I CONSIGN HER WRETCHED WALK, HER WORDS, DEEDS, AND EVIL TALK:

EROTIC MAGIC AND WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT

GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

A THESIS IN
History

Presented to the Faculty of the University of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

by

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B.A., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2009

Kansas City, Missouri
2013
Magic in the ancient Greco-Roman world has only recently begun to receive attention from historians. Thousands of curses, spells, and remnants of magical practices prior to widespread Christianity have been overlooked in the past mainly because they were seen as unimportant, or at least not appropriate as the focus of proper scholarship. Changing methodologies in history over the past fifty years have allowed scholars to rethink these magical sources. Curses and spells are now seen as significant and vital to understanding the mindset in ancient societies clustered around the Mediterranean.

Most scholars who have recently begun to focus on magical sources still retain traditional methods of thinking about the ancient Greeks and Romans as purely rational, which hinders their interpretations of the at times irrational and always emotional sources at hand. By using modern theories of feminism, mentalities, and anthropology from outside of
the usual conservative framework, magical sources can be utilized to reveal a more complex relationship between mortals and their gods, and mainly between men and women.

One of the most interesting categories of ancient magic involves erotic desire in sexual relationships. Both men and women had the option to create erotic magic in order to arouse sexual attraction in their desired mates. The same type of magic could also be used to separate couples engaged in a romantic relationship, create affairs, or even bring sickness and death to the unknowing victims. At the same time as “rational” philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome were praising stoicism and conventional morality, thousands of magical tools were readily available to whomever could obtain the monetary funds to purchase them.

Female-authored erotic magic can be used to further the argument that ancient women expressed agency. Since the feminist movements in 1960’s America, scholars have attempted to give a voice to the mostly silent majority of ancient women in Western society. In this thesis, I will attempt to use new methodologies to give ancient women not only voices, but also authentic expressions of emotional and sexual desires through erotic magic.
APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “I Consign her Wretched Walk, her Words, Deeds, and Evil Talk: Erotic Magic and Women in the Ancient Greco-Roman World,” presented by Kathryn Jean Scheiding, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank a few people who have made this process possible. For all of my professors from whom I have had the privilege of learning at this university over the past seven years: thank you. It was a journey for me to realize that the path I am most suited for is history. Along with academic growth, the exceptional professors, fellow colleagues, and students I have worked with here at UMKC have pushed me to realize my potential and love for learning, writing, and teaching.

Mainly, I would like to thank my mentor and advisor, Dr. Linda Mitchell. She has guided me over the past five years in both my undergraduate and graduate career while encouraging me to become a more confident and passionate writer. Her persistence for excellence has pushed me and challenged me for the better. Dr. Mitchell, thank you for being a dedicated advisor, supportive mentor, and a compassionate friend.

I would not have been able to complete my Master’s degree without the consistent support from my soon-to-be husband, Aaron Maisch. Thank you for putting up with my late-night classes, clustered bookshelves, and rants about magic throughout the last two years. You are my rock. Your effortless way of knowing when I need help balancing school, work, and life has kept me going. I could never thank you enough.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Magic in the ancient Greco-Roman world has only recently begun to receive attention from historians. Thousands of curses, spells, and remnants of magical practices prior to widespread Christianity have been overlooked in the past mainly because they were seen as unimportant, or at least not appropriate as the focus of proper scholarship. Changing methodologies in history over the past fifty years have allowed scholars to rethink these magical sources. Curses and spells are now seen as significant and vital to understanding the mindset in ancient societies clustered around the Mediterranean.

Most scholars who have recently begun to focus on magical sources still retain traditional methods of thinking about the ancient Greeks and Romans as purely rational, which hinders their interpretations of the at times irrational and always emotional sources at hand. By using modern theories of feminism, mentalities, and anthropology from outside of the usual conservative framework, magical sources can be utilized to reveal a more complex relationship between mortals and their gods, and mainly between men and women.

One of the most interesting categories of ancient magic involves erotic desire in sexual relationships. Both men and women had the option to create erotic magic in order to arouse sexual attraction in their desired mates. The same type of magic could also be used to separate couples in romantic relationships, create affairs, or even bring sickness and death to the unknowing victims. At the same time as “rational” philosophers of ancient Greece and
Rome were praising stoicism and conventional morality, thousands of magical tools were readily available to whomever could obtain the monetary funds to purchase them.

A quote from John G. Gager in his sourcebook of curse tablets and spells from the ancient world correctly sums up the attitude scholars should have about ancient magic. “The truth is that it made little difference who you were – man or woman; Greek, Roman, Jew, or Christian; commoner or aristocrat; unlettered peasant or wise philosopher. In matters of the heart, as in many other affairs of daily life, anyone could play the role of client or target. For there was no one who did not fear the power of defixiones.”¹ Gager refers to a quote from Roman author, Pliny the Elder (23 CE – 79 CE) in his first century CE *Natural History*, a respected source for traditional historians and classicists, “There is no one who does not fear to be spellbound by curse tablets.”² Although Pliny condemned magic throughout his *Natural History*, some scholars, like Gager, argue that he actually believed in the magic he portrayed as fraudulent.³ This example should be seen as representative of other Greek and Roman writers who mention magical practices of others. The “rational” authors must have believed in some aspect of the magical practices, or they would not be worthy of condemnation.

The inclusion of women in almost every instance of erotic magic reveals another benefit of studying magic. Magical sources allow scholars to obtain information about women, gender, and sexuality in the ancient world. Most of the written sources of erotic magic were created by a male agent against a female victim, yet in the few examples of

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female clients of erotic magic women use the exact same templates as men. Of the roughly eighty known erotic curse tablets, seventy were male-authored. Only nine curse tablets and spells have been found where the roles were reversed and a woman created a tablet to use against a man or another woman in matters of love and relationships. Although the exceptions to the norm are very interesting, they do not represent the majority of erotic magic like classical literature implies. Female-authored erotic magic can be used to further the argument that ancient women expressed agency. Since the feminist movements in 1960’s America, scholars have attempted to give a voice to the mostly silent majority of women in ancient Western society. In this thesis, I will use new methodologies focused on women and culture to give ancient women not only voices, but also authentic expressions of emotions and sexual desires through their use of erotic magic.

**Historiography of the Discrepancy Between Women’s Actual Use of Magic and their Portrayal in Literature**

Erotic magic is infrequently referenced in more general works on ancient history, if the topic is even mentioned at all. In Kirk Ormand’s very recent work titled *Controlling Desires: Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2009), out of the entire work erotic magic briefly is mentioned in only five pages. Ormand cites the ever-present literary example of Theocritus’s character from his third-century BCE poem, *Idylls 2*. Ormand uses the character of Simaetha, a witch, and her elaborate magical ritual to retrieve her absent lover as the token

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example of female-authored erotic magic.\textsuperscript{5} The thousands of spells and curses that involve erotic desire and sexual relationships seem to be forgotten or not seen as important, since they not are even discussed other than the fact that most were created by men.\textsuperscript{6} Ormand briefly acknowledges the question of why literature that involves women using magic did not follow the magical evidence and simply states that “The reason for this inversion of actual practice is not entirely clear, but it reflects both fantasy about and a fear of women’s sexual desires.”\textsuperscript{7} He then proceeds to discuss the interesting aspects of Theocritus’s poem and fictional characters for the remainder of the five-page section on magic and its association with sexuality.

The reality versus literature discrepancy has not yet been sufficiently studied or researched by scholars, partially because ancient women and magic are such new topics in history, but also because some scholars are either ambivalent or actively resisting the ever-growing importance of ancient women. These barriers, coupled with a homophobic mindset against John J. Winkler, the student of Michel Foucault, who originated the thesis on the discrepancy between reality and classic literature, have seriously hindered the current discussion on erotic magic and women.

John J. Winkler, an American classicist, was the first scholar to question why there was such a difference between reality and literature in the portrayal of ancient women’s use


\textsuperscript{7} Ormand, \textit{Controlling Desires}, 110.
of erotic magic in his book, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (1990). He also offers a few suggestions as to why there is little evidence of women-authored erotic curse tablets. There are only about fifteen pages in his book specifically about ancient erotic magic, but the questions he poses are the foundations of my thesis.

Winkler’s quick response to why ancient women might not have used erotic curse tablets seems believable. He claims that women left little tangible evidence of their erotic magic compared to their male counterparts.\(^8\) Also, an ancient Greek woman would have been more heavily guarded than a man if her lovesick disease were discovered. The involved family would protect the woman in order to prevent her desperate use of erotic magic. It would have been difficult for young women to approach public male professional scribes, and they would have lacked necessary finances needed to purchase the desired magic.\(^9\)

Winkler focuses on the idea that in ancient Greek culture, honor and shame were critical components to uphold a family’s reputation. Men were responsible to maintain and increase honor within the family, while women were associated with minimizing shame brought on the family at the women’s expense.\(^{10}\) It is almost as if the women were expected to fail and bring shame upon their families. The male relatives in a Greek family would have carefully watched the women, especially young maidens, in an attempt to make sure their good reputation was intact. Winkler discusses the dual aspects of honor and shame as matter

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\(^9\) Ibid., 90.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 74.
of fact, but clearly misguided, and he is critical of modern connections to this idea. He makes it clear that he does not agree with the overly patriarchal components of ancient Greek society that degraded women.

The short reasoning that Winkler provides in response to the question of why female characters are more often associated with erotic magic in literature than male characters involves transference and denial. Winkler states that the most common clients of erotic curse tablets were young men, who were desperate for young, unattainable maidens to return their sexual desires. Ancient Greek men felt ashamed for succumbing to magical practices as a tactic to rid themselves of their affliction of passion. In order to rid this weakness from men, ancient male authors transferred the “weak,” and therefore “feminine,” behavior of using magic to female characters in imaginative literature, rather than creating an exact reflection of reality. The authors were collectively saying that women used magic and were weak, instead of admitting the dishonorable habits of young men, who actually purchased erotic curses.

In his sourcebook of ancient magic, American scholar of religious studies, John G. Gager briefly mentions Winkler’s thesis and comments on the issue of magical women in literature and reality. In *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (1992), Gager includes about 170 examples of magical evidence found throughout the Mediterranean region: only 19 sources involve erotic magic. In his chapter dedicated to sex, love, and marriage Gager somewhat agrees with Winkler’s observations. He affirms that in classical

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11 Ibid., 88.

12 Ibid., 90.
literature “it is primarily women who resort to ritual means in order to charm the targets of their passion.”\(^\text{13}\) Rather than accepting Winkler’s belief that ancient women were prevented from obtaining erotic curse tablets because they were heavily guarded, Gager suggests that women had more freedom, both in the public realm of magicians and with monetary funds, since there are some examples of women using erotic curse tablets.

Even though Gager cites literary representations of female characters using masculine curses in his rebuttal of Winkler, he does so mainly to include all examples of curses and spells in the ancient world.\(^\text{14}\) Gager does not interpret the imaginative literary examples as comparable to actual female-authored magic. Rather than denying Winkler’s thesis, which separates magical female characters from the actual erotic magical practices of women, Gager only attempts to show scholars how widely accepted magic was in the ancient world by offering every instance of curses and spells, regardless of the genre of the source.

In a general interpretation of the ancient sources, Gager affirms that curse tablets should not be read literally by modern scholars attempting to analyze them.\(^\text{15}\) The agent did not actually want the object of his desire to be tortured until she succumbed to his sexual needs. The aggressive, and at times violent, language within erotic curses was transferred from the legal and judicial curses from which the erotic tablets originated. Men were used to using the same language in those types of competitive arenas, and sexual desires were incorporated into the existing system. Gager sees the erotic curses and spells as aggressive.

\(^{13}\) Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 79.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 80.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 82.
because of their legal predecessors, not because of overtly violent sexual emotions. This aspect could make female-authored erotic magic appear more acceptable to traditional scholars, since the curses would not be seen as an aggressive display of female agents’ sexual desires, but rather predetermined templates for any aspect of creating or ending a sexual union.

Gager’s outlook on magic mentioned in my introduction confirms that he believes every person in the ancient world -- nearly ninety-nine percent of the ancient population -- believed in the power of curse tablets.\textsuperscript{16} This places him outside of the traditional view of classicists and ancient historians, who deny any hints of irrational behavior in ancient Greece and Rome. He stresses the importance of ancient magic and rightfully acknowledges Winkler and his unfinished theory on gender and magic as expressed through literature. Gager agrees with the misrepresentation of women’s magical practices that Winkler highlights, and hints at the importance of the continued discussion of gender, magic, and classic imagined literature.

In the 1997 English translation of his book, \textit{Magic in the Ancient World}, French classicist Fritz Graf focuses on magicians and magical practices throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.\textsuperscript{17} What is curious is that Graf presents Winkler’s theory on women’s magical practices in reality versus their representation in literature as his own unique idea. In reference to the thesis, Graf claims, “It remains to tackle a question that has not yet been mentioned.”\textsuperscript{18} There is no acknowledgement of Winkler or his ideas on the precise set of

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 244.

\textsuperscript{17} Graf originally published his work in French in 1994.

questions Graf includes. Winkler’s main work on the topic is not even referenced in Graf’s
bibliography.

After neglecting the creator of the theory, Graf agrees with a component of Winkler’s
thesis: the concept that literary representations of ancient magical women did not match
actual practices. He also agrees that in ancient Greece young men commissioned curse tablets
against young, protected women.\textsuperscript{19} Graf takes the argument further by suggesting that the
ultimate goal of erotic curse tablets was not sexual. The curses were tools used by young men
in order to increase their chances of marrying maidens with good reputations and therefore
furthering their social advancement. Other scholars have questioned this thesis because there
are only a few examples of curses and spells that specifically mention a permanent union.\textsuperscript{20}
Graf mentions only one specific tablet that might suggest a desire for a permanent union
before he insists that men tried to obtain sexual relationships with women for the purpose of
marriage, not an affair.\textsuperscript{21}

Graf’s perspective diminishes the emotions and desires of the clients and victims
involved in the curses. Ultimately, his main argument about curse tablets is that they all
revolve around aspects of competition.\textsuperscript{22} This position eliminates the passion and sexual
desires that were involved in erotic magic. The emotions of the agent and victim involved are

\textsuperscript{19} Graf, 	extit{Magic}, 186.

\textsuperscript{20} See, for example, Matthew W. Dickie, “Who Practised Love-Magic in Classical Antiquity

\textsuperscript{21} Graf, 	extit{Magic}, 186.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 185.
completely ignored. Graf does not think the curses were created because of desires, but instead reduces them to commodities that were seen as necessary in the ancient world in order for a man to remain competitive. The complex emotions of lust, jealousy, passion, scorn, or romantic love that the agent of the curse might have experienced are completely removed from consideration. An irrational, complicated process of erotic magic involving spoken spells, purchased hidden curse tablets, professional magicians and scribes, and rituals requiring specific magical utterances of secret names of the gods is reduced to a strictly rational need for the elimination of competition. It is as if Graf is implying that even though ancient men participated in irrational magic, it was justified by purely rational intent.

In response to Winkler’s second question of why there is a discrepancy between literature and reality of woman-authored erotic curses, Graf suggests that the male authors deliberately chose to make the magical characters female in order to show their disapproval of the men who were actually using such magic.\(^{23}\) The authors of imaginative literature did not think that women used such magic; they knew that men commissioned such curses and the authors wanted to warn men against using feminine magical tactics.\(^{24}\) For some unexplained reason, even though Graf acknowledges that Greeks viewed curse tablets as acceptable within other types of competition, such as legal, judicial, or business dealings, Graf believes Greek male authors did not agree with the necessity of erotic curse tablets. He suggests that the playwrights used this tactic so that men in the audience would see the feminine qualities and weakness of erotic magic, and the authors were attempting to persuade

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young men to stop actively engaging in such unfitting behavior. Graf claims that in ancient
Greece and Rome, societies from which the imagined literature he cites was created, the
belief was, “a true man does not need erotic magic – the only male sorcerers are those funny
foreign specialists.” Clearly, Graf is of the opinion that no educated, rational Greco-Roman
male would acceptably use erotic magic. This traditional view overwhelms his interpretation
of the magical sources and stifle progress in the specific topic of erotic and female-authored
magic.

Graf’s purely rational interpretation of all magical curse tablets is the first example
shown here of a possible pitfall of traditional classicists and their views on classical Greek
and Roman cultures. By maintaining that Greek and Roman men created erotic magic for
purely rational, non emotion-driven motives of good marriages and increased social standing,
not only is Graf stripping the erotic tablets of sexual desire, he is also denying the emotions
of the clients of such magic. He admits that his theory becomes problematic when discussing
erotic magic practiced by women against men, and the few cases of homosexual erotic
magic.26 There are about ten female-authored erotic curse tablets against men, and two
incidences of homosexual erotic curses between two men, as well as two more curses that
exhibit sexual attraction between two women.27 In these cases, Graf admits that clients of
magic could possibly have felt overwhelming feelings of sexual desire for their victims, even
though the struggle to obtain a higher social standing was “very often an important aspect of


26 Ibid., 188.

27 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 80. See also Winkler, *Constraints of Desire*, 90.
the problem."²⁸ Graf allows for emotional motives only in the cases that involve female agency and homosexual relationships. Among the other hundreds of erotic curse tablets and spells that men created, he still cites rational causes as the main motivation.

Furthermore, Graf barely mentions women in his description of ancient magic. In the index of his work, women are listed on only seven pages throughout his book dedicated to all magic in the ancient world.²⁹ Even more telling, all except two pages refer to female characters in classic literature rather than authentic women. The only discussion Graf has on female-authored erotic magic is that the few existing cases complicate his rational argument. Women are overwhelmingly dismissed, which is a major problem among a few of the scholars discussed below, and among a majority of ancient historians and classicists.

After Winkler’s 1990 work on ancient magic, there has been more discussion of Greek and Roman magical sources, with another scholar focusing specifically on the Egyptian components in ancient magic. In British Egyptologist Dominic Montserrat’s work, Sex and Society in Græco-Roman Egypt (1996), there is more emphasis on the spells from the PGM than curse tablets from throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. Montserrat stresses the importance of separating Greece and Rome from Egypt, where a unique Egyptian culture developed from Greco-Roman influences. He further emphasizes this distinction when discussing Winkler and his thesis.³⁰ Montserrat’s only main critique against Winkler is that he over-generalizes the degree to which identical magic was practiced in various regions

²⁸ Graf, Magic, 189.

²⁹ Ibid., 313.

³⁰ Dominic Montserrat, Sex and Society in Græco-Roman Egypt (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 188.
of the ancient world. Winkler focused too heavily on ancient Greek society, with his imagery of protected young maidens alongside spells from the *PGM*, which represented a uniquely Egyptian culture centuries after young Greek maidens needed to be protected from lovesick young men.\(^{31}\)

Only two pages of Montserrat’s work mention Winkler’s thesis at all, but components of Winkler’s theory are evident. Montserrat agrees that erotic binding spells were mainly male-authored and aimed against women, but includes that there are examples where women used the exact same spells against men.\(^{32}\) In contrast to Winkler’s assertion that literature and magical evidence involving women were too separate to compare, Montserrat includes spells and imaginative literary sources together and uses them simultaneously. This shows that, while Montserrat does not agree with Winkler’s scope, he believes that the depictions of women in literature were accurate to life and closely mimicked in the Greco-Roman Egyptian spells from the *PGM* that scholars rely on so heavily to obtain a more complete picture of women and the phenomenon of magic in the ancient world.

In Christopher A. Faraone’s work, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (1999), Winkler’s thesis is present through most of the chapters, but never specifically mentioned. It is curious that Faraone does not comment on Winkler’s theory, since Winkler was Faraone’s favorite teacher, and the first scholar Faraone thanks in his acknowledgements.\(^{33}\) It is clear that Faraone does not see the discrepancy between reality and literature in women’s use of erotic

\(^{31}\) Montserrat, *Sex and Society*, 189.

\(^{32}\) Montserrat, *Sex and Society*, 187.

magic, because of his odd mixture of curse tablets, legal documents, and mainly spells from
the \textit{PGM} alongside literary sources that depict magical female characters. In fact, Faraone
introduces his book with an imagined conversation between Socrates and a courtesan,
Theodote, written by Xenophon, that portrays erotic magic as playful, and then transcribes
three violent erotic curse tablets in order to show contrasting views on erotic magic in ancient
Greece.\footnote{Faraone, \textit{AGLM}, 1.} Even after beginning his discussion by admitting the discrepancies between
literature and the authentic practice of erotic magic, Faraone relies heavily on magical female
characters to show the types of magic women typically utilized. He claims that his focus on
literary characters is justified because “art does imitate life.”\footnote{Ibid., 38.} Faraone argues that some of
the main examples of erotic magic in literature contain similar magical practices as those
described in spells found in the \textit{PGM}, and because of this, the literature can be seen as
further examples of authentic magical rituals. Winkler would completely disagree with the
equal treatment of erotic curses and spells with female characters in imaginative literature.

Faraone cites Winkler frequently while discussing gender constructs in ancient Greek
magic, yet Winkler’s theory on which I am focusing is not mentioned. Faraone creates a
chart in order to show the strict differences between his bipolar view on gendered magic:
men generally used spells for inducing \textit{erôs} (erotic passion) in women, while women
typically used spells for inducing \textit{philia} (increased affection) in male victims.\footnote{Ibid., 27.} There is a
section of the chart where “typical users” are listed. Under spells for increased affection,
Faraone lists “wives or social inferiors,” and the typical users for spells to induce erotic passion are “men, courtesans, or whores.” This distinct separation of respectable women from prostitutes, courtesans, and whores is significant to Faraone’s argument throughout the book. Respectable women are shown generally to use love charms, potions, and other passive forms of magic in order to make their husbands love them more, while Greek men are shown to use violently-worded erotic magic. The exceptions to this rule, which Faraone highlights in his last chapter, are courtesans who use “masculine” erotic magic because they were in the “active” role in their sexual relationships with men since they actively sought new clients.

All of the evidence Faraone provides that might suggest courtesans engaged in erotic magic is from literary sources. This goes against Winkler’s theory, and shows that Faraone does not agree with the need to separate the types of evidence in order to obtain a more clear and accurate image of magical women in the ancient world.

Even though Winkler’s two-part thesis is relatively new and has yet to be fully investigated, Matthew W. Dickie wrote an article specifically to criticize the thesis and dismiss its importance. In his article, “Who Practised Love-Magic in Classical Antiquity and in the Late Roman World?” (2000) Dickie briefly mentions Graf, who favored Winkler’s ideas, before he offers evidence in an attempt to systematically tear down both aspects of Winkler’s thesis. Dickie claims there are five main components of the thesis that need to be scrutinized: (i) the spells in the PGM and similar magical handbooks assume that men will be the clients of erotic magic; (ii) erotic curse tablets were cast by men and aimed at women;

37 Ibid., 28.

38 Ibid., 146-160.
(iii) guarded maidens were the targets of erotic magic; (iv) male clients of erotic magic were motivated by an outcome of either sexual favors or a good marriage; 39 (v) in literature women are almost exclusively portrayed engaging in love magic. 40 Dickie is basing his interpretation of Winkler’s thesis from one paragraph in Winkler’s book:

There are two contrasts to be drawn. First, in literature lovesick clients are usually female and the ritual experts whose help they seek in learning how to counteract or fulfill erôs are usually male, whereas the prescription papyri and tablets are predominantly composed by (or on behalf of) men in pursuit of women. The generic rites in manuals, too, regularly and unselfconsciously assume that the client will be a man aiming at a woman. The second contrast is that poetry and novels are fascinated by the powerful crone, often in groups like Macbeth’s weird sisters. Yet gangs of ugly women raiding cemeteries and swooping down on handsome young men did not figure in the papyri or tablets. In real life the persons famous for their ‘magical’ powers and knowledge are regularly men, not women. 41

The purpose of Dickie’s article was to analyze and critique Winkler’s brief mention of a thesis by breaking the discussion into the five components mentioned above. In order to determine if Dickie’s critique was fair and valid, each point should be looked at individually.

After going through the first four components, Dickie concludes: the authors of spell books used in erotic magic did not necessarily assume a man would be the agent; there is material evidence of women engaging in erotic magic; women may also have used magic to increase or diminish business of fellow prostitutes, which could be included in erotic magic; 42 existing curse tablets do not provide evidence that the agents were young men

39 Graf, not Winkler, added the proposed outcome of securing a good marriage.


41 Winkler, Constraints of Desire, 90. Winkler’s original citations within the quote have been omitted.

unable to access maidens or men attempting to obtain a good marriage; erotic magic, broadly understood, was practiced “just as much by women as by men.”\textsuperscript{43}

In Dickie’s view, each of the first four points he attributed to Winkler can be disproved. However, his interpretation of Winkler’s thesis seems flawed. Dickie makes Winkler’s views absolute, when the original language used shows that he was more tolerant and aware of exceptions. For example, Winkler states that “predominantly” men composed erotic tablets and spells to use against women; clearly, Winkler is not denying any evidence of woman-authored erotic curses by making this statement. He cites eight spells and curses created by women in order to clarify that there are examples of women as agents in erotic magic. His point is that most erotic magic was created by men -- not all; most. Dickie agrees with this aspect of the theory, but because Dickie altered Winkler’s original language to a definitive statement, “erotic \textit{defixiones} were cast by men and aimed at women,” he is claiming that Winkler’s statement is no longer valid because of the few curse tablets and spells he mentions that are attributed to female authors. Significantly, six of the seven erotic spells and curses with female agents that Dickie mentions were previously cited by Winkler as exceptions to the norm. The other five tablets used as evidence in no way suggest female authorship, but Dickie assumes the authors were female prostitutes or courtesans who attempted to put an end to the sexual unions between male clients and competing female

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 577.
prostitutes. He cites economic competition as the motive behind curse tablets directed against “prostitutes.”

Winkler’s point, that most erotic curses and spells were male-authored and directed at women, is still valid even after Dickie’s misinterpretation of Winkler’s statement. This means that the evidence provided by Dickie for his first and second components does not affect Winkler’s thesis: Dickie’s findings in no way take away from its validity and importance.

The third and fourth components of Dickie’s thesis are simply not relevant to Winkler’s original statement. The idea that young men attempted to use erotic magic in order to obtain access to heavily guarded maidens in ancient Greek society is admittedly a bit melodramatic. Winkler was trying to emphasize his theory about transfer and denial of intense sexual desires. The young men felt sexual desires, and in the process of using erotic magic, the men transferred their tormented feelings to the women victims of their desires. The intense language used in erotic spells could very well coincide with the emotions of desperate, young, lovesick men, but this aspect is not a vital element in Winkler’s thesis. Dickie should have focused his critique on only Winkler’s statements about the discrepancy in gender roles in erotic magic and magical characters in literature.

This thesis in Winkler’s book is specifically focused on erotic curse tablets and spells only, not all forms of love magic. Therefore, for the fifth piece of Dickie’s theory, literary evidence he includes that involve any other kind of love magic than erotic curses or spells, such as love potions, charms, or erotic magic in general should not be considered as evidence

44 I will write more on the tendency of scholars to attribute female-authored erotic tablets to prostitutes without evidence below.
against Winkler’s original thesis. In one of Winkler’s footnotes he lists known erotic magic created by men against women, women against men, women against women, and men against men. He includes only spells from the *PGM* and curse tablets found in *DT*, or tablets and spells mentioned by other scholars. This shows that his thesis does not concern other types of erotic magic.

In Dickie’s attempt to disprove Winkler’s thesis, he includes evidence from women and men in two distinct categories: imaginative literature and drama are combined into one category and contrasted with non-imaginative literature, which includes court cases and commentators from ancient Greece and Rome such as Juvenal, Lucian, Suetonius, and Tacitus. Dickie’s use of ancient writers of “history” as factual represents another issue with traditional interpretations of women in the ancient world. All of these “non-imaginative” sources involve some level of interpretation from the male authors. Ancient scholars did not provide any type of citations or references in order for modern scholars to verify the “facts” that were represented.

In the non-imaginative literature category, Dickie cites twelve instances of women experts or practitioners of erotic magic. Of those twelve examples, eight of the women were accused of using love philtres, or love potions, which is not a type of magic that Winkler is concerned with for this specific theory. Of the remaining four examples, only love magic is mentioned in general, not erotic curse tablets or spells. None of these instances should be considered relevant to Winkler’s thesis.

As for the men cited as experts or as using erotic magic, Dickie gives eighteen examples; however, four specifically involve love potions and nine mention only general erotic magic. The remaining five cases could possibly contain evidence of erotic curse tablets
or spells, but again it is not specified. Of the thirty examples that Dickie lists from both men and women, only five can reasonably be considered to fit Winkler’s thesis about erotic curse tablets. These five cases were all created by men, not women. Instead of disproving Winkler’s thesis, if anything, Dickie is furthering Winkler’s argument by showing that there are no non-imaginative, officially documented instances of women-authored erotic curse tablets, while men have been described as utilizing these in a few cases.

In conjunction with the previously mentioned scholars, Dickie quickly offers suggestions as to why ancient women did not leave evidence of creating erotic curse tablets. Women might have used forms of erotic spells that left no tangible trace; they might have lacked confidence to approach male scribes in a public setting; and they might have lacked financial means to pay for the services of professional scribes and magicians.⁴⁵ Surprisingly, these are almost exactly the same as Winkler’s suggestions, without the inclusion of guarded maidens.

In response to the question of why male authors portrayed women as participating in erotic magic, Dickie suggests that a few aspects need to be examined. Mainly, if each male author writing for a distinct genre had his own individual literary motives for creating female magical characters, then there cannot be one generalized explanation.⁴⁶ If this were the case, then Winkler’s original thesis would no longer be worth researching. Dickie concludes, “There is, furthermore, no one literary form in which erotic magic is portrayed. It is,

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⁴⁶ Ibid., 577.
accordingly, difficult to believe that one single factor is responsible for the choice of female
erotic magic-working as a topic for literary portrayal.”

Dickie’s argument comes from a perspective of rational Greek and Roman worlds
where irrational behavior needs to be excused or dismissed in order to maintain this rational
viewpoint. His dismissal of the importance of Winkler’s theory is based on his desire to
create a rational Greek world, rather than on the evidence provided.

As it relates to magical women in classical literature, Winkler appears to have come
to a mostly sound conclusion for this discrepancy. His main argument is that in reality young
men were known to use curse tablets as love magic, and the act is always attributed to
women in literature so that the men would see the act as feminine and stop resorting to such
forms of magic. After surveying classical literature for any mention of knowledge of love
magic or the practice of curse tablets as love magic, Dickie comes to the conclusion that
young men commonly resorted to using curse tablets as love magic, not women, even though
literature shows otherwise. Dickie uses both classical literature and other written sources
from the classical world, such as court cases, to attempt to find what kind of people used
erotic magic. He concludes that in classical literature women are shown to use love magic
three times more frequently than men. However, in the non-imaginative sources, such as
court cases, he finds that there is an even ratio of men and women accused of using love
magic; this includes other forms of magic such as love potions. Dickie lists out all of the
cases he analyzed, while expanding the criteria from using magic to simply knowing about

47 Ibid., 582.

48 Ibid., 578.
love magic. This seems to be the area where classical literature accuses women of possessing complete control over magical practice and knowledge.

Problems with Traditional Methodologies

One of the main problems that arise when dealing with ancient women and magic, especially when erotic magic is involved, is that historians traditionally emphasize ancient Greek and Roman rationality: Plato, Socrates, Cicero, and Seneca are all praised as shining examples of a rational society. The concept of magic does not fit into this cultural model; if scholars accept that magic was an integral part of ancient life -- that everyone used magic and believed in the potential power obtained from magical practices -- then the modern assumption of Greco-Roman rationality must be abandoned, at least with respect to the greater population. Paul Veyne’s well-known discussion on whether the Greeks believed in their myths points to the obvious conclusion: yes, of course they did.49 Thousands upon thousands of artifacts from regions across Europe, Africa, and parts of Asia contain remnants of ancient Greco-Roman magic that should be viewed as proof that magic was a fundamental component of ancient Greco-Roman societies. Magic was seen as a necessary tool that could be used for rational motives. The need to separate magical practices from ancient “rational” authors is a modern notion stemming from the eighteenth-century “Enlightenment.” Scholars believed that ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, along with scientists, like Hippocrates and Euclid, were strictly secular and were not associated with any type of religious practice.

It seems like the most “rational” response to evidence of ancient magic would be to accept the existence of countless examples of magical use as a sign of ubiquitous “irrational” behavior, which was deemed not only common but also acceptable and completely rational to the greater population. However, a more typical tactic has been to dismiss magic as “irrational” behavior unfit for educated Greeks; this has led to a lack of scholarly attention to magic. The recent burst of interest in ancient magic has also been hindered by the persistence of scholars to force magic into an existing framework that the entire population of Greeks and Romans adopted a purely rational mindset.

The issue of “irrational” magic becomes even more complicated when ancient women are added to the discussion. This tactic of forcing rationality onto irrational practices can clearly be seen in both Fritz Graf and Matthew W. Dickie’s interpretations of magic discussed above. Graf continuously attempts to categorize all ancient magic as a means to eliminate competition.\textsuperscript{50} In less emotional cases, such as judicial curses and curses against economic competitors, Graf’s argument is reasonable; however, when sexual and romantic emotions are involved in erotic curses and spells, non-emotional competition among possible suitors seems less acceptable. The persistence of ideas that only rational behavior was practiced in ancient Greece and Rome goes against the evidence that magic can provide.

Dickie’s rationale for dealing with women involved in erotic magic seems to be to discredit all women who acted as practitioners or who used magic by inferring that they were prostitutes or courtesans.\textsuperscript{51} Concerning women in the ancient world, there is a tendency to

\textsuperscript{50} Graf, \textit{Magic}, 186.

categorize women as “respectable” and “other,” or “nonrespectable.” The distinction between the two categories of women is enhanced by Dickie’s argument that respectable women did not create erotic magic, nor were they the intended targets. By claiming that only “nonrespectable” types of women created erotic magic, Dickie is perpetuating the idea that respectable ancient women adhered to the proper social order, and women that went against the norm were automatically separated from the proper women and assumed to be prostitutes or slaves. This stance attempts to distinguish between magic-using prostitutes and respectable Greek women. In claiming that women who dealt with erotic magic as either agents or victims were prostitutes, this would categorize the women expressing agency as masculine, and therefore more inclined to participate in “masculine” behaviors in society, which would excuse any instance of female-authored erotic magic.

In the conclusion to his sourcebook, Gager emphasizes another major problem in the study of ancient curses and spells that has affected the modern perception of both magic and women: “the aristocratic bias of ancient authors and modern scholars has produced an enormous distortion in our conception of ancient life and culture.” The problem is solidified even further when modern male scholars use the anti-female writings of ancient scholars to justify adopting an anti-female view when writing new scholarship on ancient women.


54 Pomeroy, Goddesses. Pomeroy would classify them as whores and slaves.

55 Gager, Curse Tablets, 244.
Ancient male scholars typically adopted an anti-female perspective, which could hint toward misogynistic tendencies, in their development of female characters in imaginative literature. When modern male scholars use female characters created from this skewed perspective, it compounds the problem of discussing ancient women.

A further complication is that scholars cannot account for the contrast between the (male) gendering of curse tablets and the (female) gendering of ancient magic in literature. While some have tried to explain the phenomenon, beginning with John J. Winkler, others, like Dickie, simply dismiss it as irrelevant when it does not fit within the accepted existing framework. Scholars of classical studies and the ancient world need to be willing to adapt their interpretations based on new information through new methodologies.

In the recent works on ancient erotic magic, women are commonly either barely mentioned or dismissed in their displays of sexual desire and agency. Female-authored curse tablets are quite rare, but their existence should be the focus of a study, rather than a footnote. These examples of erotic magic created by women are some of the first examples of women talking about their sexual desires. Women can be seen as active, lustful participants in sexual acts that were not connected with reproductivity. Male scholars have previously dismissed these sources as if they did not want to admit that women could have actively pursued sexual desires. By ignoring these sources traditional scholars are taking away what few sources exist that demonstrate ancient women enacting sexual agency and expressing desires.

Notably, none of the scholarship on ancient women and magic has been female authored. There seems to be a tendency to portray magic as inherently feminine, especially

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56 Montserrat, *Sex and Society*, 194.
from the critics of Winkler’s thesis. Winkler’s work is not inhibited by a need to locate magical sources in a rational society. His focus is on sexuality, gender, and the act of sex in ancient Greece, which frequently relied on the emotions and gender constructs of ancient Greeks. Winkler mentions erotic magic in only one chapter of his book, yet his work has come closest to creating a greater understanding of the irrational and fundamental components of ancient magic that continue to fascinate scholars today. One can only imagine where the discussion would be today if Winkler had lived to answer the critics of his work.

**Thesis Questions and Methodologies**

Throughout this project, I will be focusing on the thesis proposed by Winkler. He dedicates only one paragraph each to the two questions that frame my entire thesis.\(^{57}\) The first question asks why there is such little evidence of women-authored erotic curse tablets from the ancient world. I dedicate the second chapter of my thesis to thoroughly exploring this question, and offer the suggestions of other interested scholars. The second question asks why there is such a discrepancy between the reality of women’s use of erotic magic and their representation in classical literature. Again, Winkler briefly mentions the thesis; he does not investigate all possible answers, but instead suggests that scholars need to use social and cultural anthropology in order to answer the questions and continue the discussion of magic and ancient women.\(^{58}\)

\(^{57}\) Winkler, *Constraints of Desire*, 90.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 98. Unfortunately, Winkler died in 1990 due to complications from AIDS and never explored the possibilities of his proposed thesis.
I will be using erotic curse tablets, spells, and non-imaginative literary sources to show that women rarely used erotic magic against men. However, the few examples of female-authored erotic magic will be highlighted and analyzed instead of dismissed. I will use methodologies that have rarely been adopted for studies of the ancient world in order to further the discussion of ancient women. As Winkler suggests, I will use components from both cultural anthropology and feminism in order to show that more information can be gained from erotic magic than previous traditional, male scholars have explored. The topic of erotic magic and women has been dominated by male scholars, many of whom have attempted to push irrational and emotional aspects of magic into an existing solely rational framework of the ancient world. Traditional, overwhelmingly male, scholars typically subsume and dismiss the irrational and emotional aspects of magic by claiming that it was utilized by a non-dominant population, meant nothing to the “rational” ruling classes, or was the purview of women and the underclass. Ultimately, I will show that this was not the case when discussing erotic magic used throughout the ancient Greco-Roman world, and that everyone feared the power of spells and curse tablets.\(^5^9\)

By focusing a discussion of women and erotic magic around the theories of feminism, mentalities, and thick description I will be able to interpret the existing data in a different way than current traditional scholarship does. A few female authors who use feminist perspectives to discuss the lives of ancient Greco-Roman women have heavily influenced my perspective on women and ancient magic.

\(^{59}\) Pliny, *Natural History* 28.4.19
Marilyn B. Skinner wrote about the challenges of studying ancient women in her article, “Classical Studies, Patriarchy and Feminism: The View from 1986.” Her brief article emphasizes a problem of teaching classical works as justification for modern social inequalities between social classes and sexes. Skinner also acknowledges that male scholars have typically monopolized studies of the ancient world. “Approaching the study of Greco-Roman civilization from a feminist perspective presents special problems: classical studies is one of the most conservative, hierarchical and patriarchal of academic fields, and women classicists, even those professing themselves feminists, remain strongly male-oriented.”

It is this issue that I am trying to address in this thesis: the reconnection of women’s experiences to the study of the ancient world.

In an article about modern African and Asian women, Deniz Kandiyoti explains her interpretation of a system called “the patriarchal bargain.” According to Kandiyoti in her article, “Bargaining with Patriarchy” (1988), in which she defines and describes the term, a “patriarchal bargain” describes a system in which women both consciously and unconsciously agree to be in submissive familial relationships with men in exchange for protection and the continued public appearance of propriety and respectability. This term can be applied to a women’s position under her father’s protection, and her new position within the family of her husband. A young woman would have exchanged her powerless position in her father’s house for a seemingly powerless position in her husband’s house.

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Along with more general feminist perspectives, Kandiyoti’s idea of the patriarchal bargain as it relates to ancient societies, can help resolve the problem of ancient women and erotic magic. I argue that the patriarchal bargain Kandiyoti describes in modern gender relationships existed in ancient Greco-Roman cultures as well. Ancient women were consciously aware of their submissive positions in society, and they were willing to maintain their positions in exchange for perceived respectability and economic stability. In order to maintain this bargain, women refrained from using magical tactics that were gendered masculine, such as erotic curse tablets and spells. Ancient women purposefully removed themselves from positions of agency that would upset this bargain. Instead, women might have had hidden agendas and used other forms of erotic magic in order to obtain the same outcomes as violent, masculine tablets intended to induce feelings of sexual desire.

Another example of a female scholar writing from a feminist perspective is Eva C. Keuls. In her book titled *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (1993), Eva C. Keuls expresses her main thesis that ancient women were suppressed in a male-dominated and phallic-centered society in ancient Athens, and they were constantly bombarded with visual reminders of their inferior positions in society. Keuls’ main genre of evidence is overtly sexual, masculine imagery displayed on Greek vases and paintings. She includes 345 visual depictions of male sexuality that Athenian women would have witnessed. Keuls adopts an aggressively anti-male viewpoint, which at times seems too forced. However, the sheer volume of evidence on the topic of male dominance in a patriarchal society greatly enhances her thesis. I personally disagree with some aspects of Keuls’ work. I

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do not think most ancient Athenian women would have constantly felt victimized by the sexual male imagery Keuls presents, and it seems unlikely that men always exhibited aggressive attitudes against women as Keuls implies. The overpowering phallic imagery that Keuls presents might have been accepted as “normal” to ancient Athenian women and men, even though it is crass and sexist in the eyes of a modern female audience.

Keuls’ feminist perspective on women in the ancient world is a refreshing focus on ancient women that could be enhanced with the inclusion of anthropological theories. In my thesis, I have combined the feminist perspective identified above with an anthropological approach. By recreating the mindset of ancient women as it pertains to erotic magic, I can better understand how women’s use of magic was shaped by the society in which they lived.

The idea and practice of thick description, a theory used mainly in anthropology, can also benefit my research on ancient women and magic. Clifford Geertz made the technique popular in his well-known article on Balinese cockfights, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” (1972). Geertz further explained the technique in his 1973 book The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays. After living within their modern society and attending the popular sport of cock fighting, Geertz attempts to explain nuances of the Balinese culture through a description of seemingly unimportant phenomena.63 His motive for using thick description is to make the reader, an outsider to the Balinese culture, understand the phenomenon of cockfights and see how an insider would experience the fights. Geertz describes the careful attention the men pay to their animals in preparation for

fighting, along with the tricky business of placing bets on particular roosters where familial ties come into play. Geertz implies that the modern Balinese culture cannot be understood without a thorough comprehension of cock fighting.

Geertz states that he adopted the concept of “thick description” from philosopher Gilbert Ryle in order to show the varied tasks of an ethnographer. Rather than simply observing physical events in a culture unknown to Geertz, such as the cockfight, his goal is to decipher the underlying meanings behind specific components of the physical event. Geertz believes that in order to fulfill this task, he must describe how the native Balinese man thinks, acts, and feels about the fights. By explaining this to the reader in his account of the phenomenon, Geertz is showing the reader a hidden component of the culture that an outsider would not understand just by seeing or reading about the physical event itself.

The theory of thick description can be used to show that magic was a fundamental component of the ancient world. Unlike modern Western civilizations, everyone believed in the power of magic in the ancient Greco-Roman world. It was a universal phenomenon of culture in nearly all ancient regions, which continued for centuries through the Medieval period and into the modern era. Magic was rationalized within ancient Greco-Roman cultures and deemed a necessary tool used for practical reasons. Emotions were of course involved in the decision to use certain magical tactics, but magic itself was completely accepted. By adopting this position, I will be able to view erotic magic as necessary in the minds of the agents. The thousands of men and women who resorted to using erotic curse tablets and spells saw a need in their lives and chose to use magic in order to fulfill their desires.

Another theory typically used in both historical and anthropological studies can further my understanding of magic and women in the ancient world. The methodology of mentalities, which was successfully used by the French *Annales* scholars, will be used throughout this thesis in order to obtain a stronger focus on ancient women and the emotion involved in creating erotic magic. In the twentieth century, French historians in the *Annales* school focused on social history, rather than political or diplomatic themes, and larger environmental factors in an attempt to record the “totality of the human experience.”65 Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch co-founded the original journal, and Febvre created the new journal, *Annales: Economies, societies, civilization*, but the second-generation of scholars led by Fernand Braudel gained the most interest for the *Annalistes*.

The third generation of scholars, led by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, focused on writing history from the viewpoint of mentalities, or *mentalités*. This theory of history emphasizes the study of collective ideas that are accepted within a society, even if the phenomenon spans over centuries. Magic falls into this category. By basing most of my interpretations on the individual curses and spells that were used by authentic men and women, I will be able to gain a sense of a collective mindset in the ancient world. The theory of mentalities will allow me to focus the discussion on actual magical practices of men and women in the ancient world, while using classic literature to contrast the representations of ancient women and their use of erotic magic.

The first body chapter will be devoted to a discussion of erotic curses and spells, along with women’s use of such magic. I offer suggestions as to why scholars have not found

many examples of female-authored erotic magic. Much of this stems from the idea that ancient magic was gendered. It was socially acceptable for women to use only certain types of magical tactics. In order to maintain the power structure developed within a patriarchal bargain, women chose not to disturb this power dynamic and to not use masculine forms of magic. The main reasons that women would have refrained from using erotic curses and spells is that it would have been difficult for women to secretly obtain monetary funds in order to purchase magic from professional male magicians or scribes. This would also entail meeting with a man in a public space, which would not allow most women to maintain secrecy in the act of purchasing magic to use against an unsuspecting victim. A main deterrent for women using erotic curse tablets is that the names of the client, victims, and their mothers were necessary in order for the magic to work properly, and a woman would not want to leave tangible evidence of her unacceptable use of magic on a lead tablet that would be buried in a public place. All of these are reasons why there are only a few known existing examples of female-authored erotic magic.

The second body chapter focuses on the literary evidence of female practitioners of magic, and offers reasons as to why there is a discrepancy between literary depictions of erotic magic and reality. A majority of erotic magic in literature is practiced by women, not men. The gender roles are switched in literature, and scenes of aggressive, magical women go against the tangible evidence of erotic magic. I argue that ancient male scholars did not intend to create reflections of magical practices within their societies. Instead, female magical characters represent men’s fears in society: fears of both the power of magic and the potential power of women.
In the last body chapter, I will show how erotic magic continued to be used frequently through the fourth century CE, even after Christianity was legalized. After this point, there is less evidence of erotic magic, but the few examples from later centuries cited by Christian authors show that magic continued to be a fundamental component for supposed converts to Christianity. This section is set apart from Greco-Roman literature, because the authors’ motives for the inclusion of erotic magic are varied and much different. In Christian hagiographies, a common reason for the inclusion of both men and women’s use of erotic magic before turning to saintly lives is to show an immense change in behavior because of God. Men and women were shown using erotic magic from the Greco-Roman world in order to portray an absolute low in the saints’ lives and show a greater transformation of the saints through the process of conversion. Further examples of Christian religions leaders denouncing the use of magic demonstrates the continued use and belief in the power of magical practices that carried over from the Greco-Roman world up until modern times.

**Scope and Content**

The majority of primary sources used in my thesis range from the fourth century BCE to the fourth century CE. Admittedly, the regional range of sources is widespread across the Mediterranean region, from Greece, Italy, Egypt, and neighboring countries. Like other scholars studying the topic of ancient magic, all of the sources were deemed relevant. The wide range in region and time frame is justified because the specific spells and curses used for erotic magic changed very little no matter the time or region.

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66 John J. Winkler, John G. Gager, Christopher A. Faraone, Matthew W. Dickie, and David Frankfurter all include similar magical sources from varied regions and centuries.
Problems with regional scope come into play when a scholar’s thesis applies only to one region of ancient magic. A main critique of Winkler’s thesis on ancient magical women and their representation in classic literature is that his scope is limited to ancient Greece and Rome only, yet the sources are not limited to those regions. He uses mainly spells found in the *Papyri Graecae Magicae (PGM), Greek Magical Papyri*, which were from fourth-century CE Roman Egypt. Roman Egypt was nothing like classical Greece, yet his discussion of cultural gender constructs relies on the model of the carefully guarded Greek maiden. The sexual dynamics involved in gender relations in Roman Egypt were quite different from ancient Greek gender practices six centuries earlier. Winkler’s student, and fellow scholar on ancient love magic, Christopher A. Faraone, cites this as a critique against Winkler, yet Faraone uses the same spells from the *PGM* in his work, which is dedicated also only to ancient Greece. Faraone limits his time frame to the first century BCE and earlier, since he claims that after this point magic was professionalized, and therefore less true to the original motives of the creators. After making that claim, Faraone also uses the *PGM* spells in his examination of love magic in ancient Greece. Faraone and Winkler both suggest that because erotic magic barely changed over the six centuries of popular use, scholars can assume that the spells in the *PGM* were based on Greek curses and spells -- even though there is no specific evidence demonstrating this -- and the spells can be discussed in the context of ancient Greece.

Like Winkler, Faraone, and other scholars mentioned in this work, I will focus my thesis around only one category of ancient magic: erotic magic practiced throughout the ancient world. More specifically, I will focus mainly on three types of magical evidence that

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67 Faraone, *AGLM*, 16.
were used to create erotic magic. The first is curse tablets. For the purposes of erotic matters, these were created at the will of a client in order to increase the sexual desires of a victim and force him or her to fulfill those desires, to separate couples that were involved romantically, or a combination of the two motives. Most of the known erotic curse tablets were created by men against women; however, the few examples of female-authored curse tablets will be highlighted in the discussion. The second source of erotic magical evidence that I will rely on less heavily than curse tablets is spells. These were found in large spell books from around fourth century CE Greco-Roman Egypt. Spells found in these books were meant to be verbally spoken by the client. Motives behind the creation of spells were the same as curse tablets. Within the spell books there are also templates for curses and necessary rituals involved in erotic magic.

Other scholars have broadened their discussions of erotic magic to include magical sources such as love potions and amulets that were used throughout the ancient world and were more closely associated with women. While there are more examples of women utilizing these types of erotic magic, the motives behind these forms of magic are less clear, since there is no written language associated with them. Another problem is that when scholars discuss these forms of magic alongside curses and spells, which tended to be seen as more masculine forms of magic, women’s use of curses and spells is barely mentioned or excused.68 This viewpoint stifles the few instances of female-authored erotic magic that women tended not to pursue. By focusing only on male-gendered forms of magic, I hope to show greater comparisons between sexual desires of the sexes, rather than shrinking away

68 Faraone, AGLM. The bipolar categories of magic that men and women typically used are the main focal points of Faraone’s work.
from any examples of female expressions of sexual emotions, which is how scholars have typically treated these sources.

A third group of sources that I will analyze in contrast to curses and spells is instances of magic described or enacted in works of imaginative literature from ancient Greece and Rome. Most scholars who mention erotic magic use a few main literary examples of female “witches” in their descriptions. Rather than taking the literary representations of women as exact reflections of the magical practices of actual women, I will use this evidence to show how male authors, both ancient and modern, have skewed the modern perception of ancient magic. The literary evidence tends to portray women as the main practitioners of erotic magic, even though the evidence suggests otherwise. I will discuss possible answers to why this phenomenon occurred, as well as reasons why there are so few known examples of female-authored erotic magic.

It is acceptable for modern scholars of the ancient world to use classic literature as evidence that represents ancient culture and societies; however, in the specific case of erotic magic, the gender roles of the practitioners and victims are switched. This realization is the main motive behind Winkler’s thesis. In this case, ancient literature that was created in order to entertain an audience, such as a story, drama, or comedy, will be referred to as “imaginative” literature in order to separate these sources from other written material that was created solely to reflect reality, such as law codes and descriptions of court cases. I am making this distinction to express that the intent of the imaginative sources was not to create completely accurate depictions of ancient life. Even though literature is an important source of information about ancient world, ancient authors could exaggerate any components of their stories in order to create a more dramatic scenario for their characters. I would argue
that this was a tactic of ancient authors who created female magical characters as opposed to male magical characters, especially those who used erotic magic. It should not be assumed that the existing literary evidence involving magical women is more accurate to actual practices than the existing magical evidence. In this thesis, the magical evidence will take precedence over imaginative literary evidence, and I will not assume the literature to be a reflection of reality.

My aim in this thesis is to include the entire scope of ancient sources, mainly from the Mediterranean region, and focus on a more general approach to erotic magic in order to incorporate sources from the varied regions and centuries. The inclusion of sources with evidence of Christian erotic magic expands my scope even further; however, the specific topic of erotic magic maintains continuity within the paper. Christian literary sources were written for a much different purpose than Greek and Roman literature, so they are set apart from the main discussion and treated as a separate topic in order to offer various reasons for the same phenomenon: a discrepancy between the real and imagined portrayal of male and female-authored erotic magic.

**Explanation of Terminology**

Throughout this thesis, I will use the term “erotic magic” opposed to “love magic” when referring to magical practices and artifacts involved in sexual and romantic relationships. The curse tablets and spells were mostly referred to as ‘erotic’ magic prior to Faraone’s book in 1999. Faraone uses ‘love’ magic, which makes the curses seem less abrasive, but it also takes away from the explicitly sexual nature of the magical sources. The language in the curses typically leaves no question that the intent was sexual, not romantic.
love. I think the erotic nature of the magic discussed is what makes male scholars assume that women did not actively participate. Part of my argument is that scholars have previously dismissed ancient women’s desires or needs to use erotic curses unless they were prostitutes. Scholars have had no qualms about attributing sexual curses to prostitutes or courtesans, but have not embraced the idea that typical ancient women might have used magic as an expression of their own sexual desires. Traditional scholars tend to distinguish sharply between women involved as agents or victims of erotic magic and “respectable” ancient Greek and Roman women.

Keeping the term as “erotic magic” would further emphasize the sexual nature of the curses that has somehow made the magic seem unattainable to women in the minds of both traditional and modern male scholars. Erotic thoughts and ideas are what would have propelled ancient men and women to use such magic. Using the term “love magic” would over-generalize the types of magic I am studying, and would also make the section on literature more complex if any type of magic involved in romance or relationships was included. For the purpose of this study, “erotic magic” will be used to describe any instance of curse tablets, spells, imaginative literature, and Christian sources where sexual desire is either explicitly stated as the motive, or implied by the choice of language or described acts and emotions.
CHAPTER 2
EROTIC MAGIC SPELLS AND CURSES

Historiography of Ancient Magic

The practice of creating curses and spells was ubiquitous throughout the ancient Greco-Roman world, spanning not only the entire Mediterranean region but also the entire period. Evidence of the use of magic can be seen in literature, law codes, and curse tablets beginning in the eighth century BCE with Homer’s *Odyssey* and continuing strongly through the rise and “fall” of the western portion of the Roman Empire in the fifth century CE.\(^69\)

Magical sources are most prevalent from the fourth century BCE in ancient Greece through the fourth century CE throughout the Greco-Roman world. Scholars have unearthed and analyzed thousands of curses and spells that were created for a variety of reasons, all in the hopes of altering specific aspects of the creators’ lives.

A few terms need to be explained in order to establish how I have perceived ancient magical practices. I use the term “spell” to describe a phrase that needed to be spoken in order to produce the desired effects. In the *PGM*, it specifically dictates that the client should speak particular phrases laid out in the text. A “curse” refers to a written magical phrase that has been found on a tangible tablet. These curse tablets were created in all territories of the

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\(^{69}\) Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 14. Matthew Dickie argues that “magic” as a distinct concept did not exist until the fifth century BCE in Greek culture, even though there was written evidence of magical practices and ideas prior to this in Greece and other regions.
ancient world, which shows proof of the extent of magical practices. The term “magic” refers
to any spell, curse, or other ritual ancient people practiced in order to influence or alter
aspects of their lives.\textsuperscript{70}

Some of the most interesting and numerous sources that have been discovered are
curse tablets, known as \textit{defixionum tabellae}. As of 2008, about two thousand curse tablets
throughout the ancient world had been unearthed.\textsuperscript{71} The proper creation of curse tablets was
professionalized around the first century BCE by professional magicians and scribes who
standardized and maintained the language. After this time, both men and women could
purchase curse tablets from professionals for a variety of purposes. These magical sources
were written on tablets, which were typically made of lead, and either buried in a place
significant to the client or victim of the curse, or thrown into bodies of water. It was believed
that the curse tablets gained some of their power through the water or earth into which they
were deposited. This magical tactic was practiced for centuries and reached its peak during
the third and fourth centuries CE. Additionally, the spell books found from Greco-Roman
Egypt that contain hundreds of magical spells date mostly from the third and fourth centuries
CE.

Another source that scholars use to show the acceptance and practice of magic in the
ancient world is the modern-day compilation of ancient spells, the \textit{PGM}. This is a collection

\textsuperscript{70} In this sense, the concepts of magic and religion are intertwined, and should not be viewed
through modern, distinct definitions. This topic will be more fully discussed below.

\textsuperscript{71} Daniel Ogden, \textit{Night’s Black Agents: Witches, Wizards and the Dead in the Ancient World}
1500 curse tablets had been unearthed at that time, which is a dramatic thirty-three percent
increase. Interest in ancient magic has increased not only among classicists and historians,
but among archaeologists as well.
of spells along with some curse tablets that have been preserved and transcribed from spell books in Greco-Roman Egypt. The collection contains magical spells and rituals from the second century BCE to the fifth century CE.\textsuperscript{72} Even though most of the spells are fairly short, and some are difficult to decipher, they contain valuable information for scholars about the cultures in which they were created and utilized. Some of the curse tablets that have been found conform exactly to the recipes for spells included in the \textit{PGM}. This strengthens the argument used by scholars, such as Winkler and Faraone, that the collection of spells was used by professional scribes to create personalized curses for clients who wished to bind their victims, human or (in the case of chariot racing) animal. Most of the spells leave a space for the scribe to insert the names of the client and the victim, but some of them have the names filled in. This shows that the completed curses were purchased by clients and created in order to control their victims.

Scholars have been fascinated with the texts of the \textit{PGM} since the middle of the nineteenth century CE when they finally began translating and analyzing the scroll books that had previously been stored in museums and remained a mystery.\textsuperscript{73} Because of the repression and destruction of magical, non-Christian beliefs and practices, the remaining magical scrolls can be viewed as representative of only a small portion of the popular, long-lasting habit of using curses and spells. German and Dutch scholars began translating and publishing scroll books one by one until other scholars saw a need to publish the complete collection of magical spells once they began taking the magical sources seriously. The \textit{PGM} as a whole


\textsuperscript{73} Betz, \textit{GMPT}, xliii.
was translated into English by numerous scholars and finally published in 1928 by Karl
Preisendanz. With the continuous discovery and translation of new papyri, ruptures in
progress from World War II, and lessening restrictions from government authorities, new
editions continued to be released until 1974.

In my research, I have used Betz’s version of the *GMPT (Greek Magical Papyri in
Translation)*, published in 1986 and 1992, which includes the translations from Preisendanz’s
*PGM* along with translations of the *PDM (Papyri Demoticae Magicae or Demotic Magical
Papyri)*. The *PDM* was first translated and published by F. Ll. Griffith and H. Thompson in
1904. The main difference between the Demotic magical papyri and the *PGM* is the original
language used. In the *PDM*, the spells are bilingual, consisting of both Demotic (Egyptian)
and Greek texts, while the spells in the *PGM* are mainly Greek. Both collections of spell
books include some Old Coptic phrases, but they are less prevalent. The scrolls in the *PDM*
are from Greco-Roman Egypt during the third century CE, which is the time period from
which scholars have unearthed the most curse tablets across the Mediterranean world. Deities
and religious beliefs from all over the Mediterranean world can be seen throughout the over
five hundred spells found in the *PGM* and *PDM*.

**The Recipe for Proper Magic**

There are typically three possible components to any recipe for a spell found in these
important resources: ritual, spoken word, and written curse. The first is a ritual that the client
of the spell must carry out exactly in order for the magic to work. An example of this is a
popular and extensive love spell entitled ‘Love spell of attraction,’ known as *PGM* IV. 2891-
2942. It begins: “A white dove’s blood and fat, untreated myrrh and parched wormwood. Make this up together as pills and offer them to the star on pieces of vine / wood or on coals.” It continues “also have as a protective charm a tooth from the upper right jawbone of a female ass or of a tawny sacrificial heifer, tied to your left arm with / Anubian thread.”

The ritual part of the magical act can be incredibly specific. Part of the advantage to purchasing a spell or curse from a professional scribe is that the client would trust that the scribe would have the precise knowledge necessary in order for the spell to work properly. Any literate person would have been able to etch a curse onto a lead tablet, but a professional scribe would know all of the components of the exact ritual that accompanied the written portion of the magical practice. Additionally, the client of the curse would not need to be literate to purchase written magical curses; in some cases, curse tablets would be pre-made with blank spaces left for the names of the client, victim, and both of their mothers’ names.

Along with a ritual, a spoken spell might have been needed to call upon the gods in a specific way. The love spell ritual mentioned above was followed by a spoken spell of about forty lines. Specific wording, evocation and praising of Aphrodite (referred to here as Kythere), and magical words that appear as gibberish all need to be paired with the ritual. The scribe alone would know how to pronounce the magical phrases, which often contained “secret” names of the gods, thus proving the client’s worthiness of the gods’ help in making

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74 This numbering system used by Preisendanz and adopted by future scholars indicates that the spell is in the fourth (IV) scroll book in the collection, from lines 2891-2942.


his spell work correctly. The gods’ secret names were often seemingly random strands of mainly vowels that no one other than the professionals would know how to replicate exactly. This spell has blank spaces for the scribe to insert the names of both the client of the spell and the victim. They are worded here like many other spells found throughout the spell books. It reads “Attract NN, whom NN bore, to come with rapid step to my door, me, NN, whom NN bore.”77 The client, most likely a man, would need to know the name of the woman he wished to control, along with her mother’s name. This would mean that the man would need to be somewhat acquainted with the woman before he could use magic as a seduction technique.

Erotic Magic

There are many different types of spells in the PGM, anything from cures for a headache and scorpion stings, to a verbal spell to find and catch a thief are all accounted for in the one hundred thirty papyri scrolls that make up the collective PGM, or GMPT, and PDM. From all of the reasons for using magic in the ancient world, I have found spells for manipulating love, or dealing with sexual relationships to be the most fascinating. People can connect across centuries because of deep empathy and understanding of basic human emotions that propel everyone. A wife’s feelings of jealousy and frustration against her husband and father of her children because of sexual infidelity exist in every culture in which women and men engage in monogamous marriages. Intense yearning of men toward women who reject or do not know of their proposals for sexual relationships as well as desires for

77 Ibid., 93.
romantic love are easily understood as well. Any feeling of love or passion could be controlled through the use of erotic magic.

Curse tablets contain priceless information on what events or emotions citizens in the Mediterranean world attempted to alter by the use of magic. Auguste Audollent did a remarkable amount of work to collect and study hundreds of curse tablets in the early 1900s. He compiled and translated the curse tablets in his 1904 publication *Defixionum Tabellae* (*DT*). One of the most frequent types of curses Audollent unearthed was a binding curse, which was created so the client of the curse could force another person to do his or her will; the actions and thoughts of the victim would be bound, hence a “binding” curse. Audollent concluded that there were five different categories in which the nature of binding curses fell: judicial, erotic, agnostic, curses against thieves and slanderers, and curses against economic competitors. Of the five categories, erotic spells and curses were common. In Audollent’s interpretation, all of these spells involved the elimination of competition.

In 1992, after scholars had about a century to analyze and add to Audollent’s study, John G. Gager compiled a collection of curse tablets with more specific categories. These included competition in theater and circus, sex and love, legal and political disputes, businesses and taverns, and pleas for justice and revenge. Of the nearly two thousand curse tablets that scholars have unearthed, translated, and analyzed so far, a large number deal with romantic or sexual issues between men and women. Of the 118 curses that Gager collected in

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78 A. Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae*, (Paris: 1904)


his work, 16.1 percent of the curse tablets deal with erotic matters.\textsuperscript{81} He states that the collection he provided stands as a fair sampling of the known curse tablets from the ancient Mediterranean world. Within the collection of spells and curses in the \textit{GMPT}, 17.1 percent involve sexual desires, love, separation of romantic relationships, or the fetching of a woman for a man in a sexual encounter.\textsuperscript{82}

Of these categories, men dominate every topic, yet women are involved in practically every instance of erotic magic, as either victims or clients of erotic curses. This makes the creation and practice of using curse tablets a typically masculine phenomenon. Even when sexual desires are involved, there is still an element of the necessary elimination of competition that men are used to in the business, political, and legal aspects of their lives. To Audollent, competition for the romantic or sexual affections of women was not seen as being drastically different than the other uses for binding spells. However, the masculine majority on this specific type of magic leaves scarce opportunity for women to take advantage of curse tablets dealing with their personal sexual desires, emotions, and relationships. It also makes curse tablets a gendered masculine form of magic. Because scholars see curse tablets as inherently masculine and male-authored, there has not been much focus on the few instances of female-authored erotic magic. Typically, these exceptions to the norm have been dismissed because of their assumed association with female prostitutes.

Procurers of curse tablets used them for various reasons involving romantic relationships. The most common way curses were used in relation to love or lustful reasons

\textsuperscript{81} Gager, \textit{Curse Tablets}. Nineteen of the 118 samples are examples of erotic magic.

\textsuperscript{82} Betz, \textit{GMPT}. A personal analysis of all of the 542 spells in the \textit{GMPT} yielded 93 instances of erotic magic.
was a violently worded erotic curse intended to make the victim physically approach the client of the curse at once and do his bidding. These fall into a common category of spells known as “binding spells,” since they were created in order to constrain the actions or emotions of their victims. Most of these aggressive types of curses were commissioned or created by men in order to control women. Some scholars argue that men used curse tablets against women in this way only for women whom the men coveted, but could not obtain. This could mean that the women were unavailable to the men--the women might have been married or otherwise protected by male family members--but a more popular position mandates that the women were commonly prostitutes who did not accept the men as clients. The use of a violent curse intending to force the unknowing victim into a sexual act was an option for the men to release the stress of yearning for the women sexually.

An example of a typical, more aggressive curse that a man could use against a woman was found inscribed on a lead tablet in Egypt, above Oxyrhynchus on the Nile, from the third or fourth century CE and was believed to be deposited in a cemetery originally.\(^\text{83}\) After demanding assistance from the gods, along with the spirit of the deceased man in whose grave the tablet was buried, the curse reads: “arouse yourself for me and go into every place and into every quarter and to every house and bind Ptolemais, to whom Aias gave birth, the daughter of Origenes, in order that she may not be had in a promiscuous way … do not let her drink or eat, that she not show affection, nor go out, nor find sleep without me, Sarapammon, to whom Area gave birth.”\(^\text{84}\) The control the client, Sarapammon, demands of

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\(^{83}\) Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 97-100.  
\(^{84}\) Ibid.
his victim shows how an erotic binding spell was used in the ancient world. In this case, as
was quite common, the man purchased a curse tablet in order to bind the emotions and sexual
actions of his unknowing victim, Ptolemais. It is typical of curse tablets structured like this
one to mention specific actions the victim should be deprived of until she submits to the
sexual will of the client. A lack of eating, drinking, sleeping, and participating in sexual acts
are common, as is a burning sensation in the victim that will end only once the client’s
demands have been fulfilled. The violent language used in the curse is also common in most
curse tablets. It should be seen as expressive language to control the victim, but not intended
to actually cause the victim physical pain.  

The curse continues, “Drag her by the hair and her heart until she no longer stands
aloof from me … and I hold Ptolemais herself … obedient for all the time of my life, filled
with love for me, desiring me, speaking to me the things she has on her mind. If you
accomplish this for me, I will set you free.” Here the client demands the spirit of the
deceased man to forcefully drag the woman to him. This is a more elaborate curse than many
similar and simpler demands that request the same sexual unions with the victims, but
Sarapammon’s added demand of a continuous, romantic relationship with the victim of his
curse is quite rare. This might be one of the erotic curses that Graf considered in order to

85 Ibid., 22.

86 Ibid., 100.

87 Ibid., 98. What makes this curse tablet even more unique is that it was buried alongside a
figurine of a bound woman with 13 pins stuck through specific parts of her body. Scholars
have frequently analyzed this figurine and have concluded that the pins should not be seen as
a means of harming the woman victim; rather the pins are a means of enforcing greater
control over those specific parts of the victim’s body.
claim that all erotic magic was created in order to further the social situations of men in their attempts to marry into a respectable family. One or two curses that contain this specific verbiage are rare, and should not be seen as reflective of all erotic magic.

Another simpler template for an erotic curse tablet is found in the *PGM. PGM XXVI. 69-101* is also entitled “love spell of attraction,” which is a common name for dozens of similar spells throughout the spell books. It is from fourth-century CE Greco-Roman Egypt. This bit of erotic magic includes a specific ritual and instructions for creating a curse tablet, complete with a drawing of a god with a human body and animal head carrying a smaller figure, which could represent the victim, along with the names of Egyptian gods including Seth. The template begins: “It attracts men to women and women to men / and makes virgins rush out of their homes.”

Female-authored curse tablets are rare, but it is interesting that in this spell even though women have the option of purchasing the exact same magic that would typically be used by men against women, the curse tablet template is still written expecting a male client and female victim.

The ritual calls for a piece of material from the desired victim to be glued to the completed papyrus after the curse has been written. The client must then adhere the finished curse tablet to the wall of a public bath. Because public baths were sources of water, they were possible deposit sites for magical tablets. After calling for the specific gods, the curse reads: “as you are in flames and on fire, so also the soul, the heart of her, NN, whom NN bore, until she comes loving me, NN, and glues her female pudenda to my male one,

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immediately, immediately, quickly, quickly.\textsuperscript{89} The sexual nature of the curse is quite clear. The language used in this curse is less violent than some longer examples, but the motivation behind the curse is clearly that of sexual desire.

Binding curses typically evoke gods as a means to enhance the effectiveness of the spell. In the curse mentioned above, Sarapammon evokes Pluton, Kore Persephone, Ereschigal, Adonis, Hermes, Thooth, and Anoubis. The gods mentioned vary depending on the region in which the curse was created, but the most common gods called upon to help the creator of the curse are Hermes, Hecate, Kore/Persephone, and Hades.\textsuperscript{90} In Greek and Roman mythology Hermes/Mercury, son of Zeus and Maia, is the messenger god associated with travel, trade, lies, and thieves. It is fitting that Hermes would be called upon to assist in binding spells and cursing since he would need to travel to the women’s homes in order to wake them from their sleep and deliver them to the men requesting their affection. Hecate is mentioned frequently in love spells. She is the goddess of the crossroads and witchcraft, and is associated with the underworld in Greek myth. Hecate assisted Persephone/Kore in her abduction into the underworld by Hades/Dis. The myth behind changing seasons and the harvest of wheat deals with Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus, and her annual captivity in the underworld with Hades, god of the dead, brother of Zeus, and ruler of the underworld. These gods were associated with the underworld, and resurrection from death, which ties in with the darker nature of some of the violent curses and shows a connection with powerful gods who were believed to possess more knowledge and experience in dealing with the deaths of mortals.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 270.

\textsuperscript{90} Gager, \textit{Curse Tablets}, 12.
Women’s Use of Erotic Curse Tablets

In *Ancient Greek Love Magic* Faraone, immediately divulges his theory that love magic created by men and women in the ancient world was almost completely gendered. He creates a polarized view of magic by focusing on “those rituals used mainly by men to instill erotic passion (*eros*) in women and those used primarily by women to maintain or increase affection (*philia*) in men.”¹ Christopher Faraone argues that ancient women chose not to use the typically masculine curse tablets, partially because of the curses’ masculine nature and aggressive language. He believes that women wished to make their relationships with men more peaceful and harmonious, and therefore they used the types of love magic they were more comfortable with, such as love potions, amulets, and simple curse tablets that did not follow the typical templates of binding spells mentioned above. His discussion of curse tablets used as love magic is the most interesting. Faraone found that out of the eighty known erotic curse tablets from the ancient world only nine are known to be created by women.² Most likely a male professional scribe actually wrote the curse tablets, but women actively purchased them to use against their male victims. Even though Faraone admits that his bifurcated view on magic is not typical, his evidence and analysis need to be studied more closely from a different perspective.

Faraone’s views on erotic magic, although less traditional than other scholars on the subject, still maintain the idea that women were unwilling or incapable of expressing their

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¹ Faraone, *AGLM*, ix.

² Christopher A. Faraone, “When Spells Worked Magic.”
sexual desires. His polarized position on erotic magic, and even his tendency to call all forms of the magic “love magic” rather than “erotic magic,” denies women agency in matters of magic. The gendered forms of magic deemed acceptable to women by ancient standards remain the only forms accepted by modern male scholars. Love potions and amulets are the passive forms of magic that Faraone attributes to mainly women. The same sexual desires that men expressed through their use of erotic curse tablets and spells were unavailable for women to express in potions and amulets. Indeed, Faraone barely mentions female-authored erotic curses and spells throughout his work.

The ancient Greek male view of typical Greek women and their use of erotic magic seems to be the focus of Faraone’s thesis, rather than the actual practices of ancient Greek women and the limitations inflicted upon them by a male-dominated Greek society. There is barely any evidence of women creating erotic magic within the time constraints in which Faraone focuses his study, between the eighth and first centuries BCE, but more exists after this period and up to the fourth century CE. Faraone states that after the first century BCE magical practices were increasingly controlled by professional magicians and scribes, rather than individuals, and argues that the magical practices of amateurs was more true to the beliefs of the society than magic purchased by professionals.93 Perhaps women were just not aware of their options in love matters prior to the professionalization of magic. If a girl or woman had strong sexual feelings for a man and he did not return those desires, she now had the option to discreetly go to a professional and purchase a curse tablet in order to “instill erotic passion” (Faraone’s terms) in her male victim. Women might have had these sentiments all along, but had not known of their options in resolving the matter.

93 Faraone, AGLM, 16.
Faraone emphasizes women’s use of amulets and love potions as opposed to curse tablets because he implies a woman typically wanted to increase the affection in an existing loving relationship with a man, rather than establish a sexual relationship with a less familiar mate through the aid of a curse tablet. However, ancient Greek women were already familiar with amulets and medicines to resolve other issues, such as ailments or receiving increased favor and protection from the gods. These forms of magic were gendered female in the ancient world. It was socially acceptable for women to purchase amulets and potions, for a variety of treatments, in a public setting; however, women were limited to the specific types of assistance their familiar practices could provide when dealing with erotic magic. Perhaps the sentiments involved in women’s acceptable uses of erotic magic did not coincide with their prescribed tactics.

Faraone is implying that women mainly used passive forms of erotic magic because the sentiment behind their romantic desires was a passive wish for increased affection, which could be satisfied through the use of wearing amulets: a safe, acceptable, and feminine form of magic. With his implication, Faraone denies that ancient women felt passionate, sexual desires for men. Such emotions were viewed as unfeminine and would have required the use of a masculine curse tablet in order to relieve the women and deliver the male victims. These masculine forms of magic were not easily accessible to women. The distinction between gendered forms of magic is critical to Faraone’s arguments. In a simplified form, his views on ancient erotic magic are that men used masculine forms of magic because they had masculine, sexual desires, while women used feminine forms of magic because they had feminine, loving, and purely non-sexual desires.
On the contrary, men used masculine forms of magic because they were readily available to them and were viewed as acceptable for men to use as a tool. Women used feminine forms of magic because those were the only forms easily available to them. The sentiments behind women’s use of erotic magic should not be assumed solely based on the types of magical practices women were allowed to use while maintaining respectability. Women’s continued use of mainly passive forms of magic shows only what forms of magic were available to women, rather than the specific emotions involved. Modern scholars cannot claim to know the emotions a woman experienced because of her decision to use certain magical practices. Because ancient Greek women had unrestricted access to only passive forms of magic, it should not be surprising that scholars have found scarce evidence of women using aggressive, masculine forms of magic, such as violent curse tablets.

The same principle is true for men. The use of violently worded curse tablets was seen as acceptable for men to use in all aspects of their public and private lives in order to eliminate competition. However, a male client of a curse tablet might not have felt an aggressive sexual desire for the woman victim of his curse as the necessary violent language typical of binding curse tablets would imply. If a man desired increased affection and a stronger emotional attachment with a woman with whom he was in an existing romantic relationship, an amulet would have been a more appropriate device. If amulets were not as accessible to men, or if they were seen as being too feminine for a man to purchase in a public setting, he might not have used one in an effort to influence the emotions of his female victim. Along with amulets, the passive forms of assistance and relief that amulets could provide were also accessible to a woman, not a man, even if his sentiments were more closely related to a cure achieved by an amulet than a curse tablet.
It seems as if Faraone used commonly known magical practices of men and women as evidence of the typical emotions and romantic desires of the sexes. More likely, magical practices show only the types of gendered magic that were easily accessible to men or women in the ancient Greek world. The emotions behind the use of magical amulets, curse tablets, spells, or even medicines are less known and should not be assumed. Knowledge of the magical procedures that were available to ancient men and women is even more difficult to establish. Discussion of curse tablets and other forms of erotic magic in ancient literature, law codes, writings of philosophers, and early Christian writers shows that there was an awareness of common magical practices, but these sources do not help to determine whether men or women held a monopoly on this knowledge.

The Patriarchal Bargain in Ancient Societies

The concept of a patriarchal bargain in ancient cultures defines a possible reason why women did not use curse tablets as erotic magic against men. Deniz Kandiyoti’s study of women in modern African and Asian patriarchal societies could easily translate to ancient Mediterranean societies as well.94 The relationships between men and women in modern Asian and Middle Eastern regions represent a system of classical patriarchy, which was present in most Greco-Roman societies in the ancient world. In this system, girls are given away in marriage to live in the household of their husbands, which are at times headed by the husband’s father.95 Women and girls brought into the family in this way are in a low position of power, below not only all of the males in the husband’s family, but also below the older


95 Ibid., 278.
women. Kandiyoti argues that women accept their lowered status as the new wife in the husband’s home as part of the patriarchal bargain because their status, while subordinate, nonetheless provides protection and social standing outside the family. Moreover, as women in this kind of system age, they rise in status among the women in the family. Their second-class status both within the family and outside it, however, remains the same. Ancient women fit into this system of established gender constructs.

Kandiyoti analyzes ways that women negotiate their positions within their familial structures in a way that still adheres to the patriarchal system. Women know the limits of their control, along with the amount of resistance they can apply, while maintaining proper marital relationships. In classical patriarchy, women often exchange kin-rearing roles for protection and economic dependence. Wives take on roles as mothers and provide care for their husbands and the children in the household, while the husbands are expected to protect their wives and children while providing for them all financially. Magic could have been a tool used by women living under these constraints to manipulate their situations without being detected, while upholding their end of the patriarchal bargain.

In an attempt to maintain public appearances of proper marital relationships, ancient women would have wanted to avoid any behaviors or actions that would jeopardize their respectable positions in society, and their bargained-protected positions within the home. The same concepts of respect apply to unmarried women who still resided in their fathers’ households. Using masculine forms of magic that were seen as unfit for women, and therefore unacceptable to use, could have caused women to refrain from purchasing those kinds of magic. Curse tablets were so detailed and specific that a woman could not create one

96 Ibid., 279.
privately without the assistance of a professional man. If women attempted to create amateur versions of tablets that were not as durable as professional versions require, there is no way to know they ever existed, or to determine if the creators believed the amateur magic worked properly. One of the defining characteristics of a curse tablet is that they were meant to be resilient to natural elements. Tablets needed to be buried in a public place under water or earth as part of the ritual in order for their powers to take affect. A woman producing a secretive tablet who was under constant fear of being exposed and bringing shame to herself and her relatives would probably not want to leave a long-lasting reminder of her unfeminine behavior. It is possible that women who used erotic curse tablets as a last resort to end their afflictions used a much more ephemeral material than the typical lead tablets that are recovered.

Another possibility could be that women were able to purchase some and not all components of erotic magic involved in the creation of curse tablets. A ritual and spoken spell could have offered women the same desired results without leaving behind written evidence. Part of the necessary template for curse tablets was the written names of the client, the mother of the client, the victim, and the mother of the victim. Without all four written names, the gods addressed in the curse would not know the client who needed to be freed from their sexual desires and the victim who was desired. With this written information anyone in the society would have been able to tell exactly who purchased the magical tablet. There is no disguise against recognition for women or men mentioned in curse tablets.

Even the act of purchasing restricted magic from a public male professional scribe or magician might have been severe enough for women to burden their families with a bad reputation. Women might have seen the act of purchasing taboo magic as a risk that was too
dangerous to consider. In order to negotiate power within their already restricted positions, ancient women needed to be discreet about how they attempted to alter their relationships. If a woman, married or single, desired to change her romantic or sexual relationship with a man, and wanted to use magic to do so, she would need to use magic wisely. A simple amulet or charm would have been acceptable and appropriate for a woman to own, but an erotic curse tablet could have posed too much of a risk for a woman to use. Whether a woman wished to make her husband love her more strongly, as Faraone suggests, or she desired a passionate sexual encounter with a less familiar man, she would need to choose a form of magic that fit her situation, rather than her desire. If the fear of being discovered and shamed by using a masculine curse tablet was greater than her desire for returned sexual passion from a man, then a woman might have used an amulet rather than a curse tablet regardless of the desired result. It seems as if men and women in the ancient world used specific forms of magic based on what types of gendered magic were acceptable for their sex, rather than choosing a form of magic based on the desired results, in order to maintain a sense of propriety and adhere to normative gender roles. The exceptions to normal magical behaviors of men and women could offer another possible reason that women-authored curse tablets from the ancient world are extremely rare.

There are many explanations for such a drastic difference between men and women using curse tablets for love or sexual relationships. Another reason could be that women in the ancient Mediterranean world had much more limited access to expendable monetary funds than men, especially if the women were expected to maintain their household and care for their children in a classic patriarchal system. In order to purchase a curse tablet from a professional scribe or magical professional, a woman would need to obtain funds, go to see
the professional scribe in order to tell him the purpose of the tablet and all of the names involved, and keep everything secret from the male victim. Scribes that had access to spell books with the specific knowledge needed to create a successful curse tablet were men. A woman client would need to feel comfortable enough to enter a public setting with the male scribe alone. If she had someone accompanying her, the woman would have needed to tell her accomplice the specifics of the magic she intended to purchase as well.

It would have been difficult for a woman in the ancient world to publicly meet with a man and purchase a professional curse without appearing suspicious. If her actions were discovered, surely someone would tell the men in her life – her father, brothers, or husband – about the secretive purchase. Eventually, women had the option of purchasing the same aggressive binding curse tablets to use against men. While most spells assumed the agent would be male and the victim would be female, a few spells left blank spaces for both the names of the agent and victim along with options for “he/she,” “him/her,” or “son/daughter.”

A typical erotic spell from third-century CE Egypt reads, “Bring NN, the daughter of NN, to the house, to the sleeping-place in which is NN, the son of NN.”[^97] An exception to the typical spells that assumed the gender of the participants is from a scattered collection of recipes for spells found in Cairo, Egypt. It reads, “This writing is designated for X, son/daughter of Y, that he should love A, son/daughter of B.”[^98] This could possibly show that professional scribes were receiving enough requests from women that they needed to alter the previous


[^98]: Gager, Curse Tablets, 108.
wording that assumed the client would be a man wishing to curse a woman. Even though
scribes presented this as an option for women, it might not have been considered culturally
acceptable.

Another component of curse tablets that a woman would need to consider is the
required ritual of burying the tablet in a public place. Without the assistance of a
professional, a woman would have to bury the tablet in a cemetery, well, or by the victim’s
house secretly in the night without getting caught. This feat is something that a professional
scribe would have done for the client, thereby eliminating any connection of the client with
the tablet if the scribe was discovered desecrating a grave in order to bury the tablet with a
corpse.99 The secrecy involved in the public commissioning of a curse was necessary so that
the victim did not discover the magic used against them. Since professional scribes are
thought to have created many known curse tablets, it seems natural for most of the surviving
curse tablets to have been commissioned by men. Men would have had easier access to
monetary funds; they also would have had more access to the public places in which
professionals resided. Because men were used to using curse tablets in other areas of their
lives, like chariot racing and business affairs, their involvement in creating binding curse
tablets seems like a continuation of the common occurrence of magic into their romantic and
sexual affairs.

Another possible reason that there are only a few known examples of women-
authored erotic curse tablets is that women might have had limited access to knowledge of
certain types of magic prior to professional magicians, and women were restricted from

99 Ibid., 4. The practice of burying curse tablets in graveyards was common, and required for
specific kinds of curses found in the PGM.
purchasing magic from such public male figures. The continued existence of professional magicians and scribes in the ancient world beginning in the first century BCE shows that proper magic was a commodity that needed to be guarded from the general public. People continued to pay for specific curses and spells because it was socially accepted that the magic would not work properly without the exact specifications in ritual, spoken word, and written phrases with precise materials mentioned in detail above.

In most known cases of women creating erotic magic against men, the women use forms of magic other than curse tablets. Amulets were another common type of magic used throughout the ancient Greco-Roman world. These were small figures, symbols, or words carved into stones or gems and worn on the body.\footnote{Faraone, \textit{AGLM}, 119.} People created these in order to protect themselves from any harmful magic, such as a curse tablet. Amulets could also be worn to heal ailments or protect from illnesses. Faraone suggests that women used amulets as erotic magic rather than curse tablets, because they saw protective amulets as a means to encourage romantic emotions with men instead of demanding sexual relationships with them.\footnote{Ibid.} It seems that since amulets were socially acceptable for woman to purchase and wear, they might have seen amulets as their only option in getting men to love them, either romantically or sexually, even if the demanding nature of curse tablets was a better representation of what women desired.

The amulets and the non-aggressive magic they entail have been associated more with women, even though men used them as well. The use of an amulet was a tool that someone could use in order to counter a negative type of magic, such as a curse, that might have been
used against him. For example, in chariot racing in the Roman world, men would become incredibly invested in races and feel the need to curse the opposing teams, drivers, or even horses in an upcoming race. The language used is even more aggressive than in erotic curses, but the same binding curses were used in order to control the drivers and their horses, along with demanding their failure and occasionally even their death. Professional chariot drivers knew that there was always a chance that a fan of a rival team created a curse tablet against them, so they had the option of wearing protective amulets in order to fend off the binding control the curse demanded. This same concept could be used for amulets dealing with romantic relationships. Women or men could wear them in order to counter a curse that might have been created to bind their will.

Exceptions to the Rule in Gendered Magic

Of the nine known examples of women-authored erotic curse tablets, scholars such as Faraone and Dickie are compelled to offer specific exceptions as to why a woman used a masculine form of magic. An example of a woman using a more feminine form of a curse comes from Attica, Greece dating from the fourth century BCE. A woman is thought to have created the curse tablet in order to prevent her husband, or fiancé, from having relations with any other woman. It reads, “(I bind) Aristokudes and the women who will be seen with him. May he not marry any other woman or young maiden.”\textsuperscript{102} The woman wants a romantic relationship with her husband, and is jealous of other women with whom he might be having

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 14.
sexual relations. The woman who made this curse tablet did not include the evocation of gods, aggressive or violent language, or physical demands against the man, which are common in male-authored curse tablets directed against women.

When Faraone analyzes this curse tablet, he suggests that the curse was devoid of aggressive language and lacks the components mentioned above, because a woman was the creator or client of the spell. A probable reason for the lack of typical components in this curse tablet is that not only is it woman-authored, it was also created without the aid of a professional magician or scribe. As mentioned above, normally the victim’s name would be followed by the name of his mother. This simple addition is missing here. A professional scribe would have included the typical components, because they were seen as necessary for the curse to work properly. It would be safe to assume the woman who created this curse did not have professional knowledge of erotic magic, or curse tablets in general. Combined with the nature of her request it is reasonable to assume that she wrote the curse herself based on her emotions, rather than following a prescribed template.

Also, this particular curse was made very early in the period for known curse tablets, during the fourth century BCE. The period of prevalent curse tablets is eight centuries later during the third and fourth centuries CE. Perhaps the reason the woman did not use the aggressive language and demands common to later curses is that they were not yet established components of curse tablets at that time. The explanation that the woman’s frail

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103 Some translations have mentioned that the term ‘marry’ here means ‘to have sexual relations,’ and that the ‘young maiden’ mentioned could refer to young boys as well.

104 Faraone, AGLM, 14.
and demure character stopped her from including violent and aggressive phrases is ridiculous.

The rare, early tablet from a woman binding a man discussed above goes along with Faraone’s argument of women using passive forms of love magic, even if it seems like his thesis over-generalizes ancient women’s intentions behind using magic. Faraone also claims that the women who used typically masculine curses in order to bind men were probably prostitutes. He argues that the prostitutes saw aggressive binding curses as an acceptable tool to gain more sexual encounters with men, because they are in a male-gendered profession and are taking on the roles of the dominant person in the relationship, typically men.105 Faraone excuses these examples of female-authored curse tablets, since the prostitutes were able to use curse tablets only because these women did not have to follow normative rules with magical practices as they were gendered male in society.106

This assumption by male scholars that most, if not all, women expressing sexual desire must have been prostitutes or courtesans is wide spread among scholars writing about ancient magic. In his book, Dickie continues this skewed perspective of ancient women. In his analysis of a cache of curse tablets found at the bottom of an Athenian well, Dickie claims, “It will be no accident that so many of the decipherable curse-tablets recovered from the well are directed at athletes and prostitutes. They are precisely the groups of persons whom we know to have been most deeply involved in magic-working.”107 Because of this

105 Faraone, *AGLM*, 149-152.

106 Ibid.

107 Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 244.
assumption, that seems to have been accepted as fact among scholars, female-authored erotic
curses and spells appear to almost automatically be classified as involving prostitutes.

Dickie frequently mentions that the name of the victims in spells is telling of their
profession. He writes, “Their names are characteristic of either slaves or prostitutes.”108 The
female names from a group of curse tablets that Dickie associates with prostitutes and slaves
are: Mania, Glykanthia (also known as Malthake), Thratta, Areskousa, Lakaina, Lyde, Posis,
and Drink. Dickie uses these “prostitutes” or female slaves found in five different curse
tables (DT 70, 71, 72, 87, and 68) as evidence in his analysis of magic and prostitutes, or
courtesans, in fourth-century BCE Athens.109 Common names among women combined with
the assumption that female clients of erotic curses were prostitutes and the allowance of
interpretation in translating original Greek sources to English, all consciously drive the
interpretation of known and newly discovered erotic curses from the ancient world. Scholars
like Dickie already have a set theory in place about women engaging in erotic magic. The
problem is increased when imaginative literary sources involve female characters that seem
to fit the mold of magical prostitutes, like Theocritus’s Simaetha. Scholars then use the
literature to justify their interpretations of reality. Winkler’s thesis shows how dangerous
these assumptions can be when studying erotic magic because of the discrepancies involved.

It makes more sense that the few examples of female-authored erotic curse tablets
were purchased by women who did not have to negotiate with a patriarchal bargain as typical
women did. There might not have been a sense of propriety and respectability the women
were expected to uphold; the women could not bring shame to their families if they did not

108 Ibid., 86.
109 Ibid., 85-87.
have an established, respectable family to protect from shame. Women who lived outside of the typical patriarchal social constraints did not have to adhere to normal gender constructs applicable to most respectable citizens in their societies. Perhaps these few examples of women using magic should be seen as indicative of the actual needs and desires of ancient women. Women unattached to respected families, within any social class, might have been able to obtain monetary funds without the assistance of a male family member, go to a public male figure, and purchase whatever type of magic was most suited to their needs and emotions. These could be the examples in which the strict boundaries between gendered magic were nonexistent.

Examples of women who might have fit this model in pre-Hellenistic Athens include female metics, not just prostitutes or slaves. Both Dickie and Montserrat agree that women in Greco-Roman Egypt experienced a fair amount of freedom to publicly interact with men.\textsuperscript{110} Almost any woman in Egypt would have been freed from the cultural and social restraints inflicted upon her because of the patriarchal bargain. A woman would have been able to access a male professional scribe in public in order to procure an erotic curse or spell to use against a male victim without fear of discovery by male relative. Women would have had different legal statuses depending on time and place.

A few known curse tablets that involve a suspected prostitute were discovered at the bottom of a well in the Athenian agora. They date from the mid-third century CE. David R. Jordan unearthed, translated, and studied these tablets along with eighty-five other curse

\textsuperscript{110} Dickie, “Who Practised Love-Magic,” 572. See also Montserrat, Sex and Society, 194.
tablets found among eight different wells and one cistern in the Roman Athenian agora. Of the seventeen tablets found in one of the wells, six were either illegible or the purpose was unknown, six were created in order to bind the opponents in athletic competitions (five were against wrestlers, and one was against a runner in an upcoming footrace), while the remaining five tablets were created to upset romantic or sexual relationships. The high ratio of erotic magic here should not be a reflection of all the tablets found in Roman Athens, since Jordan suggests that these tablets were created by a professional scribe, and therefore he might have chosen to always use the same well to deposit his clients’ tablets. After studying the penmanship and word choice on all of the tablets, Jordan found two or three distinct authors. The elegant script found on twelve of the tablets in this well, including all five of those involving romantic relationships, belongs to a professional scribe who used a spell book, similar to one found in the PGM.

All of the curse tablets found in this Athenian well were created to end relationships, either romantic or sexual, between women and men. A man might have created the tablets so that he could steal the affections of the woman. Two of the tablets were create to stop Juliana, a prostitute, from having relationships with three different men. It is possible that a man who was jealous or rejected as a client of Juliana’s could have commissioned these tablets from the same scribe at different times; the language on both of the tablets is extremely similar. After evoking the gods Bepty and Seth, the first table continues:


Jordan, “Defixiones from a Well,” 211.
“I hand over to you Leosthenes and Pius, who visit Juliana, whom Markia bore, that you may chill them and their purposes, so that they cannot speak together or walk about ... As these names grow cold, so too let Leosthenes’ and Pius’ names grow cold to Juliana, and (their) breath, impulse, knowledge, impulse, charm, mind, knowledge, reckoning. Let them be deaf, dumb, mindless, harmless, Juliana hearing nothing about Leosthenes and Pius, (they) having no impulse towards or speaking to Juliana.”  

It is interesting here that because the client of the curse is not included on the tablet; only the name of Juliana’s mother is necessary, not the mothers of the other men listed here. The binding curse has the same basic components as the others mentioned above: evocation of the gods, demands of an addition or removal of emotions, and a list of specific things that the client wishes to more specifically control. Instead of controlling only specific body parts, actions and feelings of both of the men and Juliana are listed. Jordan believes that the woman is a prostitute because he translates some of the verbs from their original Greek into English to mean a sexual visit in exchange for money, and because two men are visiting Juliana instead of only one man. The second curse tablet against Juliana reads very similarly to the previous one. It reads: “I hand over to you Juliana, whom Markia bore, and Polynikos, that you may chill them and their purposes and love and intimacy, and themselves in your dark air and those with them.” The rest of the tablet contains exact phrases from the other tablet, which reinforces the idea that the scribe was working from a handbook and just inserting the names of the victims where necessary.

113 Ibid., 226.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid., 228.
The language used in these tablets about chilling the sexual relationship of the victims suggests that the lead curse tablets were deposited in a well, so that the curse could gain power from the cold water in which it was buried. A physical chilling of the temperature of the tangible tablet was emblematic of the chilling of the couples’ sexual relations. Most of the other tablets that Jordan uncovered within the Athenian agora were also found in bodies of water from the same time period. He mentions two hundred other curse tablets that were found in underground bodies of water just like the two tablets described.\textsuperscript{116}

Another female-authored erotic curse tablet is even more rare, because both the agent and victim are believed to be women. The simple curse tablet was unearthed in Boeotia, Greece and the date is unknown. I find this curse particularly interesting, which is why it is the title of this thesis. In its entirety the curse reads, “\textit{(Side A)} I assign Zois the Eretrian, wife of Kabeira, to Earth and to Hermes—her food, her drink, her sleep, her laughter, her intercourse, her playing of the kithara, and her entrance, her pleasure, her little buttocks, her thinking, her eyes … \textit{(Side B)} and to Hermes (I consign) her wretched walk, her words, deeds, and evil talk.”\textsuperscript{117}

The gender of the agent does not seem to be entirely clear from the translation, but Gager assumes the curse depicts a love triangle between the female agent and the man she desires, Kabeira. Zois is Kabeira’s wife, so the agent of the curse appears to be “the other woman,” who is trying to steal the affections of Kabeira away from his wife.\textsuperscript{118} The curse is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 207.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Gager, \textit{Curse Tablets}, 85-86.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 85.
\end{itemize}
missing components that are typical to most erotic curses, which could mean that the agent
created this magic on her own without the help of a hired scribe. All of the physical traits and
talents of Zois that are listed in the curse could be associated with sexual attraction. If the
agent of the curse were a woman who was sexually attracted to Kabeira, her attention to the
sexual traits of her competition, his wife, would be critical.

**DT 271 – Domitiana and Urbanus**

One rare erotic curse tablet from third century CE Roman, North Africa contains a
plea from a woman client, Domitiana, against a male victim, Urbanus. The lengthy tablet
contains the same aggressive language that is common to curse tablets commissioned by men
against women. Four of the scholars mentioned above (Winkler, Gager, Faraone, and Dickie), who comment on ancient women’s use of erotic curse tablets and their portrayal in
literature, also reference this rare tablet commonly called DT 271.119 Scholars’ varied
interpretations of this exact same curse could help to show that there might be some
preconceptions that would influence how the curse was translated or analyzed.

In my analysis of the curse tablet, I will use Gager’s translation, since his is the most
complete version, and because he does not offer interpretations that might influence the
translation to English from the original Greek.120 This curse reads similar to other curse
tablets typically created by men against female victims. A main difference here, other than

119 DT refers to A. Audollent’s *Defixionum Tabellae* (1904). Audollent numbered the
translated curse tablets, and scholars refer to the tablets by their corresponding number. DT

the female agent and male victim, is that Domitiana requests both a sexual union and continued romantic marriage with Urbanus. It seems clear that she was not married to Urbanus prior to her creation of the spell, nor was she living in the same household. The curse states, “he may beg her to return to his house and become his wife.”\(^\text{121}\) Surely, if Domitiana and Urbanus were already married, she would not have chosen to purchase a curse with this precise language about her desire to become his wife.

The curse also contains the detailed, sexual language that men typically included in their curse tablets, but there is more of a demand in this curse for a mutual, passionate and loving relationship. Most agents of curse tablets desire a sexual union only with no intention of marriage or a continued relationship. Domitiana wishes for Urbanus to desire only her, not any other women or maidens. She wants Urbanus to continuously remain faithful to her sexually, which could show that Domitiana believed she needed magical assistance in order to keep her desired lover from having extra-marital affairs even after their first union. It could also mean that Urbanus had not shown any passion toward her prior to her use of magic. By wishing for Urbanus to desire only her, Domitiana could have been directing the curse against other women whom she thought Urbanus coveted. The control Domitiana requested in her curse is rare. Her sexual and emotional desires for Urbanus were not enough to keep him committed to her, so she chose to use magic as a tool to make Urbanus passionate toward her, and force him to become a devoted husband.

Winkler sees this unique curse as an example of a desired end of continuous “life-long love” on the part of Domitiana. She asks the demon, along with the Jewish God, to

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 113.
make Urbanus come to her house, ask her to return to his home, and “to be his mate.”

Winkler continues the curse “Yoke them as mates in marriage and desire, for all the time of their lives; make him subject to her in desire as her slave, desiring no other woman or maiden.”¹²² Winkler sees the bondage as a desire for permanence and stability, rather than an actual ‘slave.’ He interprets the curse as a private metaphor for Domitiana that her husband be publicly known to be faithful to her.¹²³

Gager devotes three and one half pages to a description and full translation of the curse tablet, including footnotes, in his sourcebook. Gager does not comment on the meaning of the curse, or interpret the woman’s intent: he simply offers an English translation. The curse was unearthed in North Africa in the Roman cemetery of Hadrumentum. Gager suggests that, because of the language and script, the tablet was created in the third century CE. Interestingly, the one god evoked is the God of Israel.¹²⁴ Gager suggests that both Domitiana and Urbanus were freed people, but does not explain his reasoning.¹²⁵ He agrees that Domitiana’s purpose for commissioning the curse was that she wished to be the wife of Urbanus. A majority of the curse is a description of the powers of the God of Israel.¹²⁶ The section of the spell that corresponds with Winkler’s translation reads: “unite them in

¹²² Winkler, Constraints of Desire, 97.
¹²³ Ibid.
¹²⁴ Gager, Curse Tablets, 112.
¹²⁵ Per Dr. Linda Mitchell, Gager could have determined that Domitiana was a former slave, because all slaves in Spain were property of the state, and Domitiana refers to Emperor Domitian.
¹²⁶ Gager, Curse Tablets, 112-115.
marriage and as spouses in love for all the time of their lives. Make him as her obedient slave, so that he will desire no other woman or maiden apart from Domitiana alone.”

Faraone mentions DT 271 nine times throughout his book, mainly as a reference to the components of joining within the curse, both sexually and permanently in marriage, a rare case of a male victim, and the precise language used about Urbanus being like a slave. Faraone translates the exact same section as Winkler as: “Yoke them (i.e., both) in marriage and in passion, as they live together for the whole time of their lives. Grant that he, like a slave, be subordinated to her as he lusts for her, desiring to hold as his life-mate no other woman or maiden but Domitiana.” His translation is close to Winkler’s, but he adds more details to the specific relationship that Domitiana wished. Faraone mentions that because of the wording of “her” instead of “me,” as would be typical in a scribe-authored curse tablet, this curse is odd; however, he does not suggest a reason for the difference.

Further, Faraone suggests that Domitiana did not commission the curse, as other scholars have concluded, but that a parent of Domitiana commissioned or wrote the curse on behalf of his or her daughter, who might have been having marital problems. This implies that Domitiana and Urbanus were already married, and that Domitiana was unhappy, perhaps because of extramarital sexual unions. The curse mentions a wish for fidelity on the part of Urbanus, which could have been essential if Domitiana or someone in her family believed Urbanus to be unfaithful.

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127 Ibid., 115.
128 Faraone, AGLM, 23.
129 Ibid.
Dickie agrees that Domitiana’s main goal is marriage, but he takes the interpretation even further. Dickie states, “Her main goal is likely to have been economic security.”\(^{130}\) There is nothing in the lengthy curse about finances or anything related to money. Like Graf, Dickie dismisses any emotional attachments or desires of the woman, either romantic or sexual. He portrays the woman as anxious to have a monogamous relationship with the man, because in her eyes “the man was obviously … something of a catch.”\(^{131}\) This reasoning reduces the power of Domitiana, and makes her seem desperate for the man to marry her. The passion and desire mentioned in the curse are ignored, and Dickie sees the woman as eager to marry so that she can become financially secure. He does not refer to the client or victim by name. This might be a small detail, but it could show a greater attempt to dismiss Domitiana’s personal emotions, as well as the agency women exhibited by actively using erotic magic.

Dickie also states that Domitiana used the curse in order to make Urbanus faithful to her, not because of her sexual desire for him. He then contrasts this curse with the typical erotic curse tablets used by men, because he believes men actually wished for a sexual union with their victims.\(^{132}\) Dickie’s claim that Domitiana’s intent was different from a man’s intent is highly suspect: she purchased the tablet from a scribe, followed the exact same ritual, and included the same language as men would use in curse tablets directed at women. The language in the text reads: “bring Urbanus, to whom Urbana gave birth, and unite him with


\(^{131}\) Ibid.

\(^{132}\) Ibid., 574.
Domitiana, to whom Candida gave birth, loving, frantic, tormented with love, passion, and desire for Domitiana.”¹³³ In an earlier section of the curse, Domitiana wishes for Urbanus to be brought to her house “loving her, sleepless with desire for her, begging for her, and asking that she return to his house and become his wife.”¹³⁴ Along with passionate, loving desires Domitiana wishes for marriage. Just because her ultimate goal was to marry her lover, her sexual feelings should not be ignored. The PGM includes over one hundred different templates and examples of erotic curse tablets. If Domitiana’s goal was financial security, she could have purchased a number of different spells or curses to suite her needs. Instead, she chose this curse, which included emotions of desire, passion, love, and fidelity. The specific language used in this tablet was intentional. Domitiana’s desires should not be dismissed and replaced with a rational, dispassionate wish for money, especially since there is no evidence that even hints at monetary gain.

¹³³ Gager, Curse Tablets, 115.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 114.
Evidence of Erotic Curses and Spells
in Imaginative Literature

Draw to my house my lover, magic wheel. / Delphis lost this fringe from his coat: I
now shred it and cast it into the wild flames. Ah, cruel Love, why do you cling to me
like a leech from the swamps and drain all the dark blood from my body? / Draw to
my house my lover, magic wheel. / I shall crush a lizard and bring him an evil drink
tomorrow. But now, … take these magic herbs and smear them on his threshold while
it is still night, and whispering say: “I smear the bones of Delphis.”

This is an excerpt from the most commonly mentioned work on the topic of love
magic and women, written by Theocritus in the third century BCE. He was writing in
Alexandria on the Greek influence in Egypt under the Ptolemaic dynasty. His poems, or
idylls, were meant to be representative of daily life in the growing city. In Theocritus’s
second Idyll he writes of a dramatic scene where a love-struck magical woman, Simaetha,
creates love magic against Delphis, her athlete lover, in an elaborate ritual with spoken
incantations and a potion-like concoction. She uses an odd combination of varied magical
practices throughout the lengthy ritual. Just in these few lines, Simaetha mentions or uses a
piece of fabric from her lover’s coat, fire, a crushed lizard, a love potion, magic herbs, rituals
done at the home of the curse’s victim, the necessity of night, and a spoken incantation. All
of these practices could have been associated with some form of magical ritual, but they

\[135\] Theocritus, Idyll 2, 106.
would not have been combined all together. In his attempt to recreate a magical scene, Theocritus must have combined what he knew about magic with rumor, or he might have read a spell handbook, similar to the PGM, and combined bits of many different spells together to create this dramatic scene of a jilted woman, who resorted to erotic magic in order to control the desires of her wayward lover.

Greek and Roman literature that mentions the subject of curse tablets and erotic magic overwhelmingly assert that ancient women, as opposed to men, had knowledge of harmful magic, and that they frequently used it against their male victims. Some scholars use this scene as proof that women practiced harmful love magic, and argue that since there are similar rituals in the PGM, this was an accurate representation of reality in ancient Ptolemaic Egypt. Others, such as Georg Luck and Graf, argue more convincingly that Theocritus must have had prior knowledge of spell books and magical practices similar to those mentioned in the PGM, and wrote his poem based on the books rather than an actual scene of a magical woman conjuring up a concoction of bay leaves, corn husks, wax, and fringe from her boyfriend’s coat in order to bring her lover back to her doorstep. Even though the poems were meant to show daily life, they were also meant to be recited and performed in front of an audience. It was a form of entertainment, just as the other plays and stories of classical Greece and Rome. It seems much more plausible that this work, as well as other

136 Graf, Magic, 176-185.


classical literature on the same precise subject, was meant to entertain as well as show the
fears within a society, rather than record an exact literal description of ancient life.
Professional magicians might have performed a ritual quite similar to the one Simaetha
enacts in the poem, but the gender roles would have been reversed.

Winkler mentions three main instances of erotic magic in classical literature, Dickie
lists about thirty, and Faraone goes further, claiming “love magic appears or is alluded to in
the literature of every epoch of ancient Greek history, beginning with Homer and ending with
early Christian hagiography.” The many examples of women using erotic magic in male-
authored works of literature are too numerous to enumerate here, but several examples of
these depictions will serve to demonstrate how common such characterizations were.

Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis* is frequently cited in discussions of erotic magic. It is
also an example that helps prove Winkler’s theory, since the imaginative literature about the
death of Heracles contains a female practitioner of erotic magic. The Greek writer,
Sophocles, created this imaginative story about Deianeira, the wife of Heracles, around 430
BCE. Deianeira is forced to resort to using erotic magic against her husband after Heracles
sends his new mistress to live in Deianeira’s home as a captive slave. After learning of her
husband’s sexual union with the attractive, young Iole, Deianeira is not angry with them. She
attempts to make her husband turn his passion from Iole back to herself through the use of a
love charm that was given to her by a centaur, whom Heracles killed out of jealousy. After

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139 Faraone, *AGLM*, 5.
spreading the centaur’s blood onto a cloak, Deianeira sends the affected cloak to Heracles and instructs him to wear it during his sacrifices to the gods. Unknowingly, Deianeira causes her husband’s death; the centaur’s blood was not a love charm, but a concoction that caused Heracles excruciating pain and torture until his death.

Some of the scholars who commented on Winkler’s thesis use this example of erotic magic in their discussions on ancient magic. Winkler briefly mentions this work in a description of love potions and a common literary occurrence of women accidentally poisoning their husbands with love potions.142 Faraone argues that Deianeira’s actions represent a majority of women who used erotic magic against their husbands. He cites recipes for similar love potions, charms, and amulets in the _PGM_ that would produce similar results of increased affection.143 Faraone even includes legal cases where women used a very similar excuse of giving their husbands love potions in too large quantities, and unwittingly killing them. He claims “Deianeira simply desires to be more loved by her husband.”144 Dickie claims that this is an example of a respectable Greek woman who deeply regretted having to resort to using erotic magic against her husband.145 He sees the character of Deianeira as emblematic of typical Greek women, who were not actively involved in erotic magic either as agents or victims. In this case, erotic magic was the last resort of a desperate woman.

142 Winkler, _Constraints of Desire_, 81.

143 Faraone, _AGLM_, 118-119.

144 Ibid., 119.

Strangely, both ancient and modern scholars agree that love potions were gendered feminine in the ancient world, and that women who used them against their husbands were relatively innocent, even if the potion resulted in death. Murder seems like a very unfeminine trait, even when dealing with erotic magic, but because it was produced from a passive act of wanting increased affection the women are exempt from blame in most cases.

Another well-known author from the ancient world mentions erotic magic and woman’s use of magical tactics against men. In first-century CE Rome, Ovid wrote his highly criticized Erotic Poems including The Amores -- The Art of Love and Cures for Love. Throughout these entertaining guidebooks for men on how to seduce women and a separate guide for women on how to seduce men, Ovid includes the theme of erotic magic. The Roman writer includes depictions of beautiful women who had knowledge about erotic magic, which were mainly love potions rather than curse tablets or spells. There is a constant threat of erotic magic against men, women seducing young men, and the tendency of attractive women to be unfaithful. All of these themes are representative of the threat that attractive women pose if they interact with other men in private settings, like the dinner Ovid depicts, which seems to be an exaggeration if not simply a fantasy for Ovid.

Roman men who heard or read Ovid’s books for entertainment would surely have been able to identify with a constant threat of erotic magic. Gager’s insistence that everyone in the ancient world believed in the power of magic affirms this fear. Those main fears of women that Ovid represents could have been an accurate depiction of ancient women. The idea that a beautiful, married woman was just waiting to flirt with a handsome, young man at a dinner party seems like an exaggerated fantasy of Ovid’s creation. While displaying known

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options for erotic magic that were available to women, Ovid mainly describes a fantasy for the men reading his books. If modern scholars were to treat Ovid’s creation as mainly factual information about Roman social life and gender constructs, all women would be seen as adulterous and deceptive toward their husbands. Depictions of female magical characters should be seen in the same light; they are representative of the fears that men had within a society, rather than accurate reflections of the actual magical practices of women.

Another popular Roman literary source of female-authored erotic magic is Apuleius’s depiction of a beautiful witch, Pamphile, in his second century CE novel, *The Transformations of Lucius Otherwise Known as the Golden Ass.*\(^{147}\) People in the town knew that Pamphile was a witch, and feared her because of her magical powers. The main character, Lucius, sees the witch transform into an owl after she performs a magical ritual and wishes to be taught the same extravagant magic. His lover, Pamphile’s apprentice, tries to teach him, but turns him into an ass instead. This comedy could show men’s fears of women. It seems highly exaggerated and doubtful that only women knew of harmful magic. It also shows the complexity of some forms of magic. The spells and rituals mentioned in the *PGM* vary in their complexity, but some of the more elaborate rituals are immensely precise and would be extremely difficult to complete unless a professional was paid for their expertise. Any slight variation could result in catastrophe for the client or victim of the spell, though none would be as extreme as having to live their life as an ass.

In real life, Apuleius was accused of using erotic magic to seduce and marry an extremely wealthy widow, Aemilia Pudentilla.\textsuperscript{148} Apuleius had to testify in a court setting and explain that he did not use any form of erotic magic in order to make his wife love him. He claimed that even though his marriage to Pudentilla would have given him access to her wealth and the assumed higher social standing, his own family was already powerful and rich, so he did not benefit financially or desire social advancement.\textsuperscript{149} The man who accused Apuleius of using erotic magic was a relative of a prospective suitor for Pudentilla; along with the claim that Apuleius was a magician and sorcerer, he also accused Pudentilla of being a prostitute.\textsuperscript{150} These were common negative stereotypes in the ancient world that were used to generally state that the person had a shameful reputation. The main evidence that the accusing men had against Apuleius was that he had an odd habit of cutting up fish to study their anatomy, and some of the fish he used were known to be poisonous, and could be used for love potions.\textsuperscript{151} It seems more likely that the accuser felt cheated out of the fortune his family would gain and wanted to make Apuleius appear unfit for marrying the rich widow by using magic as a cover for his greed.

\textbf{Possible Reasons for Abundance of Female Magical Characters}

\textsuperscript{148} Faraone, \textit{AGLM}, 85.

\textsuperscript{149} Graf, \textit{Magic}, 187.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 69.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 73.
Scholars of ancient magic have analyzed the discrepancy between magical evidence created by ancient women and the representation of magical women in literature. One possible explanation for an abundance of magical women in literature and the absence of magical men could be simply that the literature did not reflect reality. In this specific case, Levi-Strauss’s theory that “women are good to think with” ties into the idea that the women characters in classical literature in no way represent actual ancient women. The women in literature who seek revenge on their male acquaintances through elaborate rituals of witchcraft were not representative of actual women. Male authors made up the fictional scenes in order to add drama to their comedies, dramas, or stories. It seems more plausible that the tales of beautiful, dangerous, and quite powerful female witches represent a fear within the society, where women posed as a threat to unassuming young men. A young Greek or Roman man would not lose power by being consumed with passion for a beautiful woman, because clearly the woman used witchcraft, such as a hidden love potion or curse on the man. However, men had to be wary of women because of their knowledge of magic and powers to influence the emotions of men, as foretold in literature.

Winkler describes the emotion of erôs, or extreme sexual desire, as more of an illness than an emotion. His descriptive scenes involving lovesick young men desperate for a cure for their desires seem a bit dramatized, but it is not far-fetched considering the overly dramatic language used in the curses and spells. Based on ancient medicine and social belief in ancient Greece, sexual desire was extremely difficult to treat, and was only curable by a returned feeling of erôs for the patient within the desired victim, hence the use of erotic
Such extreme emotions along with the added excitement of magic would make for an intense dramatic scene in imagined literature.

Magic in literature is also portrayed as fickle and dangerous, as was the case with poor Lucius being transformed into an ass after witnessing and coveting the transformation of a beautiful witch into an owl. Perhaps making women typical magicians was a literary technique in order to show that magic should not be attempted by amateurs or taken lightly by clients of scribes and magicians. This thought goes along with Graf’s theory that in literature erotic magic was intentionally attributed to female characters in order to make the practice appear strictly feminine, and not suitable for young men. Magic in the hands of young, amateur men could be potentially dangerous, especially if the ancient participants fully believed in a literal interpretation of the magic they used. Manipulation, torture, disembodiment, or even death to the victim was possible in erotic curses. The intense potential for power that knowledge of magic entails could be seen as even more threatening in the hands of professional women, such as the beautiful witch Lucius envies. A heightened sense of power and danger would be easy for male authors to achieve by placing fictional women in such magically powerful positions over untrained men. This is shown in Sophocles’ Women of Trachis as well. Deianeira, a mortal, was able to (accidentally) kill Heracles, an incredibly powerful half-immortal son of Zeus, with a small amount of blood. Heracles had successfully completed countless difficult tasks and survived, yet his own wife

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152 Winkler, Constraints of Desire, 82.
153 Graf, Magic, 189.
154 Sophocles, Women of Trachis, line 572-579.
successfully ended his life after ending her own. Men in the ancient world might have felt this same fear of the potential power of women and magic.

A definite possibility behind the discrepancy could have been a fear of female agency in ancient Greek and Roman societies. The powers of magic described above would have been accepted knowledge in the ancient world. Everyone believed in the potential of magic to alter specific aspects of their lives. Women living within such overtly patriarchal cultures were bound to desire greater agency and control over components of their lives that were closely controlled. The few number of erotic curse tablets and spells that women purchased is a sign that at least some women defied the social constructs that restricted them to specific types of magical practices. An even greater accomplishment is that the women reacted against their passive roles in society. Their decisions to purchase erotic magic from a male professional and leave tangible evidence of such defiance show their agency.

Even though there about only about ten examples of female defiance in the form of erotic curse tablets, there is a possibility that more tablets could be unearthed. Since scholars have just recently considered the topics of ancient magic and ancient women to be important, more interest in ancient magical women could bring to light more examples of authentic erotic magic.

The juxtaposition between how literature has treated ancient women’s overwhelming knowledge and use of curse tablets for the purposes of love magic and the evidence of remaining magical texts that clearly show men’s monopoly on erotic tablets is quite clear. It is curious why scholars whose studies focus on ancient curse tablets continue to analyze references to erotic magic in literature alongside the hundreds of known tablets that show such a vast discrepancy. Either ancient women were aware of the potential power of curse
tablets in the matters of love, and actively chose not to create them or go to a professional in order to have them created against a male victim, or the literature did not reflect an exact reality in ancient society. A lack of tangible evidence, in this case curse tablets created by women, refutes the idea that only women practiced and had knowledge of this specific type of magic. If the literature did not reflect a literal representation on women in ancient societies in this case, the reasoning behind the continuous gender reversal should be questioned.

The most plausible possibility seems to be that everyone knew about curse tablets and erotic magic in the ancient world. This would also imply that almost the entire ancient population believed in amulets as well. Amulets were seen as a means of protection from either known or unknown ill will. If a man believed a local competitor had cursed his business, he could simply purchase an amulet to counteract the curse tablet created against him. The same would be true if a woman believed a curse tablet had been created in order to control her sexual desires. An amulet would protect the woman and make the gods or spirits lessen their control over her. Thousands of amulets and hundreds and hundreds of examples of durable curse tablets have survived from the ancient Mediterranean world, and all but nine have been created for men to use, not women. If both women and men knew about harmful love magic, which seems to be the most plausible concept since both men and women were involved in the curses, whether a man cursed a woman or vice versa, then there has to be a reason as to why most of the classical literature depicts only women using this type of magic.

Since the literature was written by men and performed for a probably male-dominated audience, any female characters or discussion of women would not be contested by the readers or consumers of these texts. Instead of attempting to represent an accurate portrayal of reality, male writers could use women characters however they saw fit; this does not mean
that all aspects of women characters in classical literature are mirrored depictions of ancient women. It seems as if scholars of antiquity have been trying so hard to understand the lives of ancient women that they rely too heavily on literature that was meant for entertainment, not as a recording of historical and cultural facts. Like Theocritus’s elaborate poem mentioned above, classical works were meant to be memorized, rehearsed, and performed for the enjoyment of a crowd. Even ancient writers of biographical history, such as Suetonius and Tacitus, were known to embellish truths in order to create a more interesting story. In Tacitus’s biographical work on the emperors in his *Annals*, found in Daniel Ogden’s 2002 *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, Tacitus writes of the many forms of harmful magic that were thought to have killed Germanicus, the eldest son of Nero Claudius Drusus and Antonia Minor and father of the notorious emperor Caligula, including poisons and curse tablets hidden in the walls of his home. Tacitus later says that Germanicus’s once reliable confidant, Piso, was the one who put the tablets in the walls in order to bring sickness and death. Along with Piso, his wife, Plancina, and a known “witch,” Martina, were also accused of conspiring against the ruler and using harmful magic that led to his death.

There is a noticeable distinction between ancient authors’ portrayal of magical use in the different genres of literary sources discussed above. Imaginative literary sources (novels, plays, and epic poetry) by authors such as Theocritus, Sophocles, Ovid, and Apuleius depict primarily women using magic in their fictional accounts, rather than men. Historical sources,

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156 Tacitus, *Annals* 2.69.
such as Tacitus’s *Annals*, and works of empirical study, such as Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, include both men and women in their descriptions of magical use. These latter authors intended to create an accurate representation of truthful events they believed to have occurred. The inclusion of both men and women in these accounts more closely resembles the empirical evidence of magic from the ancient world.

However, creative interpretation and some embellishment of factual events were also common in ancient sources, and ancient scholars did not need to cite their sources as modern historians do. Even if a historian like Tacitus believed the stories he retold to be true, and even if he strived to be as accurate as possible in his presentation of events, modern scholars cannot guarantee that all the information found in his works is indeed factual, and face a risk when they reproduce such information without questioning it in any way. This can be particularly true when ancient “non-imaginative” authors focus on the activities of women, whose real lives are often hidden from view and could have been a source of speculation and gossip rather than empirical research.
CHAPTER 4
CHRISTIAN LITERATURE AND EROTIC MAGIC

A rise in the popularity of creating curse tablets in the ancient Mediterranean world coincided with the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century CE. Curse tablets were most common during this time period, even though conversions to Christianity grew rapidly, especially in Egypt, which had a large Christian population. Evidence of erotic magic can be found in Christian sources as well as erotic curse tablets and spells.

The types of literature that Christian writers produced were completely different than the Greco-Roman authors. The motive of writers of imaginative literature was mainly to entertain; they could embellish certain details and facts in order to create a more dramatic story. Women’s use of erotic magic has a different impact in popular literature than the same topic in Christian writings. Christian commentaries and hagiographies included instances of erotic magic in order to show the devious nature of such practices. The inclusion of male and female saints using erotic magic, or having knowledge of such magic, prior to their sainthood was not intended as a literal representation of his or her life. It was a strategy used by writers to show how far the men and women had come from their past, and to show the power of the Christian God to change such awful prior habits.

Polytheistic Magic as Religion
The term “magic” as it relates to the ancient world, cannot be defined separately from the term “religion.” Magic, science, and religion were all connected so entirely that there is no way to define one without mentioning the others. In this case, the ancient erotic magic that has been discussed throughout this work should be seen as a series of socially accepted rituals that were deemed necessary in order to bring about the proper response from the requested gods in resolving the agent’s need. It is quite similar to a prayer that a Christian follower might offer to their God.

Ancient Greeks and Romans believed that they could manipulate their lives through a combination of specific magical practices and the help of their powerful gods. As seen in curse tablets and spells, there were precise actions and words that were required to make the magic work correctly. Curse tablets could be used for certain reasons, such as curing diseases, deciding the outcome of a public sporting event, manipulating one’s opponent in a legal or judicial case, or matters of love and desire. All of these intentions were presented to a professional scribe or magician, who then provided the necessary tools and words required in order to force assistance from the gods or deities. It was believed that with all of the proper procedures, the requested plea would be answered.

The necessary process of fulfilling a desire with the help of a professional and gods is exactly the same as the ritual required in early Christianity. Intentions, or prayers, were brought to the attention of a professional, or priest, who could then provide the client with the necessary words and rituals necessary in order to relieve him of his affliction with the assistance of a god.

One of the main differences between Greek and Roman polytheistic religious views and Christian monotheistic views is the relation of the gods to mortal people. In ancient
Greek religion, the gods were seen as having human qualities, both good and bad, and committing heinous acts against each other and mortals. They were not an ideal that humans should strive to emulate. Romans accepted the Greek version of the gods in their religious beliefs as well. Citizens could pray to their household gods, or any of the established gods, goddesses, or deities in the upper pantheon. However, in the Greek and Roman polytheistic religion, there is an aspect of reciprocity involved. People could request help from the gods, and expect that their requests would be answered. If a man requested a desired sexual union through a curse tablet, and the act was not accomplished, the man might feel the need to commit an act of retaliation against the god or goddess: he could have mutilated a statue of the god from whom he requested help to show that he expected the god to produce results. There was an accepted ritual system, and as long as the man did everything correctly it was expected that the god would answer his request.

In the monotheistic Christian religion, there was no corresponding allowance for mortals to manipulate or demand action from the Christian God. A man could go through the same required rituals of bringing his request to a professional in order to offer his plea to God and hope for his intention to be answered, but he could not demand any results. In order for ancient citizens to fully accept and agree with the new Christian religious beliefs, they would have needed to change their entire way of life, not just the belief that they had control over their gods.

In his book, Dickie argues that Greeks and Romans saw magicians, or people who practiced magic, as people who treated the gods as creatures who could be manipulated and
controlled according to their will, or that of their clients. This is contrasted with a priest or religious worshipper who would humble himself before the Christian God. The negative view of magicians that Dickie seems to think all Greeks and Romans in the ancient world possessed makes it difficult to believe that so many people would engage in purchasing curse tablets that demanded results from the gods. Dickie sees magic as negative, yet the concept that it was an unacceptable practice in the ancient world conflicts with the amount of tangible evidence scholars have analyzed. People in the ancient Greco-Roman world were not guided solely by rational ideas: superstitious or irrational beliefs or behaviors were not automatically deemed as deviant or wrong in some way. However, in the eyes of a newly formed and enforced Christian church, the “magical” and superstitious beliefs and practices needed to be redirected in order to obtain a greater amount of control over new regions of converts.

Evidence of Erotic Magic in Christian Sources

The types of literature that Christian writers produced were completely different than the Greco-Roman authors. The motive of writers of imaginative literature was mainly to entertain: they could embellish certain details and facts in order to make a more dramatic story. Women’s use of erotic magic had a different impact in popular literature than the same topic in Christian writings. Christian commentaries and hagiographies included instances of erotic magic in order to show the devious nature of such practices. The inclusion of male and female saints using magic prior to their sainthood was not intended as a literal representation of their lives. It was a strategy used by writers to show how far the saints had come from their past, and to show the power of the Christian God to change such awful prior habits.

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It has been established that in Greco-Roman imaginative sources, women are shown as more likely to practice erotic magic against men. In order to show the influence of erotic magic within Christian-authored writings, both imaginative and non-imaginative, references of such magic can be studied. If the outcome is similar to Greco-Roman sources and mainly women, not men, are shown as initiating erotic magic, then it could be possible to theorize as to why this trend continued through Christian writings. Since Christian writings are not relevant to Winkler’s original thesis about women-authored erotic magic in Greco-Roman literature, any references to magic in general can be included here.

There are quite a few examples of curse tablets, spells, and amulets that follow the exact same template as earlier versions, except the agent of the magic evokes only the Jewish or Christian God instead of a demon or numerous Greco-Roman or Egyptian gods. The frequently cited tablet mentioned above created by Domitiana against Urbanus in third century CE North Africa is one such curse. The majority of her tablet listed many of the accomplishments of God as evidence of his overwhelming power. Another fifth century CE amulet was created to protect Alexandra from any harm, including demons, spells, and curse tablets. Amulets were a powerful way for people to protect themselves from any other type of magical influence. The author of this amulet on behalf of Alexandra wished to keep her from harm “while she is praying or on the road or away from home, either in a river or in the baths.”\textsuperscript{158} The amulet ends in a Christian-like prayer, “One God and his Christ, help Alexandra.”\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{158} Gager, \textit{Curse Tablets}, 234.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
This lengthy amulet was intended to be a physical representation of the agent’s prayer that would be worn around her neck. Amulets used prior to the popularity of Christianity were created for the exact same purposes and worn on the body, except they were a physical representation of a spoken spell. In this amulet, the agent describes the many achievements of the Christian God before she requests protection. Interestingly, the amulet requests that Alexandra also be protected from demons “spells and curse tablets.”\textsuperscript{160} Amulets such as this one were used to protect people from any possible negative influences from other forms of purchased magic. The continued use of amulets for protection after Christianity was legalized and enforced shows how powerful the ancient magic was believed to be. It could also show that it was difficult to make people completely sever ties with former rituals that were seen as beneficial and necessary. The girl used an amulet to protect her from other forms of magic; she clearly believed in the power that magical rituals possessed.

In order to highlight Christian magic used in Egypt, David Frankfurter offered translations of Coptic magic in ancient Egypt in a sourcebook titled \textit{Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power} (1994). There are 112 curses, spells, and amulets that range from dates between the first and twelfth century CE. About twenty of these curses and spells involve erotic magic. In the introduction to the chapter “Sexual Spells,” Frankfurter claims, “Such rituals were surely the equal property and tactics of both men and women.”\textsuperscript{161} His suggestion that men and women had equal access to erotic curse tablets and spells is expected, since he cites only Winkler as an expert on the topic and mentions his views

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 233.

exclusively. Only two of the twenty examples of erotic magic were female-authored, but a few others were amulets written on behalf of women to protect them from the sexual advances of men. The main difference from previously mentioned erotic magic is the deities that are invoked. The curses and spells presented here are exactly the same as previous curses from the Greco-Roman world.

One of Frankfurter’s lengthy examples of erotic magic in Coptic Egypt is dates from the eleventh century CE, but the story originated in the third century CE. Cyprian of Antioch was thought to be a powerful magician who then changed his ways and became a bishop after Justina, a Christian virgin, rejected his advances. In an attempt to gain her affections, Cyprian wrote a lengthy curse containing the same violent, aggressive language seen in other erotic curse tablets. Throughout the spell, the client calls upon the archangel Gabriel to assist him by forcing the female victim to come to his home and fulfill his sexual desires. The spell wishes Gabriel to go to the woman, “filling her heart … with burning desire and hot longing … The father must have no mercy upon her, the son must show her no pity, the holy spirit must give no sleep to her eyes … I adjure you, O Gabriel: Go to N. daughter of N. hang her by the hair of her head and by the lashes of her eyes. Bring her to him N. son of N. in longing and desire.”

This erotic magic is different from the Greco-Roman versions only because of the Christian references. Gabriel is the main entity in the spell, but it is interesting that Cyprian includes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which are the consubstantial trinity in the Christian and modern Catholic church. Even more interesting, there is evidence of reciprocity in this

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specific example. Cyprian claims that if Gabriel does not fulfill the wishes of the client, then he will despise, revile, and loathe Gabriel. A threat against the gods is much more common in polytheistic tablets than Christian magic, but perhaps it was excusable since there is no mention of loathing God, only the archangel Gabriel.

Another Christian writer, Jerome, wrote of love magic in his *Life of Saint Hilarion the Hermit* in the fourth or fifth century CE. In this hagiography, Hilarion apparently studied in Memphis, Egypt in order to study magic. Once he returned home to Gaza he created a curse tablet with magical words and figures, and then buried this tablet under the threshold of the house where the woman he desired lived. She was a young, Christian virgin who had previously denied his advances. After the erotic curse tablet was buried at her house, “Immediately the young virgin went crazy.” Even by Christian writers, this type of magic was thought to be powerful enough to manipulate the sexual behavior of the young girl, who had previously devoted her life to the Christian God.

Jerome could have based this moment in Hilarion’s life on an actual occurrence; however, it is also possible that he included a tale of erotic magic in order to show how far Hilarion had once been from the role of a devoted Christian. Instead of representing reality, instances of erotic magic in hagiographies could have been inserted to show a lack of morality. As shown above, there were curse tablets created that evoked only the Jewish or Christian God, so the practice of creating erotic magic occurred among Jews and Christians during the time Jerome wrote this biography. If Hilarion was portrayed as being exceptionally far from following the Christian God, then Hilarion’s eventual devotion to God

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163 Ibid., 157.

164 Ibid., 261.
would seem that much more remarkable. This would also show God’s power in converting such delinquent people, and God’s forgiveness of even the greatest of offences. Perhaps magic was seen as opposite from the Christian religion, so it would make for dramatic tales of conversion if the agents were known to create magic.

In an article titled “The Perils of Love: Magic and Countermagic in Coptic Egypt” (2001), David Frankfurter analyzes fourth century CE Coptic monks and their required knowledge of magic in order to counter curses inflicted upon unsuspecting Christians. Frankfurter makes an interesting point that is barely mentioned: monks in Coptic Egypt would have known and possibly provided people with erotic binding curses and the countermagic to reverse the spells. Frankfurter’s article supports the concept that magic was still practiced and accepted among common citizens of Greco-Roman Egypt after the fourth century CE when Christianity was prevalent and enforced. This time period is also when the most curse tablets were created, based on those unearthed and translated. The rise in curse tablets could represent a rebuttal against newly enforced Christian religious beliefs and practices.

Frankfurter’s main piece of evidence is a story about a girl who was thought to be turned into a horse because she was a victim of an erotic curse tablet. The same tale was found in two separate fifth century CE sources. Both claim that the girl was Christian, and either married or a virgin. In either case, she was unattainable to the young, Egyptian man who created an erotic curse tablet against her because of his sexual desire for her.165 Either

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her parents or husband request the help of a monk, Apa Marcarius, who locks her in a cell for seven days, prays for her returned health, anoints her with sacred oil, and eventually cures her from her afflicted state. It is difficult to tell if the stories portray her as an actual horse, or if the magic caused her husband to view her as a horse, but either way the curse tablet worked correctly. What is telling in this tale is that the monk knew how to cure such magic, and through the assistance of the Christian God, was able to heal the innocent woman. Another aspect of the tale is that the monk, Marcarius, believed it was not the powerful magic that changed the girl: she was cursed because she had not accepted the Eucharist for over five weeks.166 This component withholds power from the magical practices and the gods who assisted the love-stricken Egyptian man, and places the powers to both harm and heal with Christian leaders and God.

Erotic magic is mentioned again in the hagiographic biography of Saint Irene, a ninth century CE Cappadocian nun. In the description of her good deeds, it mentions how the nuns encountered a woman who had been cursed with love magic. The nuns found figurines of the woman and a man embracing, which was a form of erotic magic that was usually accompanied by a lead curse tablet. The woman’s former lover apparently purchased the figurines from a professional magician or scribe in order to renew their sexual desires. The woman claimed that unless she could see her former suitor again she would hang herself, and she tried to flee and go to him. This is a common theme found on curse tablets from the fourth century CE and before. The victim of the curse was meant to experience a burning sensation, and was not allowed to eat, drink, or sleep until she completed the demands of the

166 Frankfurter, “Perils,” 481.
client of the curse. If the woman would not submit to the client of the curse, then the gods were to torture her. Since this biography was written so late after curse tablets were most prevalent, it is interesting to see that the fears of love magic perpetuated. The author of the hagiography knew specific details about erotic magic and cursing techniques, which could mean the magical practices were continued, or more probably that the author of the hagiography knew of magical spell books that contained the instructions for such violent erotic magic.

These examples from Christian hagiographies demonstrate a different presentation of gender roles in the practice of magic than was shown in ancient literary sources. All of the sources show men acting as agents in erotic magic against female victims, which is opposite from previous non-Christian examples of erotic magic in literary representations. A possible reason for the difference from previous literary examples in these hagiographic examples could be that because the male saints were the objects of the biographies, their sinful behaviors were highlighted before they turned to Christianity. The theme of erotic magic would cover both lustful behaviors and “pagan” practices of magic that were both seen as negative behavior to the Christian church. The inclusion of erotic magic against women practiced by the male saints would show that they participated in negative behavior that God would need to forgive and alter before the men were welcomed into sainthood.

Another possible explanation for the lack of female-authored erotic magic in Christian sources is that the Christian authors did not partake in the same anti-female perspectives as previous ancient authors. The hagiographies were not intended to be read before an audience for entertainment purposes; they were thought to be realistic and accurate depictions of the events of saints’ lives. There is not a focus on making men appear as
masculine as possible and women appear feminine and unpredictable. In these writings, the authors were not held accountable for continuing social gender constructs that existed in the ancient Greco-Roman world. A cultural fear of magical women was not a concern for the Christian authors, who strived to record what they believed to be accurate representations of the lives of saints.

Another group of Christian sources that mention the continued use of magic are homilies and commentaries that Christian scholars wrote or recited to an audience. These are carefully crafted personal opinions that the authors could infuse with passionate remarks against certain practices that they and the Christian church deemed as sinful. Like the ancient imaginative sources discussed above, homilies could reflect personal fears and opinions of the authors, rather than actual events.

A Christian commentary on magic written by Basil of Caeserea, a commentator writing on canon law in his Epistles during the mid-fourth century CE, mentions spells that could possibly cause death. He writes, “This is the sort of thing that women frequently do, who endeavour to attract a love to themselves by means of spells and tablets and who give to them (their targets) charms that make their thinking cloudy.”"167 Women are accused of initiating such erotic magic against men, even though there is no evidence. Unless there were many more examples of female-authored erotic magic during that time, the assumption that women were the main clients of such magic is pure opinion.

A negative perspective against women, not grounded in actual practice or evidence, could explain why Basil of Caeserea wrote that typically women engaged in erotic magical

167 Gager, Curse Tablets, 260.
practices against men, which he deemed as sinful. This is another example of an anti-female ancient scholar, whose views of his surroundings were clouded by a negative perspective of women. Modern male scholars who wish to cling to the notion of a “rational” ancient world turn to sources similar to Basil of Caeserea’s depiction of magical women. By claiming that mainly women created seemingly “irrational” polytheistic, erotic magic, both ancient and modern male scholars can further distance magic from the “rational” world of typical Greek and Roman men.

Although the popularity of curse tablets lessened after the fourth century CE, clearly knowledge of such magical practices continued for centuries after their widespread use. In a sermon from a German eighth century CE leader Pseudo-Augustine, titled *Homily on Sacrilegious Practices*, the practice of creating curse tablets and protective amulets is specifically condemned by the Christian writer. He states,

> Whoever … thinks that it is possible to avert (harm) through the use of inscribed lead tablets … they are not Christians but pagans. … Whoever produces writings of Solomon; whoever ties around the neck of humans or dumb animals any characters, whether on papyrus, on parchment, or on metal tablets made from bronze, iron, lead, or any other material, such a person is not a Christian but a pagan.\(^{168}\)

Since this was produced so late after Christianity was enforced, it is telling that Greco-Roman magic was still known and utilized by supposed Christian converts. Curiously, the writer knew such detailed information about such magic, which could show that there were more than a few instances of curse tablets in order for this phenomenon to be seen as a big enough problem to forbid. The practice of creating curse tablets is mentioned in only two of the chapters within the homily, which suggests that even more magical acts were desirable to converted Christians. The author does not distinguish between men and women’s use of

\(^{168}\) Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 264.
magic. His threat against pagan magical behavior is meant for everyone who still believed in the power of magic.

The authors of Christian hagiographic literary sources demonstrate a motive for referencing magical practices different from that of Christian authors of homilies and commentaries. In hagiographies, authors depict male saints as practicing magic prior to their religious transformations in order to emphasize the sinfulness of their lives before their conversion, not to record actual events of magical use. Presenting men as practicing magic before their transformative experience parallels the depiction of female saints as prostitutes before their conversions: both represent an extreme level of sinfulness that is washed away by their transformations into holy Christians. In Christian homilies and commentaries, authors condemned everyone for the use of magic, because curses, spells, and potions that called upon the power of Greco-Roman and Egyptian gods were seen as sinful and unfitting practices for Christian followers. Neither set of Christian authors strove to create accurate reflections of magical use by men and women in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Christian authors of saints’ lives and homilies had an agenda to detect, present, and punish sinful behavior. Because magic was viewed as an acceptable practice for hundreds of years prior to the existence of Christianity, however, centuries of belief and practice could not be easily altered or forgotten, especially such a useful and powerful tool as magic. Indeed, the continuing practice of magic after the triumph of Christianity in the Roman world and beyond suggests that this belief in its efficacy persists despite attempts by Christian leaders to wipe it out.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Magic was a fundamental component in the Greco-Roman world for centuries. The use of curse tablets and spells to induce feelings of passion in the victim was a practice typically used by men against female victims, which is shown by the existing evidence of erotic magic, mainly in the form of lead curse tablets and spell books from the ancient world. Authors of imaginative literature from the ancient Greco-Roman world, conversely, typically assert that women were the main practitioners of such magic. This contradiction seems not to have been a source of conflict for the ancient authors, because the imaginative literature was not created to present an exact reflection of reality, but instead to show the existing fears within the authors’ societies. In yet another reversal, imaginative literature from Christian writers, especially saints’ lives, overturns the typical Greek and Roman non-Christian representation of magic: men are usually presented as the creators of erotic magic against unknowing women. One reason for this change might be that Christian writers used the theme of magic to represent sinful behavior of individuals, whether in the lives of saints or in homilies, condemning the use of “pagan” rituals, rather than as a reflection of anxiety directed specifically at women’s agency.

Although both ancient and modern scholars claim that women frequently used other, “feminine” forms of magic, such as love potions or amulets, most male scholars who have written about magic in the ancient world misrepresent women’s use of magic by focusing on
the presentation of magic in imaginative literature, instead of on the actual evidence of female-authored magic. Even though the few known examples of female-authored curse tablets are exceptional, since curse tablets were a typically “masculine” form of magic, modern-day historians still insist on the ubiquity of women engaging as agents of magic rather than as its victims. The available evidence suggests that the opposite is the case, but the interpretations of authors such as Ovid and Apuleius are privileged over more empirical analysis.

The perspective of ancient women is difficult to ascertain from the known evidence from the ancient Greco-Roman world. By using methodologies such as thick description and mentalities to study ancient women a greater understanding can be reached. There are many more areas of ancient women’s lives that could be better understood if scholars did not rely so heavily on ancient male authors’ fictional female characters. Ancient women lived in societies dominated by men. Their individual actions and thoughts would have been difficult for male authors to capture in literature even if that was their intent. It is more likely that ancient authors created female characters that represented a dramatized version of their personal opinions on women.

Whatever their motives, both ancient and Christian male scholars wrote about magic and women’s use of magic in order to portray the negative social characteristics associated with women’s supposedly “irrational” natures. Women were viewed as being not just feminine, but the opposite of masculine. Uncontrollable emotion that led to magical use was seen as a feminine quality that only women should succumb to. Female characters portrayed irrational thoughts and actions in order to distinguish them from rational men, and women were frequently depicted as causing the downfall of unsuspecting men. The demi-god
Herakles was killed because of his wife’s misguided actions, not because of a flaw that he himself possessed. A moral of this story was that his wife should not have been trusted. If she were carefully “protected” from outside influences by her husband, male family members, or the overseeing powers of male government officials, both she and her family would have been secure. This element of control was ever-present in ancient patriarchal societies, and the literature that portrayed women as being unpredictable and dangerous perpetuated and justified women’s domination by men.

Because ancient authors were not attempting to recreate actual situations, they had license to write anything they liked. Authors consciously portrayed women as agents in magic in order to further the idea that men should be suspicious of women’s malicious intentions, and justified the constant male control of women. Men already used magic in attempts to control the emotions and physical actions of women. With constant reminders of women’s deceit in dramas, stories, and even comedies, the concept of men’s necessary control of women’s disruptive and dangerous magical behavior became further embedded in ancient cultures. Male authors’ creation of malicious female characters continued anti-female attitudes in society. Although they often effectively navigated the complex gender relations within families and societies, women consented to this constant control by submitting to male domination and actively attempting to maintain their respectability and stability. This patriarchal bargain caused women to accept the cultural negative attitudes toward them, even though some women actively went against their restraints by purchasing masculine forms of magic.

The use of erotic magic did not end with the Christian era; it continued into modern times as seen in the witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century. In addition, the fear of
beautiful women engaging in erotic magic, such as several examples from sixteenth-century Italy discussed by the historian Guido Ruggiero, seems to have persisted in the West authors into the modern era. The creator of magic, whether male or female, is feared by society because of the element of control the magician wields as well as the secretive nature of the magic. This fear is magnified when women, who are identified as guided by irrational desires rather than by rational will, are associated with magical practices even when the historical evidence suggests otherwise. This association of magic with evil, yet alluring, women adds to the anxiety of ancient men whose society depends on controlling women’s sexuality, public personae, and status. Even though women might have been victims of erotic curses far more frequently than men, the equation of women with irrationality begun in the ancient world has been translated into modern interpretations. This means that the agency exhibited by women who acquired amulets and purchased charms, but rarely inscribed lead curse tablets, has been reinterpreted as dangerous to the social order of the ancient world, or as merely a series of commercial exchanges designed to end in marriage. Moreover, when women exhibited an unusual amount of agency, such as hiring scribes to write curse tablets, it becomes necessary to reduce their authority and agency into a form more acceptable to patriarchal ancient authors and their modern-day counterparts: such women are sex workers who emasculate men; or they are stand-ins for their fathers who are actually negotiating respectable marriages for daughters.

It is clear that this is a topic deserving of further study.

Guido Ruggiero, Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 57-69. Ruggiero offers a few examples of ancient erotic magic used in sixteenth-century Italy. A woman created a figurine in order to control the desires of her absent lover, and a young man created a curse tablet in order to gain the affections of his teacher’s wife.
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VITA

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