Assignment I

CLST 360A: Magic and Witchcraft in the Greek and Roman Worlds.

University of British Columbia, Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies

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Due October 4th

Length: 1000-1400 words

The aim of this assignment is to help you understand:

* the elements that go into creating a spell that made it work in ancient terms
* the importance for magicians of understanding both the general principles of magic and an individual client’s needs both in concrete and psychological terms
* how spells were activated, and why the forms of its activation are important
* the style and forms of ancient magic spells

Assignment I: Design a curse:

1. for a client facing a court case

**or**

1. for a client cheated by a business establishment

**The clients:**

Client I. Agathos is an Athenian landowner in 300 BCE who has been accused of cutting down sacred olive stumps and thus offending the goddess Athena.[[1]](#footnote-1) He has hired the best lawyer and orator he could afford (and he is quite wealthy) and has arranged for a parade of witnesses to testify that all of that extra olive oil he had last fall was from his own stores laid down over a number of years through intense effort. However, he is facing a very good orator in the prosecution, a man named Democritus, and he too has witnesses. So he is seeking to tip things into his favour by cursing them and all of their ability to act effectively in court. So he has come to you for a curse that will do that. He is willing to pay for complexity, but not willing to risk exposure and another prosecution for activating any curse. So he wants you to also come up with a plan for activating and follow through with it. He is very keen on value for money and likes bells and whistles, so you will need to factor that in, especially as he kept saying, ‘don’t try and cheat me by telling me simplicity is the most effectiive thing when appealing to the gods!’ when he gave you the comission.

Client II. Scintilla Maecenas. A freedwoman of the Emperor Augustus’ chief minister and advisor, and a successful trader in honey. In 10 BCE she travelled to Athens to buy their famous honey and also obtain several hives to bring back to Rome. She also unfortunately stayed in the worst inn in Athens, and everywhere else was booked out for the Great Dionysia. It was smelly, dirty, filled with garlic, leek, and onion traders, someone stole her best cloak and all of her secretary’s clothing when they were asleep, then she got a ridiculous bill at the end where they charged her an enormous sum for eating there every night, which she certainly was not foolish enough to do. When she refused to pay they said they would call the local watch, all of whom were close friends, and throw her in prison until the case was settled, which would mean she would miss the window for sailing before the winter storms set in and risk her bees when she travelled. So she paid, but now she is back in Rome and extremely angry. She is writing to the emperor and the local governor to complain but she also wants to strike these people down by magic. She is very concerned about how you will manage to make sure you can ruin their lives from such a distance, so you need to reassure her on that front before she pays up. She also has a scrap of cloth from the innkeeper’s cloak that she managed to snip off. It is pretty grimy and smelly so probably packed with their essence.

Suggested steps for this assignment:

1. Read through the descriptions of each client and select one. Think about what would each to them in a spell and note that down.
2. Read Gager and Luck for similar curses and look at your notes about why each element in included and how they work; select those that deal with a relevant situation or show features that your client might like
3. Combine elements to appeal to the client you have chosen and deal with their situation; add your own twists and additions to make it yours and unique, remember that it has to fit within the norms of ancient Greek and Roman magic.
4. Think about what material(s) you will construct the curse out of and whether you will also construct any accompanying items such as voodoo dolls. Writing that down is part of the assignment.
5. Write up your curse including all the elements that you believe your client will accept as effective. The more it matches what they want the higher your fee can be.
6. Write up a plan for activating the curse that someone in the ancient world would think was effective
7. Remember you are in the ancient world, and have to appeal to ancient tastes and mentalities.
8. You may want to add drawings; these are a feature of later spells in particular
9. Do not forget *magicae voces!* It’s not a real ancient curse without them.

**Important: this is being written in an ancient context so you cannot include modern elements or elements from other ancient cultures they would not have been in contact with.** (The Romans and Greeks were in contact and traded with a lot of peoples, so that doesn’t restrict you too much. Though anything from the Americas or Australasia is certainly right out.)

Layout: (the word counts are in there to guide you and to show you the weight given to the elements in terms of marking

1. Type of curse and name of client
2. Brief introduction to the curse explaining briefly your overall aims and why you think it would be seen as effective by your client (250-350 words)
3. The curse. This can be as long or as short or as it needs to be, but remember you need to explain the elements in V, so you want to take that into account. I suggest c. 100-300 words.
4. Instructions on how to activate it or how you will activate it (150-250 words)
5. Comment on the elements (500-600 words). This is the longest part, so it is very important.

Total: 1000-1,400 words

There is no need for a bibliography unless you are using texts other than the texts assigned for the course (Gager and Luck). Do not use the internet for this one, unless it is a website we have discussed together or in class. Honestly you do not want the results of these internet searches, and you will only come up with a lot of really problematic information.

However you should cite **specific spells in Gager and Luck** (or elsewhere) that have the same features that your spell is using or that you are taking from. This would include materials used, *voces magicae,* names of deities, the location/time the spell is supposed to be performed, any other ritual actions the spell requires, etc. Thus, if your spell uses myrrh as an ingredient, you would cite a spell that uses this also as an ingredient.

What I will be looking for in your commentary:

1. Information on the agent (the person performing the spell – presumably you, but possibly the client or someone else), the victim and how the magic is supposed to operate (on what principles will it work: sympathy? Contagion? Some other means?).

2. Why you used the particular elements or features that you did. Thus if your spell used nails from a shipwreck, it would be useful to say why, and that why should be based on ancient reasoning (nails from a shipwreck were thought to be very effective due to the violence they had absorbed and all the death that shipwreck had no doubt entailed(. You may also put your own spin on some of the ingredients/actions/etc. – innovation and adaptation were part of ancient magic. However, your innovations should make sense to an ancient audience. So you could have nails from a shipwreck on the Nile or the Euphrates or from a particular naval disaster where a lot of people had died.

**The spell should use only resources available in the Graeco-Roman world. Sadly, this excludes lots of exciting and potentially explosive ingredients that would add a certain colour to a spell. But it does mean that you can include lots of things that people in antiquity believed existed.**

Don’t forget to proof read. Yes, you have to proof read even *magicae voces* to make sure they would match what an ancient client would expect from seeing other spells.

1. There was an actual law case about such an event. We have the defence speech, but I have changed the names to protect the innocent. Cha-chung! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)