**CLST 360: Magic and Witchcraft in the Greek and Roman World**

**October 9, 2019 Magical ingredients for love magic**

**Pliny the Elder on various love charms, potions, and aphrodisiacs (a selection)**

Book VIII

**XXXVIII**. A native of the Nile resembling the crocodile but smaller even than the ichneumon is the skink, which is an outstanding antidote against poisons, and also an aphrodisiac for males.

Book IX

**XLI**. There is a quite small fish that frequents rocks, called the remora. This is believed to make ships go more slowly by sticking to their hulls, from which it has received its name; and for this reason it also has an evil reputation for supplying a love-charm and for acting as a spell to hinder litigation in the courts, which accusations it counterbalances only by its laudable property of stopping fluxes of the womb in pregnant women and holding back the offspring till the time of birth. It is not included however among articles of diet. It is thought by some to have feet, but Aristotle denies this, adding that its limbs resemble wings.

Book XIII

LI… Juba relates that in the neighbourhood of the Cave-dwellers' Islands a bush grows at the bottom of the sea called 'hair of Isis,' which has no leaves and resembles coral, and that when it is lopped it changes its colour to black and turns hard, and when it falls it breaks; and so does another marine bush the Greek name for which means 'the Graces' eyelid,' which is a potent love-charm; he says women make bracelets and necklaces of it. He declares that when being taken the bush is aware of it and turns as hard as horn, blunting the edge of the knife, but that if it is cut before it is aware of the danger that threatens it, it turns into stone.

Book XIX

**XLIV**. A cursory description can suffice for the rest of the plants. The best time for sowing basil is said to be at the Feast of Pales, and some say in autumn also, advising that when it is sown for winter the seed should be moistened with vinegar. Also rocket and cress can be grown very easily either in summer or in winter. Rocket particularly thinks nothing of cold. Its properties are quite different from those of lettuce, and it acts as an aphrodisiac; consequently it is usually blended with lettuce in a salad, so that the excessive chilliness of the lettuce may be tempered and counterbalanced by being mingled with an equal amount of heat.

Book XX: Remedies from plants

IX. The turnip too has its medicinal properties. A hot application cures chilblains, besides preventing the feet from being chilled. A hot decoction of it is good even for cold gout, and raw turnip, pounded and mixed with salt, for every ailment of the feet. The seed, made into liniment or drunk in wine, is said to protect against snake bites and poisons; many moreover hold that taken in wine and oil it serves as an antidote. Democritus entirely disapproved of the turnip as a food on the ground that it causes flatulence; Diocles, however, praised it highly, maintaining that it is also aphrodisiac. Dionysius agrees, holding that its effect is greater when it is seasoned with rocket, and that, when roasted and made into an ointment with grease, it is good for pain in the joints.

XV …Orpheus said that there is in staphylinus[[1]](#footnote-1) a love-potion, perhaps because it is a proved fact that when eaten it is an aphrodisiac; for which reason some have declared that by it conception is aided.

XVII. Wild (or stray) skirret is like the cultivated kind and has similar properties. It stimulates the appetite, banishing distaste for food, if taken in vinegar and silphium, or with pepper and honey wine, or if you like with fish sauce. It is both diuretic, as Ophion believes, and an aphrodisiac. Diocles too is of the same opinion, and moreover thinks that it acts as a cordial in convalescence, or is very useful after many vomitings. Heraclides prescribed it for mercury poisoning, for occasional impotence and in convalescence. Hicesius said that the reason why it appeared to be harmful to the stomach was that no one could eat three skirrets in succession; adding however that it was beneficial to convalescents who are beginning to take wine again. The juice, especially of the cultivated variety, checks looseness of the bowels if drunk with goats' milk

XXI… Leek moreover is eaten to counteract the poisons of fungi; it is applied to wounds, is an aphrodisiac, quenches thirst, serves as a pick-me-up after drunkenness, but is said to dim the eyesight, and to cause flatulences which do no harm, however, to the stomach but relax the bowels. Leeks impart brilliance to the voice.

XXIII [Garlic] is believed to act as an aphrodisiac, when pounded with fresh coriander and taken in neat wine. Its drawbacks are that it dulls the sight, causes flatulence, injures the stomach when taken too freely, and creates thirst.

XL Megarian bulbs[[2]](#footnote-2) are a strong aphrodisiac; garden bulbs taken with concentrated must or raisin wine help delivery; wild bulbs compounded with silphium and swallowed in pills relieve intestinal wounds and affections.

XLII … [Asparagus] is aphrodisiac and very useful as a diuretic, except when the bladder has been ulcerated.

XLIII. Wild asparagus is called by some *corruda*, by others Libyan, by the Attics *orminus*. For all the purposes mentioned above its properties are more efficacious than those of the cultivated asparagus, and those of the whiter kind are the more powerful. Both relieve jaundice. As an aphrodisiac, the water in which it has been boiled is recommended to be drunk in doses up to a hemina.

XLVII… Being aphrodisiac [basil] is also administered to horses and asses at the time of service.

XLIX…We have already spoken of rocket as an aphrodisiac; if three leaves of wild rocket plucked with the left hand and pounded are drunk in hydromel, they so act. L. On the other hand cress is antaphrodisiac, but as we have already said sharpens the senses.

Book XXI

LXXXI …Chaplets too made of [Saffron] alleviate intoxication. It induces sleep, has a gentle action on the head, and is an aphrodisiac.

XCII …They say that a spray of [southernwood][[3]](#footnote-3) laid under the pillow, acts as an aphrodisiac, and that the plant is a most effective countercheck of all magic potions given to produce sexual impotence.

CVIII. …The Egyptians plant pesoluta too in their gardens, using it for chaplets. There are two kinds, female and male; both, it is said, placed under the genitals, are antaphrodisiac, especially for men.

Book XXIII

XVIII. The leaves and root of the turpentine-tree[[4]](#footnote-4) are applied locally to gatherings; a decoction of them strengthens the stomach. The seed is taken in wine for headache and strangury; it is a gentle aperient and an aphrodisiac.

XLII. …The ash from the byra tree is good for all the same purposes. They say that if it is mixed with the urine of a castrated ox and taken in either drink or food it is antaphrodisiac.

L…The common reed has the power to extract if freshly pounded, and not the root only, for many hold that the reed itself too has this property. The root applied in vinegar cures dislocations and pains of the spine; the same ground fresh and taken in wine is aphrodisiac.

Book XXV

VII I myself am amazed that the Greeks have described even harmful plants, and not the poisonous ones only, since the state of human life is such that death is frequently a harbour of refuge even for the most excellent of men, Marcus Varro relating that the Roman knight Servius Clodius, owing to the severe pain of gout, was forced to rub his legs all over with a poison, after which that part of his body was as free from sensation as it was from pain. But what excuse was there to point out the means of deranging the mind, of causing abortion, and of many similar crimes. I personally do not mention abortives, nor even love-potion, remembering as I do that the famous general Lucullus was killed by a love-potion, nor yet any other unholy magic, unless it be by way of warning or denunciation, especially as I have utterly condemned all faith in such practices. Enough pains, and more than enough, will have been taken if I point out plants healthful to life and discovered in order to preserve it.

CII. Of the aizoum[[5]](#footnote-5) there are two kinds, the larger of which is planted in earthen pots, and is sometimes called *buphthalmos*, *zoophthalmos*, *tergethron* (because it is useful for love-potions), *hypogeson* (for it generally grows under eaves), although some prefer to call it ambrosia or *amerimon*; Italians call it great sedum, or eye, or little finger.

Book XXVI

LXIII… The Greeks indeed always, when they wish to indicate this aphrodisiac nature of a plant, use the name *satyrion*, so applying it to crataegis, thelygonon, and arrenogonon, the seeds of which resemble testicles. Again, those carrying on their persons the pith of tithymallus branches are said to become thereby more excited sexually. The remarks on this subject made by Theophrastus generally a weighty authority, are fabulous. He says that the lust to have intercourse seventy times in succession has been given by the touch of a certain plant whose name and kind he has not mentioned.

Book XXVII

XLII. Cynosorchis, called by some *orchis*, has leaves like olive leaves, soft, three in number and lying on the ground to the length of half a foot. The root is bulbous, longish, and in two parts, the upper being harder and the lower softer. Found generally in vineyards these are boiled and eaten as are bulbs. If men eat the larger of these roots, male children are said to be conceived, but female if the smaller is eaten by women. In Thessaly men take in goat's milk the softer root as an aphrodisiac, but the harder as an antaphrodisiac. The one part neutralizes the other.

XCIX. To describe phyteuma[[6]](#footnote-6) is in my opinion a waste of time, because it is used only for love-potions

BOOK XXVIII: Remedies from living creatures

VI…as Orpheus and Archelaus write,[[7]](#footnote-7) arrows drawn out of a body and not allowed to touch the ground act as a love-charm upon those under whom they have been placed while they are in bed.

XXIV. This is all the information it would be right for me to repeat, most of which also needs an apology from me. As the rest of it is detestable and unspeakable, let me hasten to leave the subject of remedies from man. Taking the other animals I shall try to find what is striking either in them or in their effects. The blood of an elephant, particularly that of the male, checks all the fluxes that are called rheumatismi; ivory shavings with Attic honey are said to remove dark spots on the face, and ivory dust [clears up] hangnails. Headaches are relieved by the touch of the trunk, more successfully if the animal also sneezes. The right side of the trunk used as an amulet with the red earth of Lemnos is aphrodisiac. The blood too is good for consumption, and the liver for epilepsy.

XXVIII. Almost as legendary is the crocodile, in its nature also—I mean the famous one, which is amphibious; for there are two kinds of crocodile. His teeth from the right jaw, worn as an amulet on the right arm, are (if we believe it) aphrodisiac, while the dog teeth, stuffed with frankincense (for they are hollow), drive away the intermittent fevers if the sick man can be kept for five days from seeing the person who fastened them on.

XXVIII….that hairs from the muzzle [of a Hyena], applied to a woman's lips, act as a love-charm… that the anus, worn as an amulet on the left arm, is so powerful a love-charm that, if a man but looks at a woman, she at once follows him; that the hairs also of this part, reduced to ashes, mixed with oil, and used as ointment on men guilty of shocking effeminacy, make them assume, not only a modest character, but one of the strictest morality.

XXIX Democritus relates that the same result comes from applying the liver with the lung of the bramble toad; that moreover the liver makes love charms and potions completely ineffective.

XXX. A similar animal is the scincos—and indeed it has been styled the land crocodile—but it is paler, and with a thinner skin. The chief difference, however, between it and the crocodile is in the arrangement of the scales, which are turned from the tail towards the head. The Indian is the biggest scincos, next coming the Arabian. They import them salted. Its muzzle and feet, taken in white wine, are aphrodisiac, especially with the addition of ragwort and rocket seed, compounding a single drachma of all three and two drachmae of pepper. One-drachma lozenges of the compound should be taken in drink...moreover the broth of a scincos taken with honey is antaphrodisiac.

XXXI. There is a kind of relationship between the crocodile and the hippopotamus, for they both live in the same river and both are amphibious. The hippopotamus, as I have related,[[8]](#footnote-8) was the discoverer of bleeding, and is most numerous above the prefecture of Sais. His hide, reduced to ash and applied with water, cures superficial abscesses; the fat and likewise the dung chilly agues by fumigation, and the teeth on the left side, if the gums are scraped with them, aching teeth. The hide from the left side of his forehead, worn as an amulet on the groin, is an antaphrodisiac; the same reduced to ash restores hair lost through mange. A drachma of a testicle is taken in water for snake bite. The blood is used by painters.

Book XXX

XLIX. A lizard drowned in a man's urine is antaphrodisiac to the one who pissed it, but the Magi claim that it is a love-potion. Antaphrodisiac too are snails, and pigeon's dung taken with oil and wine. Aphrodisiac for men are the right parts of a vulture's lung, worn as an amulet in a piece of crane's skin; aphrodisiac also are the yolks of five pigeons' eggs mixed with a denarius by weight of pig fat and swallowed in honey, sparrows or their eggs in food, or the right testicle of a cock worn as an amulet in a piece of ram's-skin. They say that rubbing with ibis ash, goose grease and iris oil prevent miscarriage when there has been conception; that desire on the contrary is inhibited if a fighting cock's testicles are rubbed with goose grease and worn as an amulet in a ram s skin, as it also is if with a cock's blood any cock's testicles are placed under the bed. Women unwilling to conceive are forced to do so by hairs from the tail of a she-mule, pulled out during the animal copulation and entwined during the human. A man who passes his urine on a dog's is said to become less sexually active. A wonderful thing again (if it is true) is told about the ash of the spotted lizard: if wrapped in a linen cloth and held in the left hand it is aphrodisiac; if transferred to the right hand it is antaphrodisiac. Another wonder: the blood of a bat, collected on a flock of wool and placed under the head of women, moves them to lust, as does the tongue of a goose, taken either in food or in drink.

Book XXXII

XVIII.There is in a frog's left side a bone called 'dog's bane,' which dropped into oil gives the appearance of boiling; by it the attacks of dogs are repelled, and if it is put in drink love and quarrels brought about; that worn as an amulet it acts as an aphrodisiac; that the bone again on the right side cools boiling liquids; cures quartan and other fevers, but love is hat worn in fresh lamb's skin as an amulet this bone restrained.

XL. Antaphrodisiac are the echeneis, hide from the left side of the forehead of a hippopotamus attached as an amulet in lamb skin, or the gall of the torpedo, while it is still alive, applied to the genitals. Aphrodisiac is the flesh of river snails preserved in salt and given to drink in wine, erythini taken as food, the liver of the frog diopetes or calamites, attached as an amulet in a little piece of crane's skin, or the maxillary tooth of a crocodile tied to the forearm, or the hippocampus, or the sinews of a bramble toad worn as an amulet on the right upper arm. Love is killed by a bramble toad worn as an amulet in a fresh piece of sheep's skin.

1. Carrot. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bulbs from Megara, a place in Greece, are praised by Columella, a writer on agriculture, and bulbs in general were seen as an aphrodisac. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A flowering plant related to the sunflower it gives off a strong smell. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The earliest source for turpetine, it was highly aromatic and used in medicine as well as for its scent. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A parasitic plant that grew on trees. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Also known as rampion, which you may remember from Rapunzel. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Orpheus was a mythical poet, whose name was, however, attached to a number of writings and a popular mystery religion. There were a number of Archelauses; we are not entirely sure which one Pliny is referring to here. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Book VIII.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)