Assignment 1

Classical World Essay

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.

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**I bind Raptsoontherfsta, their souls and their deeds and their entire selves.**

**As these words are cold, so may the hearts of Raptsoontherfsta remain cold,**

**and may they feel no joy until they attend my performance.**

*To be inscribed on a flat leaden tablet in the shape of a sexless human figure.*

*To be buried under or near the seating area of the theatre in which a client’s upcoming performance is to take place.*

*At the time of deposition, the tablet is to be folded and pierced with a nail, while orally invoking Hermes the Restrainer – ‘I bind Raptsoontherfstra before Hermes the Restrainer’.*

The purpose of this *defixio* is to attract wealthy patrons of the arts to a poet’s performance. This performance is imagined to have taken place at an ancient Greek festival, during which poets competed against one another. However, although *defixiones* were traditionally used in this context to bind and hinder competitors (Gager, 1992, p. 44), I have instead adapted their purpose to target a specific subset of audience members. My aim was to create a *defixio* on behalf of a client who, valuing poetry and the spirit of fair competition, did not wish to unduly influence the outcome of an upcoming competition. However, he *did* wish to safeguard his own financial future by ensuring that a large number of wealthy patrons were able to see his poetry being performed, and judge the worth of his work for themselves. This spell is imagined to have been commissioned at a time in which wealthy patrons paying for poetry had become commonplace – perhaps several decades after the death of Simonides, who was considered the first ancient Greek poet to be directly paid for ownership of his poetry (von Reden, 1995, p. 45).

Theoretically commissioned in the early 4th century BCE, this *defixio* – as was common at this time – lacks the wordplay, *voces mysticae*, ornamentation, and elaborate invocations of multiple supernatural entities prevalent in many later examples (Ogden, 2002, p. 210). While a direct binding begins the written portion of the spell, the invocation of a god – in this case an aspect of Hermes named the Restrainer, commonly invoked in binding spells (Gager, 1992, p. 86) – remains part of the ritual component and is spoken orally, a hallmark of early *defixiones* (Gager, 1992, p. 5). The name of the target has been scrambled; a tactic thought to represent the manner in which the targets’ mind would be scrambled by the spell’s effect (Gager, 1992, p. 91). This spell is directed at an unnamed multitude – ‘patrons of the arts’, more specifically. There are several ancient examples of binding spells in which a target’s unnamed associates are included, i.e. “and his young women” (Gager, 1992, p. 164) or “all the choral directors and assistant choral directors” (Gager, 1992, p. 49) – in combination with the precedent of prayers-for-justice spells (often by necessity) not specifically naming their targets (Ogden, 2002, p. 219), I believe I am justified in deviating from the norm to target a subset of the population, rather than naming specific individuals. The phrase “their deeds, their souls and their entire selves” (Gager, 1992, p. 91) has been transcribed directly from an ancient *defixio* – as “the language of *defixiones* is highly formulaic” (Gager, 1992, p. 13), it is likely that specific phrases like this would be repeated across many individual spells. Finally, I have employed the ‘as X, so Y’ form of analogy common in *defixiones* (Gager, 1992, p. 13), asking that the targets’ hearts remain as cold as the words of the spell (inscribed on cold lead) – I have not wished physical violence or lasting harm on the targets, but have aimed instead to fill them with a pervasive sense of joylessness, assuming that joy and entertainment are of immense personal value to those who patronise the arts.

This binding spell is to be inscribed on lead, a common material in the creation of *defixiones*. The lead is to be shaped into a flat tablet in the shape of a sexless human figure, and the text of the spell inscribed on this same figure, as in an ancient example (Gager, 1992, p. 86). Whereas this example was thought to symbolise a female target, my *defixio* employs such ambiguity intentionally – as the spell targets a broad subset of the population, the figure’s sex is left indeterminate. Including a human figure as part of the ritual is presumably intended to work via imitative magic; as the figure symbolises the target of the spell, actions taken upon the figure are intended to affect the target. The tablet is to be buried at or near the seating area of a theatre – this is in keeping with examples of *defixiones* placed on stadium floors ahead of upcoming races (Gager, 1992, p. 18), though as the *audience* is being targeted in my *defixio* the seating area seemed a more appropriate location than the performance area. Folding the figure and piercing it with a nail is intended to strengthen the spell’s effect through “additional symbolic acts of twisting and restraint” (Ogden, 2002, p. 210). Specifically folding and piercing a tablet in the shape of a human figure could also be seen as strengthening the spell – such seemingly violent actions toward a figurine were often more symbolic of an attempt to attract the target’s attention (Gager, 1992, p. 81). By performing the folding, piercing and deposition of the *defixio* at the same time as invoking Hermes the Restrainer, the intent is to attract the god’s attention in a dramatic manner. As many ritual elements of this spell are intended to take place in a theatre, these elements would be handled either by the practitioner responsible for creating the spell, or by someone in their employ – handling of the riskier elements of *defixiones* may have been part of the services provided to a client (Gager, 1992, p. 20).

Though my primary intent was to fit this *defixio* into an ancient context and draw upon ancient examples, I also approached its creation with a secondary purpose. Through keeping language in the spell intentionally vague, this spell is (with one small adjustment) able to adapt to a more modern context as well – attracting viewers to a client’s Youtube video. Burying the tablet in a theatre would be less than ideal in this context, but by hiding it inside a computer case or burying it near an internet cable, the spell could be adapted to this alternate purpose. In today’s world, anyone viewing a Youtube video could be considered a ‘patron of the arts’, as advertising revenue is often tied to the number of times a video is viewed. Similarly, ‘attend my performance’ could refer to either watching a video, or attending a live performance of poetry.

In summary, I have modelled this *defixio* on ancient examples, while in some cases adapting their features to slightly different purposes. While I have also approached the creation of the spell with the secondary intent of making it fit into a modern context without too much alteration, I feel that it fits primarily into a clearly defined ancient context, and comprises both written and ritual components representative of early examples of ancient Greek *defixiones*.

References

Gager, J. G. (1992). Curse tablets and binding spells from the ancient world. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ogden, D. (2002). Magic, witchcraft and ghosts in the Greek and Roman worlds: A sourcebook. Oxford: Oxford University Press

von Reden, S. (1995). Deceptive readings: Poetry and its value reconsidered. The Classical Quarterly, 45(1), 30-50.