Classical World Essay 2

29/08/2017

201.103 Magic and Witchcraft

Spoken Incantation

I invoke the powers of the underworld, Hermes of the underworld and Persephone of the underworld, let X be bound in your presence.

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Ritual Element

Burning of a piece of X’s Ousia while speaking the spell place ashes in box with figure of X made of clay. Both the tablet and the figurine should be placed together.

Tablet Inscription

I send you to X daughter of Y, to bring her to me. Make her heart cold and passionless to those who are not me as these words of lead are cold and passionless, may she think only of me, love only me, desire only me. I invoke you by the names Tetrax, Lix, Askion burn her stomach, burn her heart, burn her brain till she comes to me and loves only me.

This spell begins with an oral incantation, invoking the powers of Hermes and Persephone to bind X. The phrase is spoken 3 times, 3 being a significant and powerful number in Greek magic and was thought to enhance the spell and it’s effectiveness. This repetition of a phrase can be seen in another binding spell from the 3rd century that asks in repetition “let… be bound in the presence of Hermes in the underworld, and of Hekate in the underworld” (Eidinow, 2007) and many others take a similar format. The way this incantation is spoken in a prayer formula, invoking the power of the gods in a similar way to prayer, demonstrates how magic and religion overlapped in the classical world with some magic growing out from religious rituals.

The incantation invokes the powers of Hermes and Persephone, both with their connections to the underworld. Hermes was a messenger to the gods, travelling between the underworld and the living world for the gods, able to deliver the curses to the underworld and played a significant part in the resulting effectiveness of the curse. Persephone was the wife of Hades and is queen of the underworld but is split between the two worlds, like the goddess Hekate, by her connection to her mother Demeter who is the goddess of fertility on earth. These are two roles that conflict but also go hand in hand which is what makes both her and Hekate similarly significant in Greek magic in their ability to be both part of the natural world and the supernatural.

During the incantation a piece of X’s Ousia- essence- is burnt. Ousia is the essence of someone, and could be anything that was connected with the person. This could be hair, nail clippings, even a piece of cloth from their clothing. The act of then burning this piece of Ousia resembles an act of contagious magic that worked on the principle that if the Ousia had been in contact with X then you can affect X with this material. The intention of burning the Ousia is not to harm X, but to influence her with the symbolic burning of her essence to make her feel love burning inside her. This technique in Greek magic of using heat against a person’s essence in a spell can be seen in a spell from the Greek Magical Papyri which asks for a pin to be dipped in the blood of the victim of the spell to be heated to cause “ the burning sensations associated with desire to erupt” (Deadrick, 2011). The use of Ousia in this spell is to intensify the power of the magic to ensure its’ effectiveness in binding X.

After the essence has been burnt the ashes are placed in a small box with a figurine of X made of clay and inscribed with their name, giving the figurine it’s power. Imitative magic like this utilised the resemblance of one thing and another, and by performing something on one thing could cause a reaction in the other. The methodology behind the use of figurines in spells like this was the figurines were used to represent the person the curse was directed toward, implying that what was inflicted or depicted upon the figurine was intended towards the person being represented. These were often aggressive representations of the person, the figurines often being depicted bound or mutilated, with body parts ripped off or pins stuck in various places with the intention to cause the person pain and suffering. Despite these gruesome depictions, these did not necessarily mean that the person casting the spell wanted them to die, only to suffer or cause discomfort until they yield to the person who cast the spell. The figurines were also sometimes placed in coffin-like boxes; this also does not mean to represent the death of the person. By placing the figurine in the box Z, the caster of this spell, confines it and binds it, representing the binding they wish to inflict on his love X.

As well as the oral incantation it was then typical for a written element of a spell to be inscribed onto a lead tablet, which is then rolled, pierced with a nail, and placed in an appropriate place. The place in which the tablet is placed after the ritual is significant in how powerful the spell then be. These places could be water or wells which were believed to interact with the underworld so placing the tablet here would make it more likely for the underworld powers to receive the spell. They could also be placed in the grave of the restless dead. These were people who died before their time, unable to carry out their fate after their life was cut short. These were usually young people, or people who died violently or who were murdered. The restless dead were able to move between the underworld and the living world and were often utilised in Greek magic for rituals like necromancy and soothsayers. The restless dead were then used to deliver spells to the underworld powers so they could then act upon the spell. They could also be placed in a location relevant to the subject of the spell, for example they could be buried in the garden of the person whom they are casting this spell or curse against.

In this inscription Y asks the divine powers to “Make her [X] heart cold and passionless… as these words are cold and passionless”. This is a common feature of spells like this where the victim of the spell is asked to take on the characteristics of something else and can be seen in another spell from the 3rd century which asks “just as this lead is useless, in the same way may the words and deeds of those inscribed here be useless” (Eidinow, 2007). This is another method in which magicians utilised the powers of imitative magic connecting “the ritualistic elements and the desired outcome in reality” as Alicia Deadrick (2011) states.

The use of magic in ancient Greece and Rome was widespread through society and longstanding. Spells like this were used by all social classes, from the educated and aristocratic to the poor, and gave people comfort in the belief of having control over their own lives. Although the practicing of magic was later criminalised this only further demonstrates the belief that magic was effective, and by putting power in the hands of all people it threatened the structures of society and authority.

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