is willing to offer his own soul to the gods for a chance at revenge.

Because Plotius enjoyed a higher social status, Albanus could not simply confront him and dared not seek the aid of a professional. Due to Albanus' financial status, he also could not afford such aid, so must prepare everything himself. As Albanus is low-born, he cannot read or write, so the text is spoken aloud, as opposed to written on the tablet.

Mercury is petitioned for three main reasons. First, for his speed - Albanus wants a fast resolution. If the Gods were to be delayed in their actions, Albanus may lose his nerve. Second, as a messenger to the Gods, Mercury can quickly take the message to the other deities invoked within the curse and entreat with them on Albanus' behalf. Third, for Mercury's role of guiding the spirits of the dead to the underworld (Tales Beyond Belief, 2017), as this is where Albanus sees all the individuals involved ending up.

Bacchus is called upon as the God of drunken festivities to bring the crowd which Albanus wishes to bear witness to his righteous vengeance. Having witnesses, Albanus believes the murders of Plotius and Drusa are justified - many people would have seen Plotius engaged in sexual relations with Albanus' wife - and he will receive milder judgement in the underworld. During the drunken revel, Albanus would be able to partake of 'liquid courage' to steady his nerve for what he must do. As a side-effect, the intoxication of other revellers would slow their reaction time, leaving them less likely to be able to prevent the double homicide.

Invidia, Goddess of jealousy, revenge and retribution, is invoked for the actual act of killing the people who have wronged Albanus. Instead of asking her to perform the act on his behalf in her role of giving people what they deserve (Wigington, 2016), Albanus prefers to act as her vessel so he can feel the satisfaction of justice for himself.

By way of sympathetic magic, the lead has been stolen from the pipes of an aqueduct for the cold water that ran through it. A sharpened nail has been used to symbolise the cursed being nailed to the ground.

Albanus knows that, due to social status, Plotius would have access to better nutrition, sporting, hunting and combat prowess, and the benefits of all-round better health. Therefore, a direct confrontation would be foolhardy, likely resulting in Albanus losing his own life without his version of justice being met. His only viable chance to dish out punishment would be to somehow incapacitate his opponent before attacking him. In the Uley tablet, which I

have referenced, the writer asks Mercury to “take blood and health from the person,” presumably so the cursed would have less quality of life until stolen goods are returned. Albanus expands on this, asking for the cursed to be rendered incapable of action or self-defence.

Because Plotius is a rich man, he has his own personal water supply. This is a convenient and ideal place for Albanus to deposit his defixio. Not only does this ensure that Plotius personally drinks from this source, it also reduces the likelihood of too many innocents being exposed to the contaminated water. Although rich people were just as likely to steal from public aqueducts as the poor (Gill, 2017), Albanus would wish only to harm those who have wronged him. A public water supply would, therefore, not meet the optimum conditions. Depositing the defixio in a public aqueduct would provide no guarantee that Plotius would be personally affected at all.

The use of powdered lead, some of which would be bound to be ingested by Plotius, is the key element (no pun intended) to this curse and how the spell may appear to work. Ingesting enough lead can result in lead poisoning. Common symptoms of lead poisoning include: vomiting, fatigue, muscle weakness (Cafasso, 2016), and even paralysis (Lenntech, 2017). This is exactly what Albanus has asked for in his curse. Hence, it would appear as though the gods have answered his appeal for help, granted his request for incapacitation and taken away his enemy’s health. Although it is unlikely Albanus would be aware of lead poisoning or make any direct connection, it is probable that he would have witnessed or heard about other curses which had similar workings and outcomes.

References:

Cafasso, Jacquelyn (2016), Healthline: *Lead Poisoning*. Retrieved August 28, 2017, from <http://www.healthline.com/health/lead-poisoning#overview1>

CSAD (Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents) (2017). *Curse Tablets from Roman Britain: Uley 80*. Retrieved August 27, 2017, from [http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/4Dlink2/4DACTION/WebRequestCurseTablet?thisLeafNum=1&searchTerm=&searchType=browse&searchField=CurseNumber&thisListPosition=13&displayImage=1&displayLatin=1&displayEnglish=1&lastListPosition=%3C!--4DVAR%20records%20in%20selection\[curse_metadata\]--%3E%20:%20##](http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/4Dlink2/4DACTION/WebRequestCurseTablet?thisLeafNum=1&searchTerm=&searchType=browse&searchField=CurseNumber&thisListPosition=13&displayImage=1&displayLatin=1&displayEnglish=1&lastListPosition=%3C!--4DVAR%20records%20in%20selection[curse_metadata]--%3E%20:%20##) Error # 48

Gager, J.G. (Ed.) (1992), "Introduction", in *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, p. 4.

Gill, N.S. (2017). ThoughtCo. *Aqueducts, Water Supply and Sewers in Ancient Rome*. Retrieved August 28, 2017, from <https://www.thoughtco.com/aqueducts-water-supply-sewers-ancient-rome-117076>

Lenntech, (2017) *Lead (Pb) and Water*. Retrieved August 28, 2017, from

<http://www.lenntech.com/periodic/water/lead/lead-and-water.htm>

Tales Beyond Belief (2017). *Roman Gods List: Mercury*. Retrieved August 28, 2017, from

<http://www.talesbeyondbelief.com/roman-gods/mercury.htm>

Wigington, Patti (2016). ThoughtCo. *Profile of Nemesis*. Retrieved August 28, 2017, from

<https://www.thoughtco.com/nemesis-greek-goddess-of-punishment-2561996>