201103 Magic and Witchcraft.

Assignment 1: Using ancient texts as examples and inspiration, compose a Greek or Roman spell or erotic charm and then provide a detailed commentary on the features of the spell.

To all who would put a binding spell on me [insert own name, son of insert father’s name], I would bind them in return, whether they be man or woman, slave or free, young or old, from within my household or for without it, citizen or immigrant, whether they be envious of my accomplishments or my actions, whether they curse me under your name Hecate the Three Headed, Hermes Restrainer or any other underworld power I shall bind them in return. I invoke you Hecate the Three Headed, to protect me from curses made against my name and I invoke you to make my enemies hands as cold and heavy as this lead so that when they next try to curse [insert own name, son of insert father’s name], may they find themselves unable to write upon their own tablets, and I invoke you Hecate to make their thoughts as scrambled as the words on this tablet whenever they think my name, I invoke you Hecate the Three Headed, to protect me from all curses to my name and to bind in return all who would try to bind me: [insert own name, son of insert father’s name].

This type of curse would have been used during the magical “arms race” that happened during the earlier periods as a way of defending oneself against the anonymously made curses.[[1]](#footnote-2) It could deposited in a number of places such as a well for a more direct link to the underworld and Hecate, or in a crossroads as another form of more direct contact with Hecate, the goddess of crossroads. This spell would be cast by a person who believes they are likely to be targeted by spell and wishes to retaliate against the person trying to bind them. This spell is a mix of protective and prayer-for-justice types of curse, as it is created to protect the spell caster from curses and it is also being used to deliver justice upon those who would try to curse him. The victim of this binding is another spell caster who has obvious malicious intent and therefore may possibly have their own protective spells or amulets, or due to the fact that on most curse tablets the caster remains anonymous, he may not have these protections and thus he will then be vulnerable to this counter-curse.

The magic operates more like a prayer for justice than like a regular binding curse as it cannot name victims: it is conditional, and retributive.[[2]](#footnote-3) It has no *voces mysticae* as they were very uncommon before the imperial period, and this spell was written in the fourth century BC.[[3]](#footnote-4) It features very few deities, only mentioning Hecate and Hermes and then broadly covering all other deities as tablet 169 does in Ogden’s book, naming to Hermes and then “some other power”, indicating the broad range of deities invoked in curse tablets.[[4]](#footnote-5) The rest of the spell focuses on invoking Hecate to protect the caster from the offending binding magic, then binding the caster in return. Hecate is called upon in a similar protective role during the ritual to create an amulet against spells.[[5]](#footnote-6) This spell is similar to prayer’s for justice as they are typically conditional; in this case it is that only when the victim tries to curse the caster they are bound, and because it is left to the gods, specifically Hecate, to determine who cast the curse against the user of this spell.[[6]](#footnote-7) It also features dichotomies which is typical of later curse tablets but was still seen in the iv B.C. shown in example 169 in Ogden’s *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*.[[7]](#footnote-8) These elements were selected because they were thought to make the spell more powerful and this also reduces the need for rituals and oral traditions surrounding the creation of the tablet, allowing the magician to create the curse tablet in a more secretive manner. When the tablet is rolled, it could be rolled around a stone picked from a crossroad with the nail piercing the stone as well as the tablet. This would further strengthen the summoning of Hecate to carry out the curse as Hecate as she is the goddess of crossroads and this is binding a piece of a crossroad within the spell and is thus symbolically binding Hecate into the spell. This bears resemblance to the creation of an amulet against magic as the ritual involves taking “a triangular potsherd from the place where three roads meet”.[[8]](#footnote-9)

The spell differs from a prayer-for-judgement on a few levels, the obvious being that most prayers-for-judgement are about a stolen item whereas this focuses more on cursing people who have tried to curse you. It further distances itself in the way it is written, prayers-for-judgement are typically more supplicating towards the gods, it has been debated as to whether prayers-for-justice should be counted amongst curse tablets at all, whereas the writing in this spell and the language used is still quite demanding of Hecate, like the magician is using her power to perform the spell and getting her to do the work without necessarily having her express permission to do so, prayers-for-justice tend to be far less demanding.[[9]](#footnote-10)

I have used similes that were commonly found in curse tablets like “hands as cold and heavy as this lead” but in an innovative way as I have changed the context of how the simile effects the target: to only be in effect when they are cursing the caster of this spell. I have also added the repetition found in many curse tablets that are also found in many of the later curse tablets but again, given that Ogden’s example 169 features early uses of repetitive dichotomy, I have innovated and have repeatedly invoked Hecate to further strengthen her summoning to perform this curse. These innovations suit the context of the spell as the target of the binding is unknown so one would want to protect from any future curses and negate the current one, which would require a strong magical connection with Hecate, hence the repetition of her name. The spell itself is long because it is modelled off tablet 169 in Ogden’s book, which is all written as one sentence. A reason for this is that because there is no specific target of the spell the caster must take extra in listing as possible variations as to who could possibly be cursing them, this is an integral part of the spell and has had a very direct influence over my own version of it although I have been more specific in how I would bind the target of the counter-curse further blurring the line between whether it is a prayer-for-judgment or a more formal binding curse.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Bibliography:

Ankarloo, Bengt., Clark, Stuart. *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome.* Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

Ogden, Daniel. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook.* New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2002.

1. Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2002), 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. ibid, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*,211*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. ibid, 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ankarloo, Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*,211*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. ibid, 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ankarloo, Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)