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**Burying the Lead: Women and Witchcraft in Greco-Roman Antiquity**

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## ABSTRACT

The use of magic or witchcraft by women, including enslaved or marginalized women, has been an intriguing and informative subject for literature and art since the very foundations of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, and throughout their existences. Consider famous figures like Circe or Medea, who would become frequently referenced character archetypes for centuries. Although often written by elite male authors potentially far removed from the subject matter, these depictions do offer insight into the treatment of magic and of women in the ancient world. This is especially valuable in the case of depictions of enslaved or marginalized women, a term I use here to encompass shades of privilege which don't fit neatly into enslaved and free, or into a modern context (such as freedwomen, foreigners, or courtesans). I argue that while the actual voices of enslaved women are absent from the literary record, the themes which recur in their depiction in art and literature offer us critical insight into their role in and treatment by ancient societies. And where their written perspective may be missing, we can ground our interpretation of these depictions in evidence from the material record, evidence which corroborates the realities of women as practitioners of magic who sometimes wielded real social power. This archaeological evidence includes curse tablets, voodoo dolls, and other material remnants used for magic practices. In examining these depictions of enslaved or marginalized women using magic, focusing mainly on sources from ancient Greece and Rome from approximately the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, two significant themes emerge which are discussed. These themes are role reversal and monstrosity. Role reversal is defined here as a switch, after the intervention of magic, in the typical roles or traits which would be ascribed to a character. So, for example, roles which would typically be ascribed to men being ascribed to women, or free

women being ascribed to enslaved women, and vice versa. The theme of monstrosity might appear as human characters transforming themselves or others into animals (like shapeshifting), and it can also include characters taking on traits of a death-like state, as well as chthonic, or even necromantic associations. I examine the recurrence of both of these themes in relevant poetry, mime, drama, and more, with particular focus on a scene which recurs in a mime fragment by Sophron, the poem *Idyll 2* by Theocritus, and the poem *Eclogue 8* by Vergil. I then consider the synthesis and evolution of these two themes in the *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius, a unique tale by an author from a more marginal part of the ancient world himself. This source acts as an fitting bookend for my discussion of these tropes in ancient literature and ancient life, as well as their legacy throughout the medieval, early modern, and modern periods.

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## Chapter 1

### Role Reversal

There are many ways in which we seek to understand the experiences of women in the ancient world. The simplest would be to hear it from them directly, the way we have from male authors preserved throughout history. This was a privilege afforded to relatively few ancient women overall, and as for marginalized or enslaved women, practically nonexistent.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, we have to try to ascertain what we can from the indirect sources which offer the most insight. In the case of enslaved or marginalized women living in ancient Greece and Rome, some of our best insight comes from their portrayals in literature and art, as well as their presence in the archaeological record. One of the first commonalities to emerge in literature depicting women across the Mediterranean was an association with magic, or witchcraft. Witches were a subject which continuously fascinated and frightened ancient authors, and the proliferation of certain magical practices in their societies is attested in the archaeological record. This was true when magic was deeply interwoven with other concepts like medicine, nature, and religion, as well as when it was viewed more skeptically and suspiciously. Although portrayals of enslaved or marginalized women performing witchcraft are far from common in antiquity, they do recur, and with striking patterns. One of these patterns, or themes, which appears most often is the theme of role reversal. Role reversal can take on a variety of forms, but in this case involves roles or traits which would typically be ascribed to free women being ascribed to enslaved

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word ‘marginalized’ here to encompass shades of social, legal, and economic privilege which don’t fit neatly into enslaved and free, or into a modern context (such as freedwomen, foreigners, or courtesans).

women, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Although there are examples across the ancient Mediterranean, we will focus on mainly ancient Greece and ancient Rome from approximately the fifth century BCE to the second century CE.

In some ways, this theme of role reversal in literature could be seen as a logical consequence of the intervention of magic in the situations depicted. Ancient magic, after all, represents a kind of role reversal in and of itself. Rather than being largely passive subjects to the will of the gods, as was typical in Greek and Roman religion, the use of magic meant that people were symbolically controlling the actions of the gods. It is no wonder, then, that the use of magic would appeal to a variety of marginalized peoples in the Greco-Roman world. In ancient literature and in ancient life, the use of magic was associated with non-citizens, foreigners, prostitutes, women, and enslaved people, anyone who might seek a foothold in a social and political system which was largely unforgiving to them. The ultimate victim of these systems could be argued to be enslaved women, burdened by the intersection of misogyny, classism, and more. This is why instances of enslaved women performing magic in literature are especially significant. The intervention of magic constitutes one of their only forms of agency in life and in literature, and role reversal is a notable continuity in these depictions of its use.

Caution must understandably be taken in considering any literary portrayal of enslaved women by an elite male author to be a reflection of real magical practices. Women in literature were often the target of patriarchal and exaggerated stereotypes, reflecting the fantasies and

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<sup>2</sup> This role reversal in some cases extends beyond the typical traits of free women in antiquity into more stereotypically male roles. This will be discussed in more detail below, but examples include the use of *agogai* (a form of 'aggressive' magic involving chants) by Simaetha and Theslyis in Theocritus' *Idyll* 2. (See: Frankfurter, David. 2014. "The Social Context of Women's Erotic Magic", in *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*. Kimberly B. Stratton, and Dayna S. Kalleres. Oxford University Press, p.325, and Faraone, Christopher. 1999., "Courtesans, Freedmen, and the Social Construction of Gender", in *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, p.146-160.)



anxieties of the male authors. The topic of the use of magic was no less troubled. Women were often the ones depicted using magic, and the stereotype of the old witch or hag only became more popular throughout Greco-Roman antiquity. Some, such as Fritz Graf, have suggested that the relative prevalence of portrayals of women using magic in literature was an attempt to displace magic from the male to the female sphere, given its negative connotations.<sup>3</sup> This would appear to be a fitting explanation for why enslaved women are also portrayed performing magic—almost nothing could be farther from implicating the elite male authors. Even with this in mind, the practice of erotic magic constitutes a unique case.

Here, it seems that a rare specialization existed in which women were known practitioners, reflected in both literary and material evidence. While many of the better preserved magical practices from Greco-Roman antiquity relied on literacy and access to clients (two spheres from which women were largely excluded, as they were not typically educated or allowed to run businesses), erotic magic catered to the specialties of women, and even marginalized women in particular.<sup>4</sup> Erotic magic often involved *pharmakeia*, or the use or administering of drugs. This sphere of magic was often physically similar to cooking or brewing, dealt with or remedied bodily functions and appetites, and was commonly associated with the

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<sup>3</sup> Graf, Fritz. 1997. *Magic in the Ancient World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.189.

<sup>4</sup> This is a generalization, as of course there existed women in antiquity who were educated and ran businesses, and several well-known preserved female authors. In Classical and Hellenistic Greece, free women's abilities to own property and conduct economic transactions was especially limited but existent. Female prostitution was one legal grey area in which free women, alongside enslaved women and metics, were allowed to do business. In Republican and Imperial Rome, free women enjoyed significantly more freedoms in business and public life. Prostitution (alongside wetnursing and midwifery) remained a common avenue for both free and enslaved women to work and acquire wealth. For the economic status of women in ancient Greece, see: Patterson, Cynthia (2007). "Other Sorts: Slaves, Foreigners, and Women in Periclean Athens". In Sammons, Loren J., II (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*. Cambridge University Press. For economic status of women in ancient Rome, see: Culham, Phyllis (2004). "Women in the Roman Republic," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*, Cambridge University Press.

traits of eroticism, irrationality, and exoticism or foreignness.<sup>5</sup> *Pharamkeia* usually produced a product like a *philtre* where other forms of magic revolved around chants (i.e. *agoge*) or inscriptions. It was most commonly associated with erotic magic, such as the binding ritual in Theocritus' *Idyll 2* or Euripides *Hippolytus*. This form of magic was thought to bind your will outside of your control using the power of the gods. Thus the connection to irrationality and irrational actions, also commonly associated (negatively) with marginalized groups in the ancient world. Finally, magic as a practice was partially imported, with much inspiration and material stemming from areas of interaction like Assyria/Babylonia, Egypt, and Persia. This is especially notable as following around 490/480-79 BCE, the source of enslaved people in Greece was increasingly non-Greeks. All of this points to the experience of marginalized women.

Curse tablets, defined by Plato in his *Laws* as a subsection of *pharmakeia*, also demonstrate this correlation particularly well.<sup>6</sup> Curse tablets, commonly referred to as

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<sup>5</sup> See: Rihl, Thomas. "Classical Athens." In: Bradley, Keith, Paul Cartledge, David Eltis, and Stanley L. Engerman. (2011). *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*. Cambridge University Press. p. 53, notably following the Persian invasions taking place in those years.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Leg.* 11.932e-933b, see also: Graf, Fritz in *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*. 2014: 391-2.

*katadesmoi* in Greek and *defixiones* in Latin, were small tablets, usually made of thin metal like lead but sometimes other materials like wax or clay.



Figure 1. A Doric Greek inscribed lead curse tablet, 5<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE<sup>7</sup>

They were inscribed with spells to bring supernatural forces to bear against someone or something, usually including the name of the intended victim, the sender, and a patron deity.<sup>8</sup> Numerous curse tablets have been found which appear to have been commissioned by women (including prostitutes and possibly even enslaved women).<sup>9</sup> As John Gager puts it, “Here, then, we find one arena of ancient life where women were not only active participants in shaping their private lives but initiators of action in the public realm.”<sup>10</sup> It is with this in mind that we evaluate literary portrayals of enslaved women performing magic, and the themes that arise therein.

<sup>7</sup> Donadoni, Eugenio. “A Doric Greek Inscribed Lead Curse Tablet circa 5th Century B.C.”. Photograph. Christie’s. July 7, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Gager, John. *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from Antiquity and the Ancient World*. 1992. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 4-6, the inclusion of the names and invocations of the gods and spirits are notably longer, more complex, and aggressively international in the later examples.

<sup>9</sup> One example comes from sometime in the first or second century BCE, where a woman set up a curse tablet in the Demeter sanctuary at Cnidus and asked the goddess to punish “the man who accused me of making *pharmaka* for my husband”. See: Faraone (1999): 113-4.

<sup>10</sup> Gager (1992): 79

Many of the iconic female characters whose portrayals have survived antiquity are associated with witchcraft. One need look no further than perhaps the oldest work of Greek literature, the *Odyssey*, to see the beginnings of this trope.<sup>11</sup> Circe is portrayed as a powerful enchantress, an archetypal female character who would be imitated in many forms of art over the centuries.<sup>12</sup> The surviving works of Ancient Greek drama only provide further examples, from Medea to Hecuba to Deianira to Andromache. The variety and nature of these depictions of women performing magic in drama provide several insights. The use of magic in the narrative often reflects popular anxieties about magic, such as demonizing the emotional or irrational actions of women (as in the case of Deianira), or rendering them into murderous monsters (as in the case of Medea and Hecuba).<sup>13</sup> Euripides was arguably more nuanced and unconventional than the likes of Sophocles or Aeschylus in his depictions of female characters, especially involving witchcraft. In some of his works, such as *Medea*, *Andromache*, and *Hecuba*, magic is framed as a clear last resort for the disempowered. Medea is a foreign princess about to lose her home and husband when she turns to poisoning.<sup>14</sup> Andromache is an enslaved foreign woman accused of using “Eastern magic” to cause the infertility of her new mistress.<sup>15</sup> Hecuba is

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<sup>11</sup> Other examples of love magic from Homer include the use of Aphrodite’s enchanted girdle by Hera in book 14 of the *Iliad* to seduce Zeus, and the unsuccessful use of charms and spells by Calypso in book 1 of the *Odyssey* to induce Odysseus to forget his native land of Ithaca and remain on her island.

<sup>12</sup> Circe is even portrayed as being specifically proficient in magic resembling *pharmakeia*, though the distinctions between religion, magic, and medicine were still being formed and defined in these critical centuries. Mention is made of “evil drugs”, “herbs” and “potions” which transform some of Odysseus’ men into swine while he manages to resist with the help of Hermes (Hom.*Od.* 10.208-475).

<sup>13</sup> Deianira, the wife of Heracles in Sophocles’ drama *Women of Trachis*, turned to a magic *philtre* which she was tricked into believing would win back his affections (which proved instead to be deadly to him). This action was taken as a last resort after Heracles returned from neglecting his family for months with a new captive love interest, the enslaved princess Iole. For translation, see: Sophocles. *Antigone. The Women of Trachis. Philoctetes. Oedipus at Colonus*. Edited and translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones. Loeb Classical Library 21. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Poison, like medicine, falls under the nebulous umbrella of *pharmakeia* in the ancient world and helps to cement the connection between the mythical Medea and the goddess of magic and poison, Hecate, which endures throughout antiquity.

<sup>15</sup> Eur.*Andr.* 155-160.

similarly disempowered, as a former queen who is currently enslaved. Her story is one of similar desperation, ending in tragedy and the literal complete loss of her humanity as she is transformed into a dog. Finally Euripides even introduced an enslaved character procuring magic herself, in his *Hippolytus*.<sup>16</sup>

One of the main characters of this tragedy is simply called Nurse, an enslaved woman and maid to Phaedra. Much like in the case of Deianara, magic enters the plot as the proposed solution to a crisis which threatens the dynamics of the household. This threat comes in the form of the unhealthy attraction Phaedra has towards her stepson Hippolytus, an affliction which has rendered her bedridden and in despair for three days. The attraction is a spiteful trick by Aphrodite, who felt slighted by Hippolytus' vow to the maiden goddess Artemis. Only another enslaved character, simply referred to as a servant of Hippolytus, foresees this insult to Aphrodite and warns him against it, to no avail. Intriguingly, in an almost visual representation of the supposed dynamics of erotic magic, the same actor who would play the Nurse begins the play as Aphrodite.<sup>17</sup> It acts as a very literal role reversal, from one social station to the complete opposite. This choice underscores both the power of erotic magic and the relative helplessness of Phaedra, the victim of that same goddess. When the Nurse learns of Phaedra's condition, she offers an ointment or potion as a solution (referred to simply as *pharmakon*).<sup>18</sup> As we will continue to see, this kind of magic in particular is typical of this recurring character trope

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<sup>16</sup> Translations for these plays from: Euripides. *Children of Heracles. Hippolytus. Andromache. Hecuba*. Edited and translated by David Kovacs. Loeb Classical Library 484. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Magic involves symbolically manipulating the will of the gods, and the Nurse character both binds the will of the gods with erotic magic and unwittingly plays into the curse of Aphrodite by interfering.

<sup>18</sup> Eur. *Hipp.* 510-516. Although offered as the most expedient solution, the Nurse also seems to be versed in other forms of magic than *pharmakeia*. She mentions "There are incantations, and words that charm: something will turn up to cure this love. Men will be slow to invent such contrivances if we women do not find them." (Eur. *Hipp.* 479-481). These lines not only reinforce her proficiency in and general knowledge of magic, but also the gendered associations with it already prevalent by the time of Euripides.

involving enslaved women. The Nurse's offer of erotic magic and her attempts to resolve the situation with Hippolytus himself are the impetus for the dramatic conclusion of the tragedy, Phaedra's suicide by hanging. In doing so, the Nurse has a hand in the complete upheaval of her household, a feat normally outside of her sphere of control. Here, the character performing or using magic can be seen as having the most direct connection to the gods, while the other characters suffer the consequences. In this case as in later cases, this amounts to a social role reversal. Another form of role reversal seems to occur in the condition of Phaedra herself at the beginning of the play.

Phaedra's suffering at the beginning of *Hippolytus* is a useful example of what the supposed effects of *pharmakeia* might have been in the ancient world, or at least in Classical Athens. Although she never actually took the *pharmakon* offered by the Nurse in the play, Phaedra already seems to be suffering from symptoms of this school of erotic magic.<sup>19</sup> As Phaedra is first brought on stage, supported by the Nurse, the chorus notes, "The cloud of unhappiness on her brow is growing. My heart longs to know what it is, why the Queen's body is so ravaged, her color so changed," (172-175). She is portrayed as pale and useless, almost near death. Whereas some erotic magic rites seek to ignite a burning passion in their targets, as will be discussed in further examples below, other rites seek to drain their energy and vitality for the purposes of the practitioner of the spell.<sup>20</sup> This intention is also usefully attested not just in further literary examples, but in material evidence as well. This material evidence comes largely

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<sup>19</sup> Notably, although the *pharmakon* is never consumed or "used" in the plot, the interference of Aphrodite mirrors the effects of erotic magic in a more direct way. Magic rites like binding curse tablets or *philtre* potions seek to enact what we see here in its raw form, in this case the erotic power of Aphrodite. With the Nurse character's actor appearing onstage first as Aphrodite, this plot device doesn't muddle the causality of role reversal, but rather underscores it.

<sup>20</sup> See: Gager (1992):80 for types of binding spells, typically categorized by intention.

in the form of curse tablets, many of which contain examples of binding spells with similar language.

One such tablet was found in Athens, in a well near the Agora. It states, "I deliver to you Leosthenes and Peios, who frequent Juliana, to whom Marcia gave birth, so that you may chill them and their intentions, in order that they may not be able to speak or walk with one another, nor sit in Juliana's place of business, nor may Leosthenes and Peios be able to send messages to Juliana. And also (chill) in your gloomy air those who bring them together. Bind (them) in the darkened air of forgetfulness and chill and do not allow Proklos and Leosthends and Peios to have sexual/social intercourse with (her)... may they stand deaf, voiceless, mindless, harmless...".<sup>21</sup> These conditions, especially the chill, are also meant to evoke the conditions of the well the tablet was destined to be deposited into.<sup>22</sup> Curse tablets are valuable not just as a more plausible way of connecting the elite literary magic of Euripides to the actual experiences of ancient life, but especially as concrete evidence of women's participation in witchcraft in the ancient world. Although the exact nature of the relationship between the practitioner and the target of this tablet is obscure, it seems unstable and triangular, much like the kind of relationship which Phaedra unwittingly finds herself in at the start of *Hippolytus*. Although he does not escape the Greek convention of exaggerating the "otherness" of women by highlighting their irrationality, religious fervor, and sexual passion, Euripides offers a unique depiction of the

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<sup>21</sup> Gager (1992): 89

<sup>22</sup> Gager (1992): 90, this desire to connect the physical discomfort of your intended victim to the physical conditions of the material used to represent them is a common tenet of sympathetic magic (another example being voodoo dolls) and will be discussed further below. It was also a way to metaphorically connect them to the Underworld, which is why sites like graves and wells were common for deposits.

power dynamics of an ancient household.<sup>23</sup> These include prominently an enslaved woman capable of *pharmakeia*, a trend which will continue in other literature.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most significant examples of role reversal occurring as the result of an enslaved woman performing magic comes from the bucolic poetry of Theocritus. His poem *Idyll* 2, thought to take place on the island of Cos as Theocritus might have known it in the late 4th and early 3rd century BCE, stands out as a unique and in-depth portrayal.<sup>25</sup> He is said to have been inspired in the subject matter and the characters by a mime from the roughly contemporary author Sophron, which will concern us further below.<sup>26</sup> The poem begins by introducing us to the central character, a seemingly free woman named Simaetha. In the first section of the poem (lines 1–63), we see her prepare and perform magic rites, mostly delegating the actual work to her enslaved helper Thestylis.<sup>27</sup> In a formula which may quickly become familiar in depictions of enslaved women performing magic, Simaetha the commanding mistress begins by forcefully directing the preparations for a ritual as Thestylis assists. In between Simaetha’s instructions and

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<sup>23</sup> This treatment of women in Greek tragedy was even noted contemporarily by Xenophon, see: Bushnell, R. W. (Ed.). 2005. *A Companion to Tragedy*. Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>24</sup> This is noteworthy especially in contrast to later versions of the subject matter, such as Seneca’s *Phaedra*, written before 54 CE. In this Roman version, the Nurse character (often accused of cynicism and scheming in Euripides) is removed entirely. Rather than being a rather passive victim of fate, Phaedra is depicted as self-aware and pursues Hippolytus directly. This is not the only case in which the Roman adaptations of Greek literature sideline, diminish, or remove entirely the enslaved characters of the Greek originals.

<sup>25</sup> The setting is never explicitly stated in the poem, but is commonly identified with the Isle of Cos, where Theocritus once lived. He is also attested in scholia to have lived in Alexandria, and perhaps these travels influenced his knowledge and portrayal of magic. For background and translation see: Theocritus, Moschus, Bion. *Theocritus. Moschus. Bion*. Edited and translated by Neil Hopkinson. Loeb Classical Library 28. Harvard University Press, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> According to a scholiast on Theocritus, see: Hordern, J. H. 2002. “Love Magic and Purification in Sophron, PSI 1214a, and Theocritus’ ‘Pharmakeutria’”, p. 165. See also: Theophrastus, Herodas, Sophron. *Characters. Herodas: Mimes. Sophron and Other Mime Fragments*. Edited and translated by Jeffrey Rusten, I. C. Cunningham. Loeb Classical Library 225. Harvard University Press, 2003. p.299.

<sup>27</sup> This name itself is interesting as even in its original Greek sounds noticeably similar to Thessaly, already known as a center for magic worship by the time of this poem. Even if this is a coincidence, a connection to Thessalian magic recurs in other literary depictions of enslaved women performing magic.



laments is a repeated refrain, perhaps evoking the repetitive chanting of spells.<sup>28</sup> “Magic wheel, draw that man to my house,” the chant repeats for the first section (up to line 65), referencing a *iunx* or *inyx*. This was a wooden disk or wheel made to spin by alternately loosening and tightening a cord passed through two holes near the center.<sup>29</sup> The *iunx* provides one clue to the nature of this ritual, which appears to have been an erotic binding spell.



Figure 2. 4th cent. gilded copper ring depicting Eros playing with a *iunx/inyx* wheel<sup>30</sup>

Here, we are granted a rare glimpse into the details of magical practice in the Hellenistic world, at least as it was portrayed in literature.<sup>31</sup> The binding is directed at a young man named Delphis, a lover of Simaetha who had suddenly stopped seeing her for twelve days at the time of the ritual. She explicitly states her intention to “bind him with fire spells”, drawing him back to

<sup>28</sup> Hopkinson (ed. & trans.) 2015: p.36

<sup>29</sup> Matyszak, Philip. (2019). *Ancient Magic: A Practitioners Guide to the Supernatural in Greece and Rome*, London: Thames & Hudson, p. 80.

<sup>30</sup> Williams & Ogden. Photograph. *Greek Gold. Jewellery of the Classical World*. (1994). p. 253.

<sup>31</sup> Though parallels in curse tablets and trial records (such as Antiphon *In Novercam* 9) suggest a basis in reality.

her home. The goal of this type of binding ritual appears to be to ignite a passion so strong it is physically uncomfortable (thus the “burning” of the “fire spells”). Simaetha details her history with Delphis later in the poem (64–162), telling the Moon directly the story of her passion—how she first saw Delphis, how she began to sicken for love, how she summoned him to her house, his smooth talk, their lovemaking, and his ultimate betrayal. Here, the refrain changes to “Note, lady Moon, whence came my love.”<sup>32</sup> As Simaetha bids her farewells to the Moon at the end of the poem (163–66), she seems resigned to her fate, but indeed a real confrontation is brewing on the horizon. Her magical machinations have already been set in motion, and there are sure to be real consequences. As she says herself in the opening, “I shall go tomorrow to Timagetus’ wrestling school to see him, and I shall reproach him for treating me so,” (8-9).

The first noteworthy aspect of this piece as it regards the roles of enslaved women lies in the performance of the ritual itself. The ritual takes place in the night and often addresses the moon (or rather, Selene). The spell also invokes Hecate, goddess of magic amongst other associations.<sup>33</sup> Accounts of Hecate vary in their description of her parentage and attributes, but she is described in a scholion on this piece specifically as “the nurse of Persephone”.<sup>34</sup> This description is notable as “nurse” characters in literature were enslaved, most closely paralleling Thestylis in this scene, although she is never described as a “nurse” explicitly. Although Simaetha is the one directing the proceedings, it is the enslaved woman Thestylis who actually performs the majority of the spell. Just as the love magic is a silent actor controlling the scene, so is Thestylis. Simaetha directs:

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<sup>32</sup> Beginning with line 69.

<sup>33</sup> Syncretism between Hecate and Selene was a common feature of later magical texts, and it is noted as another parallel to the scene from Sophron.

<sup>34</sup> Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: p.301

“First barley grains are melted in the fire. Scatter them on, Thestylis. Where have your wits flown off to, you wretch? Have I become an object of scorn to you too, then, you vile girl? Scatter it on, and at the same time say, ‘I scatter the bones of Delphis.’ ” (18-21).

Theocritus also mentions the use of a bronze *rhombos*, a common ingredient in a binding ritual. It was one of several substances listed in the ritual with supposed apotropaic powers, seemingly an attempt by the two women to protect themselves against the dangerous power they have invoked with Hecate.<sup>35</sup> The passage which precedes this only confirms this, as Simaetha states,

“Now I shall burn the bran. You, Artemis,<sup>36</sup> who can move the adamant of Hades and anything else as firmly fixed—Thestylis, the dogs are howling for us in the town: the goddess is at the crossroads—clash the bronze quick as you can.” (33-36)

It appears from these lines that the one most directly involved in the performance of the ritual is not Simaetha, but Thestylis. In the last leg of the preparations, the two throw a lost fringe from the coat of Delphis into the flames.<sup>37</sup> Although still part of the binding ritual, this act is representative of sympathetic magic, where the destruction of bodily tokens (especially hair and nails) was thought to affect by “sympathy” the body itself. Simaetha then sends Thestylis off with a bundle of herbs to knead over Delphis’ doorstep at night while whispering an incantation to make Delphis’ bones ache with love. From these lines, we can be sure that Thestylis, who has

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<sup>35</sup> Other substances mentioned include salt, laurel, and libations to appease the goddess. See: Hopkinson (ed. & trans.) 2015

<sup>36</sup> Another example of syncretism.

<sup>37</sup> Theoc.*Id.*2.53-54

been carrying out many of the material preparations for this ritual, is also capable of performing the incantations which formed a separate part of magical practice.<sup>38</sup>

According to our understanding of erotic magic in antiquity, Simaetha seems to be combining a variety of magic practices for her ritual. Simaetha herself refers to the ritual repeatedly as a “binding”.<sup>39</sup> Related closely to curse tablets, a typical binding spell would be known as a *defixio*, while the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (henceforth referred to as ‘PGM’) refer to specifically “erotic binding spells” as *philtrokatadesmoi*.<sup>40</sup> What is intriguing is that the ritual also resembles a second category of erotic rites known as *agogai*, “spells of attraction”, or occasionally *philtr*a, “erotic rites”.<sup>41</sup> The use of fire to offer fumigations is typical of these kinds of rites, such as we see Simaetha and Thestylis burn barley grains (18), laurel (23), bran (33), and a scrap of cloth from Delphis’ cloak (53-4). The burning of the scrap of cloth, meant to invoke a similarly burning passion in Delphis, bridges into the sympathetic school of magic. There is also a mention of melting wax, a typical material used in sympathetic magic rites.<sup>42</sup> Selene, Hecate, Artemis, and Aphrodite are all identified in the ritual, though the apparent arrival of Hecate is met with fear and protective rites. Finally, Simaetha also mentions making an “evil drink” with a crushed lizard to bring to Delphis (58), which more closely resembles the *pharmakeia* of drugs and poisons.

The disparities between certain elements of the ritual and other records of magic practices, such as what is preserved in the *PGM* or on curse tablets, have led some scholars to

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<sup>38</sup> Such as *agogai*, the aggressive love spells and chants often formulated and cast by men.

<sup>39</sup> Hopkinson (ed. & trans.) 2015: lines 3, 10, and 159.

<sup>40</sup> Graf (1997): 178

<sup>41</sup> Graf (1997): 179

<sup>42</sup> Such as to create wax dolls or tablets which could be used to represent and affect the target of the ritual (see: Hanses, Mathias. "Ovid and the Magic Doll: Witchcraft and Defixiones In Amores 3.7." *Classical Journal* 117, no. 3 (2022): 249-283.). Wool was another common material for tokens of sympathetic magic, and although it is mentioned (line 2), it doesn't seem to be used in a sympathetic context.

dismiss the ritual as a largely literary construction. They cite such evidence as the lack of archaeological record of the *rhombos*, one of the instruments Simaetha uses in her ritual.<sup>43</sup> But as the old adage goes, lack of evidence does not constitute evidence of a lack. The evidence from the *PGM* in particular comes centuries after the writings of Theocritus, with materials spanning from around the 2nd century BCE to the 5th century CE.<sup>44</sup> While binding rituals appear to have persisted for centuries in the ancient Mediterranean, it seems reasonable that certain magic practices may have simply changed in ways which misalign them from the literary portrayal. In addition, the eclectic combination of rites which Simaetha carries out could be seen to parallel the eclectic variety of sources she turns to for magic advice, such as old enchantresses, an Assyrian stranger, her own enslaved servant Thestylis.

Therein, the value of this portrayal lies beyond the verisimilitude of the ritual itself. While an elite male author may botch the specifics of magic practices, intentionally or otherwise, there are revealing truths behind the literary construction. Theocritus appears to reveal some of the basic and enduring realities of magic practice in the ancient Mediterranean world. His bucolic scenes are filled with marginalized characters, from foreigners to courtesans to enslaved men and women. It is these characters who repeatedly bear an association with the knowledge and practice of magic. Theocritus paints a picture of a world in which magic was known to all, acknowledged by most, and practiced by many. Within that world, magic was especially attractive to the disadvantaged who had few other avenues for agency or advancement. This idea

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<sup>43</sup> Graf (1997):180, for more context, 175-185.

<sup>44</sup> From Betz, Hans Dieter (ed.).1986. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*. University of Chicago Press. This collection of magical texts includes translation of spells, formulae, hymns, rituals, and more, one of the most comprehensive sources of information on magical practices in antiquity.

commonly recurs in later literature, where women in particular and the marginalized in general are stereotyped as practitioners of magic.

As previously mentioned, this construction is seen by some as a deflection of the unsavory connotations of magic practice from the male realm to the female realm. This is supported in part by the non-literary evidence of Greco-Roman magic, such as the *PGM* and curse tablets, where wealthy men appear to be frequent patrons and practitioners of magic. However, the evidence from curse tablets once again supports the reality of marginalized women as practitioners of magic. Many curse tablet formulae appear gender-neutral, ready to be used for both male *and* female clients or victims.<sup>45</sup> Several examples have been found which were likely or definitively commissioned by women, often prostitutes or courtesans hoping to keep the favor of their clients.<sup>46</sup> This evidence, along with the extent to which these associations recur across centuries, suggest a more concrete basis in reality.

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<sup>45</sup> Notably, by Late Roman Egypt (the time of the *PGM*), formularies were written as if with gender changes in mind, or even advertised (i.e. “draw any man or woman with this amazing spell”). See: Dickie, Matthew W. “Who Practised Love-Magic in Classical Antiquity and in the Late Roman World?” *The Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2000): 563–83.

<sup>46</sup> One Attic spell from the 4th century BCE attempts to prevent a man named Arikudes from achieving sexual union with any of the other women presented to him or any boy, seemingly a prostitute attempting to protect her livelihood. Another Attic example from the same period attempts to sever the relationship between a woman named Theodora and two named men, as well as several others implied, seemingly motivated by an economic threat once again. A third example from Boeotia dated to the Hellenistic period or earlier seeks to drive multiple men away from a woman named Antheira, a name which alongside the other intimate implications of the binding spell suggests her occupation as a courtesan. In all of these cases, the most likely candidate for the sender of the spell is another marginalized woman. One significant example from Pella dated between 380 and 350 BCE in which the agent commissioning the spell is definitively a woman seeks to cancel the impending marriage between a man, Dionysophon, and a woman, Thetima, and make it such that he can marry no other woman, widow, or maiden to grow old with besides herself. (See: Dickie 2000, p. 575-6). Pella (notably in Thessaly, famed for its magical reputation) would have existed slightly outside the main cultural currents of the Greek world, but perhaps it makes for an even more fitting comparison to the bucolic world recalled by the likes of Sophron and Theocritus. As John Gager notes of those who commissioned curse tablets in Classical and Hellenistic Greece, “Once again, the majority of persons belong to the world of marginal laborers, some free and some slave—tavern keepers, carpenters, metalworkers, potters, prostitutes, and so on.” (Gager 1992, p.152).

As we divine further how the role reversal in this poem reflects the experiences of enslaved women, we must examine the social status of its narrator, Simaetha. She stands out for her behavior as an intriguing and slightly unusual character. Although in the preparation of the magic ritual she acts as the typical commanding mistress, her social status is somewhat difficult to determine. She possesses an enslaved woman, and she seems to have no legal guardian, acting independently before and throughout the scene in *Idyll 2*. While it has been suggested that she may have been a prostitute or *hetaera* as an explanation for her independence, she also displays a great concern for the loss of her virginity to her lover Delphis, which seems to contradict this theory. The association is understandable, however. For one, the scene closely parallels a ritual described in Lucian's *Dialogue of the Courtesans*. In this piece, a young *hetaera* seeks the help of a witch to win back the favor (and business) of her old lover. This witch performs a ritual involving sulphur, a torch, salt, wine libations, a *rhombos*, and an article of clothing from the former lover, incredibly similar to the one described in Theocritus.<sup>47</sup> It also fits with the story of some of the most compelling material evidence of love magic, curse tablets, as mentioned above. Therefore, a connection between this kind of magic and marginalized women is precedented. However, given the way Simaetha imposes on and interacts with Thestylis and her concern for the loss of her virginity without marriage, I am inclined to believe that she acted as a free woman. But whether or not she belongs to the marginal world of non-citizens, she certainly surrounds herself with them, from slaves to flute-girls to enchantresses.

Simaetha acts as a connection to a more marginal, more transgressive world which is not often explored in literature. Much like the recently enslaved, formerly noble female subjects of

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<sup>47</sup> Lucian, *Dialogue of the Courtesans*, 4.288 (from: Lucian. *Dialogues of the Dead. Dialogues of the Sea-Gods. Dialogues of the Gods. Dialogues of the Courtesans*. Translated by M. D. MacLeod. Loeb Classical Library 431. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961.).

Euripidean drama (such as *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, *Polyxena*, or the chorus of *Trojan Women*), her status as a free woman is a more comfortable paradigm, almost a buffer for a slave-owning, male, or elite audience. Theocritus seems willing to explore an unusual subject, the bold and independent Simaetha, going down one social level. But to fully examine an enslaved woman such as Thestylis demonstrating expertise on magic would likely be a more difficult and uncomfortable prospect. Drawing inspiration from the subject of mime such as Sophron, this poem offers a more elevated take on fairly obscene subjects, such as sex and magic. Thus we end up with Simaetha, a free woman who associates with a variety of marginalized groups. She fulfills the role of a romantic, pining protagonist while introducing the reader to the intriguing and shadowy world of magic in antiquity. It was not Simaetha, but rather her network of marginalized women and foreigners, who introduced the expertise on magic in this poem to begin with, as Simaetha consults them for advice.

A Thracian nurse is cited as the one who initially convinced Simaetha to attend the festival where she first saw Delphis from afar, another enslaved woman. Before sending Thestylis to arrange a meeting with Delphis, she consulted with every “old enchantress” in town to rid herself of her affection.<sup>48</sup> Simaetha mentions the mother of her “piper Philista and of Melixo”, who broke the news to Simaetha that Delphis may have taken another lover.<sup>49</sup> Simaetha also mentions an Assyrian stranger from whom she learned of “evil drugs” which could take care of unfaithful Delphis.<sup>50</sup> It is noted that the Babylonians and Assyrians were famous practitioners

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<sup>48</sup> Theoc.*Id.*2.91-2, this is especially notable as it implies offhandedly that these ‘old enchantresses’ are already well known as experts in love magic, including separation spells.

<sup>49</sup> Theoc.*Id.*2.145-8, Gossip, alongside magic, is notably one of the few opportunities for agency available to enslaved and marginalized people. Here, we see one glimpse of how that might have manifested, in the true encounters related to Simaetha by this mother of a courtesan.

<sup>50</sup> Theoc.*Id.*2.160-3.



of magic. Finally, and most prevalently, there is the character of Thestylis. Not only did Thestylis have a hand in initiating the entire predicament by arranging the first meeting between Simaetha and Delphis, she has a hand in nearly all the magic rites taking place in the poem. While Simaetha rants and laments, Thestylis circles the ritual bowl with scarlet sheep's wool, scatters barley on the fire, sounds the bronze *rhombus*, and chants the accompanying spells. Indeed, Thestylis' relative control of the situation is underscored by the seeming helplessness of her mistress. Much like the case of Phaedra and the Nurse, Simaetha, unlike Thestylis, seems herself to already be suffering the effects of some kind of sympathetic magic from the start of the poem. Through the affair she is vulnerable and objectified, traits which seem out of place with her depiction.

Although Simaetha is the one seeking to enact the magic, her condition mimics the afflictions of sympathetic or erotic magic. Here, another more nuanced form of role reversal takes place, aside from the larger role reversal of an enslaved woman controlling her free mistress. In an unusual reversal of the typical gender roles in this scenario, Simaetha describes how she saw Delphis from afar at a festival and was struck mad with love. Delphis is portrayed as the ideal male beauty, blonde-bearded and gleaming from exercise at the gymnasium. She states, "And when I saw them I was seized with madness, and my wretched heart was caught with fire, and my beauty wasted away," (82-4). Just as she burns a piece of his cloak in the binding ritual, she describes her own burning love and the trouble it has caused her, almost as if she had suffered the same fate she was attempting to inflict. "The whole of me is burning for the man who made me disgraced—wretch that I am—and no longer a virgin, instead of his wife," (40-1). Simaetha even describes her body as going stiff like a doll when Delphis crossed the

threshold of her home (110). This description really cements her helplessness and seeming objectification because of the situation with Delphis.

Dolls, similar to our modern concept of voodoo dolls, were also a popular tool of sympathetic magic in the Greco-Roman world, used to inflict effects on a victim represented by the doll. These dolls, or *kolossoi*, can be used (like curse tablets) to ground these literary depictions of magic in the material record. One example of particular significance is a wax doll found buried just outside of Rome along the Via Flamina, dating to approximately the 4th century CE. The doll curses a man named Petronius Cornigus, but its significance lies more in the fingerprints which were preserved on the outside of the lead container holding the doll, which have been forensically analyzed to belong to a woman.<sup>51</sup> The figurine itself was inscribed with the name of the intended victim and pierced with needles, like the same context of binding depicted in Theocritus. As such, this can be interpreted as fairly concrete evidence of female practitioners of magic in antiquity. Because sympathetic magic is being used extensively in the poem *Idyll 2* when dolls are mentioned, it does not seem unreasonable to draw a connection to the dolls' use in magic practice. To quote,

“And when I saw him just crossing the threshold of my door with his light foot—

*Note, lady Moon, whence came my love—*

-the whole of me became much colder than snow,

and sweat like damp dews ran from my forehead, and I could say nothing, not even as much as children whimper in their sleep, crying to their own dear mother: my fair body became stiff, just like a doll," (103-110).

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<sup>51</sup> Hanses 2022

This allusion seems to depict Simaetha as the victim of sympathetic magic just as much as she is a practitioner of it, though this is never explicitly stated. The “burning fever” which Simaetha suffered for ten days and nights after meeting Delphis recalls the fiery language of the *agogai* (85). Other extreme symptoms she lists are no less familiar. “Often my skin would become as pale as fustic, and all the hair began to fall from my head, and only my skin and bones were left.”, she laments (88-9). These side effects of what we might literally call ‘lovesickness’ are common in the language of erotic magic. Coldness and absence of luster, value, and utility were common symptoms of binding spells.<sup>52</sup> This type of objectification, comparing Simaetha to a doll, is also a reversal of the objectification more typical of enslaved characters. Often, enslaved characters act almost as an extension of their master’s body, performing tasks for them without autonomy.<sup>53</sup> With magic, the performance of these tasks *is* the power. In this case, Thestylis demonstrates more agency than either Delphis or Simaetha, controlling both the magic and reality which shapes the narrative of this poem.<sup>54</sup>

Another incredibly striking depiction of this phenomenon of role reversal comes from Sophron’s *Women who say that they expel the goddess*, or *The Female Exorcists*. Written in 4th century BCE, this woman’s mime is one of his most complete passages to survive antiquity, and one of very few with a plausible title ascribed to it. Unlike Herodas, whose roughly contemporary mime also depicted enslaved characters, Sophron was not known to mix male and female characters in this era of his mime.<sup>55</sup> Therein, we can assume that this exorcism scene was

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<sup>52</sup> See: Graf (1997), p.133. This is sympathetic in as much as it evokes the types of materials originally used for binding rituals, such as lead, a “cold” and “lackluster” material used for early curse tablets especially. It also mimicked the conditions in which they were deposited, typically graves but later other sites such as wells, sewers, and tombs.

<sup>53</sup> This concept of masterly extensibility will be expanded on further below.

<sup>54</sup> Thestylis controls reality by performing such tasks as arranging the first meeting between Simaetha and Delphis.

<sup>55</sup> Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: p.287-291.

carried out involving almost entirely female characters, a glimpse of the stereotypically female side of the ancient world. Not only that, but in the unique dramatic genre which is the mime, the female characters would have even been played by female actors.<sup>56</sup> Although it would be optimistic to think that this fact points towards a deeper realism in a genre still written and directed by men such as Sophron and Herodas, it does help paint a better picture of not just the performance, but the intended audience. After all, mime was a fairly accessible art form in antiquity. It is true that mime, like other comic forms, relied on the exaggerated comic male view (or fantasy) of how women acted, often depicting them in the worst possible light. However, it realistically depicted its subjects' concern for "female" matters such as the family, the home, and most significantly, religion.<sup>57</sup> These associations were not the basis of the jokes, but rather the reason they would have made sense to an ancient audience. The *personae* of the mime of Sophron and Herodas began to bridge the gap between the exaggerated and obscene women of Old comedy and the more toned-down, realistic women of New comedy (notably lacking grotesque masks).<sup>58</sup> The result is an entirely unique depiction of women performing magic, caught somewhere between male fantasy and real world anxieties.

The scene of *Women who say that they expel the goddess* begins with the preparation and description of a purification ritual carried out by the titular women. This ritual has been identified with the 'expulsion', or exorcism, of Hecate. References to Hecate are rife, despite not all of the passage surviving. The here unnamed mistress character seems to direct the ritual preparations as others, including at least one enslaved woman, carry out the tasks. These tasks

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<sup>56</sup> Although Hordem notes that the presence of masculine participles suggests that at least one of the background characters assisting the main speaker might be male (see: Hordem (2002):168).

<sup>57</sup> Finnegan, R. J. 1992. "Women in Herodian Mime". *Hermathena*. 152: 21-37.

<sup>58</sup> Finnegan 1992: 23.

include burying a sacrifice to ward off poisons, poison being one of the known associations of Hecate. Whether or not they were successful in this task is to be seen. They also appear to sacrifice a dog, a ritual which was attested in another scholion to be common in worship of Hecate. This parallels the dogs howling in the town mentioned in Theocritus. More clarification also comes from a scholiast on Theocritus which notes of Sophron that, ‘He says that Hecate is chthonian, inasmuch as she was nurse of Persephone, or inasmuch as Sophron made her ruler <of the dead>’.<sup>59</sup> Here, we are to note that the invocation of Hecate is one connection between these two depictions, although the two authors seem to differ slightly in her role. This detail that Hecate mythologically served as a nurse to Persephone is once again interesting to note. Even if Hecate isn’t identified as a nurse in this sense by Sophron, as Theocritus does in *Idyll II*, there is another character referenced who might be.

The name Mormolyca crops up in one of the most fragmentary sections of the mime, alongside the terms ‘dog-shameful’ and ‘most lewd’.<sup>60</sup> Mormolyca is a female chthonian spirit invoked by Greek nurses and mothers to scare their children into behaving, and is associated with Hecate. The name itself means both fearful (mormo-) and wolflike (-lyca). A scholion from Apollodorus’ *On the Gods* states that “(Gorgyra invented as wife of Acheron) ‘just as his nurse was named as Mormolyca by Sophron’.”<sup>61</sup> Much like we see with Hecate, the associations with wetnursing, child-rearing and child-birth are areas of ancient life over which ‘nurses’, i.e. enslaved women, would have had a significant influence. Perhaps one ghoul which frightened male authors is represented in her- an insidious threat to the household from within. This take combines the exaggerated evil traits typical of women as depicted by men with the realistic

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<sup>59</sup> Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: p. 301

<sup>60</sup> Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: p.297

<sup>61</sup> Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: p.297, footnote 27.

concerns they might have faced, typical of mime. Even if Mormolyca is just being evoked or mentioned, she is associated with these women performing magic, in particular the enslaved women. Mormolyca's seeming description as 'dog-like' is also very much in line with the type of dehumanization and monsterization inflicted on enslaved people and enslaved characters in literature.

As for the outcome of the ritual, it is slightly difficult to ascertain. Piecing together the fragments of the mime, the ritual seems to begin as a means to expel 'poison' which is afflicting at least the mistress if not all the women. Given the references to and surviving punchlines of the mime of Sophron (usually revolving around food and drink, sex, or bodily functions), the joke involves the women experiencing diarrhea. Not only does this interpretation suit the humor of the mime, it matches up with the type of ritual which they seem to be performing. Purgatives and other medicinal substances which caused physical discomfort were often a part of ancient magic ritual.<sup>62</sup> The line between 'poison' and 'medicine', much like the line between 'medicine' and 'magic', was blurred at best.<sup>63</sup> As the example of Theocritus' "evil drugs" and crushed lizards would suggest, harmful substances were widely available. Constant stomach ailments must have also been an unfortunate fact of life before modern comforts such as refrigeration and pasteurization. The phrasing of the title seems to suggest that the ritual is somehow unsuccessful, perhaps comically so. Once again, the role reversal is at work here. In both pieces, we see an enslaved woman with assumed knowledge of *pharmakeia* controlling the gods (such as Hecate)

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<sup>62</sup> Matyszak 2019: 77

<sup>63</sup> The correlation between debilitating poisons and love potions is alluded to several times in earlier literary sources, but its social context and significance are most clearly spelled out in Plutarch's "Marital Advice" (*Moralia* 139a).

and thereby her mistress with magic. Indeed, the actor with the most control in these scenes must be whoever controls the ritual- the enslaved woman.

The character which mirrors Thestylis in Sophron's mimic scene leaves behind few traces in the fragmentary remains of the text, including any discernible spoken lines.<sup>64</sup> Her presence, however, is noted in a scholion on Theocritus suggesting his inspiration for the character came from Sophron. This unheard enslaved woman is the subject of some of the mistresses commands, such as:

“Set down the table as it is;  
 take a lump of salt in your hand  
 and bay at your ear.  
 Now approach the hearth and sit down.  
 You, give me the sword;  
 bring the dog here.  
 But where's the bitumen?  
 – Here. –  
 Hold both the torch and the incense.  
 Come then, let's have all the doors open.”<sup>65</sup>

In carrying out these magical tasks, the enslaved women once again seem to be the ones actually performing the ritual. In this context, they become in many ways the most important characters in the mime. Their silent involvement speaks to an impressive amount of agency for enslaved women. Indeed, the very effects of diarrhea which the mistress and other women appear to be

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<sup>64</sup> With the possible exception of the single spoken response “- Here. -” (line 9) when asked about the bitumen, which is separated from the rest of the dialogue in this mostly-intact passage.

<sup>65</sup> Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: lines 2-11, p.295.

suffering from could just as easily be caused or cured by someone with such presumed knowledge of *pharmakeia*. Perhaps this is a punchline which is invisible to the modern reader—the actions of an enslaved woman in the background of the scene. If the suffering mistress is meant to look ridiculous in this ritual (as various interpretations have suggested), then this kind of comic sabotage isn't out of the question. This image of women plotting sex and sabotage in the absence of men, assisted or even encouraged in their misdeeds by their serving women seems painted by male fantasies and anxieties. It must be seen as significant, however, that it is repeated in drama, comedy, and apparently real life.<sup>66</sup>

This scene and subject matter which inspired Theocritus would remain culturally relevant for centuries, as it would in time inspire a second adaptation by Vergil. Vergil reimagined this and several other Theocritean subjects in his *Eclogues*.<sup>67</sup> These similarly bucolic poems were an imitation of Theocritus' *Idylls*, written relatively early in Vergil's career, before 29 BCE. Much like the *Idylls*, the *Eclogues* characters and settings are ambiguously Mediterranean.<sup>68</sup> In *Eclogue* 8, the idealized male beauty Delphis becomes the equally idealized man Daphnis, the scheming Simaetha is replaced by an unnamed sorceress, and the role of magic assistant once played by Thestylis is carried out by a woman named Amaryllis.<sup>69</sup> The social status of Amaryllis, like several other characters in the *Eclogues*, is somewhat difficult to determine. She is referenced as the lover of Tityrus who appears to be enslaved and mirrors the role played by

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<sup>66</sup> Most notably in court cases, such as *Lys.* i 11-15 (see: Finnegan 1992: 32).

<sup>67</sup> Translation from: Virgil. *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 63. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916.

<sup>68</sup> Almost all the main characters in the *Eclogues* have Greek names, with the exception of Gallus in *Eclogue* 10. Greek place names appear in every *Eclogue* except for *Eclogue* 3, which contains no named locations. However, the shepherds of *Eclogue* 1 mention having visited Rome, and other *Eclogues* contain references to prominent contemporary Romans as if these Greek-sounded characters knew them personally. For more on setting, see: Flintoff, Everard. 1974. "The Setting of Virgil's *Eclogues*". *Latomus*. 33 (4): 814-846.

<sup>69</sup> Though a character named Thestylis, perhaps another homage to the inspiration of Theocritus, does crop up in *Eclogue* 2, referred to simply as a woman who cooks.



Thestylis in *Idyll 2*, therein she is most likely enslaved as well. But unlike Theocritus' *Idyll 2*, in which Simaetha speaks extensively and directly, no female character in Virgil's *Eclogues* ever talks for herself. This is perhaps the most significant departure from the Greek version of this subject matter.

The scene of this *Eclogue* begins with a singing contest between two characters, Damon and Alphisiboesus. After a brief dedication to an unnamed patron who apparently requested these songs, Alphisiboesus recounts the story of the attempts of the two women by means of magic to draw Daphnis back. Although the sorceress refers to the straying Daphnis as her *coniunx*, their relationship status remains ambiguous, as the same word is used by Damon to describe someone other than his legal, permanent mate.<sup>70</sup> Just as in Theocritus, the story of the doomed romance unfolds as the two women prepare an erotic magic ritual in sequence. One distinction between the two versions is the depth of detail which the Latin account offers of the actual magical practices being performed, slightly more than the Greek version which was already notable for this reason. Just like Simaetha, this sorceress directs the preparations of a ritual, telling Amaryllis to weave wool around the altar (in strands of 3, as uneven numbers were apparently pleasing to the gods, 73-8) and throw bran and frankincense on the offering fire. After the ritual is complete, Amaryllis is instructed, "Carry forth the embers"<sup>71</sup>, Amaryllis, and toss them over your head into a running brook; and look not back. With their aid I will assail Daphnis; he reckes naught of gods or songs." (101-3). Once again, it is noteworthy that the enslaved character is completing the ritual on her own.

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<sup>70</sup> MacDonald, Jennifer. "Structure and Allusion in *Idyll 2* and *Eclogue 8*", Vergilius (1959-) 51 (2005): 12-31.

<sup>71</sup> From the fire into which various offerings were thrown.

This calls to mind the concept of masterly extensibility, i.e., the conception that rather than being independent agents, slaves were prosthetic tools with which owners accomplished various tasks.<sup>72</sup> This worldview, clearly still present in Roman society, was expressed earlier on by Aristotle. He conceived of enslaved people as being part of their master's body, alive but severed from it.<sup>73</sup> Varro, writing his *De Re Rustica* in the first century BCE, would similarly describe the enslaved among the means of cultivation (*agri quibus rebus colantur*) as a "speaking sort of tool" (*instrumenti genus vocali*).<sup>74</sup> This dehumanizing description seems especially significant in the context of literally using an enslaved person's voice to attempt to carry out a master's (or mistress') magical task. Due to the understood nature of magic in antiquity, however, where intention and minor details play a role in shaping the perceived outcome of the ritual, this appears to be a rare case in which masterly extensibility seems to backfire. The enslaved characters performing magic are indeed being directed as if they were the hands of the slave-owning characters, but they do not suffer the same fate. Perhaps this highlights the Aristotelian separation between the two: the hands (the enslaved people) act, and the body (the master) suffers. Regardless, it is an interesting reversal of the usual power dynamic implied in this relationship.

The Latin version also includes something rare, which is a snippet of dialogue seemingly spoken by Amaryllis herself.<sup>75</sup> While Simaetha's instructions to Thestylis included directions which would presumably be spoken by the character aloud, Thestylis had no spoken lines

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<sup>72</sup> As defined by Brendon Reay in his article: Reay, Brendon. "Agriculture, Writing, and Cato's Aristocratic Self-Fashioning." *Classical Antiquity* 24, no. 2 (2005): 331–61.

<sup>73</sup> *Aris. Pol.* 1255b.

<sup>74</sup> Varro *R.* 1.17.1, see: Reay 2005: p.335.

<sup>75</sup> To say Amaryllis spoke this line 'herself' is of course complicated by the fact that the entire story of Amaryllis and the sorceress is sung by Alpheisiboesus, a male shepherd. However, it is a line seemingly ascribed to and spoken aloud by an enslaved woman (embedded as it may be in a man's song), and therein remains significant.

included in the poem. Amaryllis, on the other hand, is granted this quote, ““Look! the ash itself, while I delay to carry it forth, has of its own accord caught the shrines with quivering flames. Be the omen good!”” (105-6). In these few words she is not only carrying out a magical task by herself, but offering an interpretation of the omens of the magic being performed by the two. Once again, this seems to indicate a kind of familiarity and expertise. The extensive use of fire as referenced in these lines is one of the notable magical elements of this portrayal. At one point, the fire seems to serve dueling sympathetic purposes on the materials being tossed into it, leading some to question the accuracy of the practices. The sorceress directs, “As this clay hardens, and as this wax melts in one and the same flame, so may Daphnis melt with love for me! Sprinkle meal, and kindle the crackling bays with pitch.<sup>76</sup> Me cruel Daphnis burns; for Daphnis burn I this laurel.”<sup>77</sup> As for the purpose of this act, she states, “May such longing seize Daphnis as when a heifer, jaded with the search for her mate amid woods and deep groves, sinks down by a brook in the green sedge all forlorn, nor thinks to withdraw before night’s late hour—may such longing seize him, and may I care not to heal it!”<sup>78</sup> However, the enchantress seems to be using the two materials for two different symbolic purposes, such as the melting wax sympathetically melting his resistance to her.<sup>79</sup> She also burns laurel and seemingly buries some artifacts of Daphnis’ outside her house, stating: “These relics that traitor once left me, dear pledges for himself. Now, on my very threshold, I commit them, Earth, to you. These pledges make Daphnis my due.”<sup>80</sup> All of this seems to parallel the portrayal in Theocritus, while adding more detail.

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<sup>76</sup> Pitch, also known as bitumen, is one spell ingredient which appears in common with the magic ritual portrayed in Sophron.

<sup>77</sup> Virg.*Ecl.*8.80-4

<sup>78</sup> Virg.*Ecl.*8.85-9

<sup>79</sup> The hardening clay could have a fairly literal erotic sympathetic effect on him in mind. Hopefully that effect is clear from context.

<sup>80</sup> Virg.*Ecl.*8.91-3

Much like Simaetha, the sorceress in Vergil's *Eclogue 8* seems to be embedded in a subversive world which includes variously marginalized groups and practitioners of magic. These include Moeris, a sorcerer from whom Alpheisiboesus' enchantress claims to have received her "herbs and poisons" (*herbas atque... venena*, line 95) grown in Pontus. She claims to have seen Moeris turn into a wolf many times, amongst other magical feats (such as calling spirits from the grave and charming corn from one field to another).<sup>81</sup> This is reminiscent of Simaetha's herbs from 'an Assyrian stranger'.<sup>82</sup> Much like the world of Theocritus and seemingly Sophron, magic and its practitioners are readily accessible at all levels. Even in the smaller, rural social sphere of the *Eclogues*, multiple practitioners of magic are known by name, suggesting the continued omnipresence of magic in Mediterranean society.

It may be noted that I have thus far referred to the character performing magic alongside Amaryllis as an 'enchantress' or 'sorceress', i.e., a woman. This is the overwhelming consensus in secondary literature regarding the *Eclogues*, so much so that I took it for fact when beginning my research.<sup>83</sup> However, the character referred to by Alpheisiboesus in his singing competition with Damon remains unnamed, with no definitive indication of their gender in the Latin. The extensive parallels with *Idyll 2* are enough to imply heavily that this unnamed character is meant to stand in for Simaetha, just as Amaryllis does for Thestylis and Daphnis for Delphis. But the lack of straightforward evidence for the assumption that the *Eclogues'* other magic practitioner

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<sup>81</sup> The reference to "charming corn from one field to another" seems significant as a possible allusion to the earliest legal references to magic in the *Twelve Tables*. This 5th century BCE Roman legal code underscores the fact that it was not magic, but theft that was illegal. The presence of magic, then, was not outlawed, but rather assumed. This sort of ubiquity of magic could be seen to have continued, if not intensified, by the time of Virgil.

<sup>82</sup> Both exotic and local substances are referenced in all three portrayals of the scene with the two sorceresses (i.e. the bitumen and incense in Sophron, the 'Assyrian drugs' and hippomanes from Arcadia in Theocritus, and the frankincense and laurel in Virgil).

<sup>83</sup> See: Hahn, E. Adelaide. 1944. "The Characters in the Eclogues". *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*. 75: 196-241., Flintoff, Everard. 1974. "The Setting of Virgil's *Eclogues*". *Latomus*. 33 (4): 814-846., Rose, H. J. 1942. *The Eclogues of Vergil*. University of California Press., etc.

character is a woman, a witch, is worth noting. This is one of the intriguing ways in which the female characters performing witchcraft in this depiction by Vergil are both more present and more absent in the narrative. Amaryllis in particular, a character likely meant to be understood to be enslaved, seems more present in the narrative than her predecessor Thestylis. She is named while her seeming mistress is not, and even gets a line of spoken dialogue towards the end of the scene, though not in her own voice. Her magical workings are portrayed in more detail and with arguably less vitriol than in the portrayal by Theocritus.<sup>84</sup> However, both characters are realistically removed from the direct narrative as their story is being recounted by two men. Neither of their voices actually appears in the text, only their stories. This is a departure from both Sophron, where the female characters in the mime would have likely been performed by real female actors, and Theocritus, where the main character is a woman speaking in her own voice.

Perhaps this literary move by Vergil, adding a layer of distance between his narrators and the practice of witchcraft, is indicative of the general attitude towards magic practice at this time in antiquity as unsavory but omnipresent. While his enchantress lacks a name or voice in the text, readers since antiquity have filled in the gaps with the context which was logical and familiar to them. This contextualization is perhaps even more telling than if the character had been outright named as a woman. These assumptions offer more insight even than the continuities in the magical practices described by Sophron, Euripides, Theocritus, and Vergil centuries and thousands of miles apart. Magic, especially erotic magic as is main focus of the latter three portrayals, was a stigmatized but undeniable force in ancient life. It has always been associated with the disenfranchised, from the enslaved to foreigners to prostitutes, in literature and in the

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<sup>84</sup> Simaetha scolds Thestylis, referring to her as a “wretch”, “vile”, and witless (lines 19-20).

material record. Many have been inclined to dismiss these stories of magic in literature as fiction, alongside the practices which seemed to have accompanied them in reality. This is one area where it can be particularly difficult to divorce our modern worldview from what we perceive ancient people to have practiced. But to write off these portrayals of magic use as a literary invention or a fruitless, superstitious gesture is denying or ignoring the real effects magic such as this might have had on those who practiced it.

It is easy to get caught in the idea of magic “working” in a literal sense, achieving the desired effects of the spell as stated, harnessing the power of the gods to accomplish your ends. In some ways, even this was likely seen in practice. As mentioned above, the line between magic and medicine, particularly the further back into ancient life you examine, is ill-defined.<sup>85</sup> Working knowledge of both helpful and harmful drugs by magical practitioners, amongst whom we know enslaved women were included, is recorded. In this sense, magic would have had real and immediate consequences on the lives of those who practiced it. This represents a real niche, a foothold for agency amongst those who may not have had many other means of enacting change. But even outside the *pharmakeia* of drugs and potions, where the effect would have been more obvious, magic could still be said to “work”. While throwing a curse tablet down a well may not bring back your lost lover or render your rivals impotent, there was undoubtedly a psychological empowerment which must have accompanied it. Much like the placebo effect of modern medicine, the knowledge that you’ve taken steps you believe will remedy your problems is enough to make a profound emotional, mental, and even physical difference in your reality.

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<sup>85</sup> One example of this phenomenon which occurs in the text is the description of the use of buckthorn in a scholion on Nicander’s *Poisonous creatures*, referencing Sophron. It mentions: ‘protective twigs of buckthorn, for buckthorn is a good defence not only against poisons, but also against phantoms; hence they hang it in front of doors in offerings to the dead. . . . The plant is mentioned by . . . and likewise Sophron [165]’ (from: Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.). 2003, p.303). While also solidifying the connection to Hecate, who was associated with ghosts and poison, it demonstrates the overlap of religion, magic, and medicine in the ancient world.

Perhaps this push was all that was needed to facilitate a real action or confrontation, as we see in the case of Simaetha, who pledges to confront Delphis the morning after she casts her spell. In this sense as well, magic could be seen to have “worked”. This interpretation only makes it more vital to understand the nature of these portrayals of enslaved women performing magic.

Role reversal is a complex theme to analyze amongst other reasons because it assumes a defined ‘role’ for various groups in society which tend to be complex and heterogeneous. However, as we have seen demonstrated repeatedly in the literature, magic allows marginalized people to act in ways which might normally be forbidden or inaccessible. It allows women like Simaetha to take on more masculine, assertive roles, a reversal of the normal gender conventions of the pining lover trope. It also more critically allowed enslaved people, enslaved women like Thestylis and Amaryllis, to take on the mobility and agency which might normally be difficult or impossible. We see this in the helplessness and lifelessness of Simaetha and Phaedra compared to Thestylis and the Nurse, the ones carrying out the majority of the magic. The same can be seen in Vergil’s *Eclogue* 8, and seemingly of the speaker in Sophron’s *Women who say that they expel the goddess*. Scenes recur throughout antiquity in which enslaved women through magic become the controlling force in the scene. This is often at the expense of the free or less marginalized characters, who appear to be victims of the magic. This is a profound reflection on both the attitude toward and practice of magic. Magic was, from a very early point in Greco-Roman antiquity, an unseen but perceived threat, a potential wrench to the dynamics of the family and society as a whole. The fear that this threat may turn on them, particularly at the hands of those whom they persecute the most, underlies these portrayals.

## Chapter 2

### Monstrosity

Very few things are universal to all human cultures, from ancient history to the present day, from hunter-gatherer bands to large state level societies. These rare universals include things like marriage, music, gossip, and- intriguingly- a fear of the dark and the things that go bump in it. Monsters reflect what societies fear and abhor, and the monsters of Greco-Roman antiquity were no exception to this rule. This relationship seems to hold especially true with regards to literature which depicts enslaved women performing witchcraft. Just as the use of magic allowed or forced enslaved women to act outside their normal means within the theme of role reversal, the use of magic also often placed these women outside the normal realm of humanity. Indeed, although magical transformation was depicted to empower enslaved women and other magic practitioners, in many instances it also marked their descent into dehumanization and monstrosity.

It must first be noted that we likely have strong preconceptions of monstrosity or the word 'monster' in our modern context. To understand the monsters of antiquity, this is a good starting point to work backwards from. As aforementioned, 'monsters' are often reflections of what a culture fears most, and what it defines as human.<sup>86</sup> This is evident, for example, in the recent progression of the horror genre in media. Here vampires, zombies, and slasher-killers

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<sup>86</sup> Paired with some seemingly universal human biological aversions, such as snakes, spiders, and the dark. This is why horror is what has been referred to as a 'biocultural nexus'. (See: Asma, Stephen. (2014). "Monsters on the Brain: An Evolutionary Epistemology of Horror". In *Social Research*. 81(4).)



offer outlets for our ever-evolving anxieties over society's ailments, changing and adapting to the fears which plague us most. Professor Liz Gloyn, a lecturer in classical literature at London's Royal Holloway University, summarizes it well. "We can be frightened of the uncategorised which doesn't fit into the neat box, like Frankenstein's monster which is half dead, half alive," she says. "Or it can be the unfamiliar, the present 'other'. The monster can constantly reshape itself to haunt the culture that is using it — not just the culture that created it."<sup>87</sup> Frankenstein's monster is a particularly apt example because he was intentionally created to reflect the fears of the Gothic era from which he stemmed.<sup>88</sup> He is an emblem of the uneasy borderline between what science *can* do and what science *should* do, one of the most pressing concerns of European society following the upheaval of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment. A popular trend among portrayals of monsters in the Medieval era in Europe, by contrast, was supernatural themes derived from Christian theology. This aptly reflects the fear of crossing spiritual boundaries and uncertainty about religion which preceded the Reformation. It has also been documented that the areas which were most affected by the upheaval of the Reformation (such as what is now modern Germany, which remained very politically and religiously fragmented throughout the Medieval and Early Modern periods) were most fervently and violently involved in the phenomena of witch hunts.<sup>8990</sup> This is further evidence that even broad societal fears or

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<sup>87</sup> From: Pengilley, Victoria. "From Vampires to Zombies, the Monsters We Create Say a Lot about Us." ABC News, ABC News, 8 Sept. 2018.

<sup>88</sup> It has also been suggested that vampires in media can be an expression of paranoia about disease, blood and dehumanization (Pengilley 2018).

<sup>89</sup> Briggs, Robin. (1996). *Witches & Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>90</sup> It is worth noting that the difference of religious experience in places like Scotland, the Alpine lands, and southwestern Germany during the period of the Reformation and the resulting difference in the intensity and organization of witch hunts there was also due to the secular and decentralized nature of their court systems. These accusations were still culturally interwoven with religion and provide an interesting parallel to the ancient world. (See: "Witch Trials in Early Modern Europe and New England." Berkeley Law. UC Berkeley School of Law, September 20, 2008.)

turmoil can have direct and measurable consequences, and that monsters can be seen as a reflection of those fears.

Indeed, monstrosity is a central theme in the witch trials of Early Modern Europe (here approximately 1450 to 1750). This is a segment of history which yields meaningful insights into the treatment of enslaved women performing witchcraft in Greco-Roman antiquity for several reasons. For one, the members of the household or community who were most often accused of witchcraft were usually the most vulnerable or oppressed members of society. This is one reason why the trials primarily targeted women.<sup>91</sup> The victims were also often poor or servants, vulnerable to attacks from their more socially mobile employers or others in the community. Many times the accused witch was also an old woman, amongst the most vulnerable populations in Early Modern Europe if you did not have a family to support you. It is theorized that these old women were often consciously or unconsciously seen as suspicious and a burden to their communities, and for this they were often targets of accusations.<sup>92</sup> These social forces can be seen at work in what is perhaps the most iconic witch trial of the Early Modern period (at least to someone raised in America): the case of Salem in 1692. The first person in the entire community to be accused of witchcraft was Tituba, an enslaved woman from the West Indies. She was one of few, if not the only member of the community of a different ethnicity, which is widely accepted to have played a role in her accusation. She was specifically accused of sexual encounters with demons, swaying the minds of men, and telling fortunes. All of these themes also surface in our sources depicting enslaved women performing witchcraft in Greco-Roman antiquity.

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<sup>91</sup> The demographics targeted by witch trials varied by gender, age, class, and other factors dependent on the area. There was an overall majority of women targeted over men, but this was not overwhelmingly true, nor true in every area (Briggs 1996).

<sup>92</sup> Briggs 1996

It is bittersweet (and not unrelated) that the advent of the witch trials coincided with the invention of the printing press. This allowed both information and misinformation to spread at unprecedented speeds, and has also allowed a much greater cache of primary source documents on the trials to survive. This is comparable, though on a different scale, to the boom of popularity of monster mythology which emerged in Greco-Roman antiquity.<sup>93</sup> In Europe, so-called ‘monstrous births’ were a popular subject for newly printed Early Modern mass media, and Catholics were prone to interpreting them as signs of the impending apocalypse.<sup>94</sup><sup>95</sup> Monsters in witchcraft accusations themselves tended to be ‘familiar’. These were strange animals, often with human qualities (whether in their physicality, such as human hands and mouths, or in their abilities, such as speaking). They were also often combinations of animals, such as the case of a black dog with the face of an ape and horns on his head, akin to the hybrid monsters of Greek and Roman mythology.<sup>96</sup> Accusers would claim to have seen familiars acting on the behest of the accused, to whom monstrous traits were also often applied. The result was that monstrosity was a weapon which could be used to turn society against an individual associated with it.

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<sup>93</sup> "The Greeks adapted many of their monsters from the Near East, but it was in Ancient Greek culture that monsters reached an apogee of sorts, with both pictorial and literary depictions of monsters flourishing to a degree never seen before." Quoted from: Mittman, Asa Simon, and Peter Dendle. 2016. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. London: Routledge., p.103.

<sup>94</sup> By the Early Modern period it was written that the word ‘monster’ itself came from the Latin *monstrum*, and according to St. Augustine it was synonymous with *prodigium* or prodigies as it showed (*monstrat*) God’s will. (See: Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, xxi, pp. 8.) It should also be noted that much like Aristotle’s categorization of monstrous births occurring more regularly among “prolific” populations, i.e. foreigners, these ‘monstrous’ births were interpreted through a moralistic view.

<sup>95</sup> Hsia, R. Po-chia. (2004). “A Time for Monsters: Monstrous Births, Propaganda, and the German Reformation” from *Monstrous Bodies / Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes. Cornell University Press. p. 71.

<sup>96</sup> This example comes from the testimony of twelve-year-old Agnes Brown against her neighbor Agnes Waterhouse (as well as her daughter Joan Waterhouse and sister Elizabeth Francis) in Chelmsford, England in 1566. This case resulted in the first documented execution of a woman for witchcraft in England, and also involved several other elements familiar from antiquity: the killing of livestock, causing illness, and inducing the loss of a child (in this case through abortion caused by herbs guided by the familiar in the form of a cat). (See: Rosen, Barbara. (1991). *Witchcraft in England, 1558 - 1618*. University of Massachusetts Press. p. 72 - 82.)

With this in mind, we know that to examine the recurring theme of monstrosity associated with enslaved women performing magic in ancient literature, we must first attempt to contextualize monstrosity within the cultural sphere of those literary sources. Aristotle described monstrosity as a natural occurrence thus:

“Still it is not easy, by stating a single mode of cause, to explain... why sometimes the offspring is a human being yet bears no resemblance to any ancestor, sometimes it has reached such a point that in the end it no longer has the appearance of a human being at all, but that of an animal only—it belongs to the class of monstrosities, as they are called.” (*On the Generation of Animals*, 769b10).<sup>97</sup>

In literature, monstrosity might appear as human characters transforming themselves or others into animals. Shape-shifting, whether intentional or as a curse, is a common iteration of this trope. It can also include characters taking on traits of a death-like state, often with chthonic, or even necromantic associations.<sup>98</sup> Although the monsters of ancient Greece and Rome were not necessarily thought to come *from* the Underworld, many seemed to end up there in mythology, and appeals to chthonic deities such as Hades, Persephone, and Hecate were common in ancient magic ritual. Much as the theme of role reversal can be seen as an abstraction of the broader of agency among enslaved women, monstrosity in ancient literature gives us an abstract approach to the concept of dehumanization and horror. The association between many monsters of classical antiquity and women, especially enslaved women, is a window into who and what the elite male

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<sup>97</sup> He also notably describes monstrosities as being more common in regions where women were “prolific in Egypt for instance,” (possibly referring to Egypt and Libya), *Gen Animals* 770a40, from translation: Aristotle. *Generation of Animals*. Translated by A. L. Peck. Loeb Classical Library 366. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942, p.425).

<sup>98</sup> Although the fear of a state between life and death is not just ancient, but also modern, as we can see with our recurring stories of zombies, vampires, and monsters like Frankenstein

authors of these texts considered human. In the words of classicist Debbie Felton from her 2013 essay “Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome”, these monsters, “...all spoke to men’s fear of women’s destructive potential. The myths then, to a certain extent, fulfill a male fantasy of conquering and controlling the female.”<sup>99</sup> To examine exactly when and how these situations involving magic and monstrosity arise reveals intriguing patterns.

Once again, the roots of this theme can be traced back to the oldest extant works of Greek literature, such as the *Odyssey*. When the men of Odysseus’ crew land on her island, the mysterious sorceress Circe utilizes “herbs” and “potions” to transform them into swine.<sup>100</sup> This memorable dehumanization demonstrates the supposed power of witchcraft in antiquity, even the archaic and relatively undefined form of witchcraft which was recorded in the *Odyssey*. Two things mark this portrayal as an interesting early example of what would later become a widespread trope. For one, it is Odysseus’ men, not Circe herself, who take on the traits of beasts. For the second, the men are transformed into pigs. Some modern associations with pigs may make this seem like a particularly damning comparison on first reading. Pigs are generally

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<sup>99</sup> Felton, Debbie. (2013). "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome", in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle. Routledge.

<sup>100</sup> Hom. *Ody.* 10.233-243

thought of as dirty, smelly, and a source of meat; to call someone a “pig” is a strong insult.<sup>101</sup>

However, the ancient Greek associations would have likely been very different.



Figure 3. Archaic Greek (ca. 550-560 BCE) *kylix* thought to depict scenes of Circe's transformation from the *Odyssey*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (99.518).<sup>102</sup>

Pigs were fairly ubiquitous in Greek religious ritual, often sacrificed as a votive offering to the gods. Aristotle, writing some three or four centuries after Homer, described pigs alongside dogs as the animals most like people.<sup>103</sup> If widely accepted, this opinion adds an interesting dimension to this transformation. It establishes that the earliest iterations of this theme in the relevant literature (such as Homer, and Euripides, who will be discussed shortly) involved dehumanization, but into domesticated animals like pigs and dogs which were closer to or more trusted by humans.<sup>104</sup> Pigs were also particularly important in religious rites practiced by and for

<sup>101</sup> Merriam-Webster gives the third definition of 'pig' as "a dirty, gluttonous, or disgusting person". Intriguingly, a fifth definition (listed as slang) defines pig as "an immoral woman".

<sup>102</sup> Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. *Wine cup (kylix) depicting scenes from the Odyssey. Greek, Archaic Period, ca. 560-550 BCE (99.518)*. Photograph. April 28th, 2013.

<sup>103</sup> *Aris.Hist.Ani.571b*, translation from: Aristotle. *History of Animals, Volume I: Books 1-3*. Translated by A. L. Peck. Loeb Classical Library 437. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965.

<sup>104</sup> It will emerge that this is a contrast to the types of animals that witches in later literature transformed themselves and others into, typically wilder and more predatory animals like wolves (*Ver.Ecl.8.97*, *Prop.El.4.5.9-10*) and birds of prey (*Ov.Am.1.8.14*, *Apul.Met.3.12-20*).

women who were, metaphorically at least, linked with cultural, personal and agricultural fertility.<sup>105</sup> In this sense, Circe's transformation of battle-hardened soldiers into pigs ready for slaughter is especially potent. Once again, Circe stands out as an empowered female practitioner of magic and a formative reference for later literature, a woman who may not be a monster but creates them.

It is worth noting also that two of the most significant mythological monsters encountered by Odysseus are also described as definitively female. These are Scylla and Charybdis, two very inhuman creatures. Scylla makes for an especially interesting example because of the transformation which she undergoes as a mythological figure in between Homer's *Odyssey* and Ovid's retelling around 700 years later.<sup>106</sup> While Homer described Scylla as a monster with few human characteristics, Ovid used her more female and human features to underscore her horror. In this version, she is described as having a normal, even beautiful human female face, and a mass of writhing legs which was transformed by Circe in a fit of rage to be a mass of barking dogs.<sup>107</sup> This retelling goes hand-in-hand with the larger trend of Roman depictions of female witches and monsters being more exaggerated and ghoulish, but it also offers insight into what had stayed important in Mediterranean society in those intervening 700 years. As literary critic Jess Zimmerman points out in her essay collection *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*, what makes Scylla horrifying in this version of the story is “the contrast between her beautiful face and her monstrous nethers”—a metaphor, she argues, for

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<sup>105</sup> "Another metaphorical similarity between Greek women and pigs was that women, like piglets and the dead, were considered to be "polluted" when not ritually "contained".

<sup>106</sup> Essentially encompassing the era of literature in Greece and Rome in which I am most closely examining these themes.

<sup>107</sup> *Ov. Met.* 14.59-67

the disgust and fear with which male-dominated societies regard women's bodies when they behave in unruly ways.<sup>108</sup>

To return to ancient Greece, another famous example of a monstrous magical transformation in literature with very different associations is that of Hecuba at the end of Eurpides' *Hecuba*. Fittingly, this transformation occurs at the end of a long process of what could be described in the words of Orlando Patterson as social death.<sup>109</sup> The former queen is taken from her home, forced to witness the deaths of her family, and most significantly, enslaved. The magical change itself is only expressed in a single line of text, "You will become a dog with fiery glances," foretold by a Thracian mantic and repeated by Hecuba's son Polymestor before his murder.<sup>110</sup> This transformation into a dog is prophesied to occur once Hecuba jumps into the sea from the masthead of a ship, a sort of suicide averted by the last-minute change. It can be read that it is implied she was not saved from her suicide attempt—rather, it seems that the fate of slavery and dehumanization is akin to death. Hecuba, in being stripped of all the freedoms and vestiges of her former life as a queen (down to the most basic social unit of her husband and children), loses her humanity to the point of becoming a literal animal.<sup>111</sup> Given that this play is said to have been written around 424 BCE, at a tense point in the ongoing Peloponnesian War, musings about the possibility of being captured and enslaved by an enemy at war seem to be a prescient reflection of societal fears. This is not to mention the

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<sup>108</sup> Zimmerman, Jess. 2021. *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*. Beacon Press.

<sup>109</sup> Patterson, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>110</sup> Thrace, like Thessaly, recurs frequently in literature regarding magic. This might be due in part to its reputation from early in antiquity as a source of enslaved people, and thus the subversive world of magic.

<sup>111</sup> She is said to be carried off by the Erinyes (Furies), female chthonic entities who were depicted as ugly, winged women with hair, arms and waists entwined with poisonous serpents. This, along with the timing of the transformation to her suicide, cement a connection between animalistic traits and death in depictions of monstrosity.



recent impact of the Persian War (499 BCE – 448 BCE), which compounded the general fear of the horrible outcomes of war with the Athenian's particular fear and suspicion of foreigners.<sup>112</sup>

Another duality exists in the ancient Mediterranean's associations with dogs, and therein debate on the portrayal of Hecuba's character. Here, the animalistic traits of monstrosity are applied in a new way. In Homer, dogs are scavengers who mangle the warriors' dead bodies and deprive them of funerary rites. Here and repeatedly after, it is implied that being eaten by dogs is one of the most abject fates imaginable.<sup>113</sup> However, even within Homer dogs are also already considered to be loyal and intelligent, exemplified by Odysseus' dog Argos who alone amongst his friends and family recognized him upon his return to Ithaca. As previously cited, Aristotle lists dogs as one of the animals closest to mankind. Of course, this is couched within the mindset of a natural hierarchy of being by which his worldview was organized, a hierarchy which also included a category for "natural slaves".<sup>114</sup> While Aristotle is explicit that nonhuman animals are capable of voluntary movements, their behavior does not count as "action" (*praxis*) to him in the robust sense.<sup>115</sup> From this and from the common association of dogs with enslaved people, we

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<sup>112</sup> It has been suggested that Thessaly's collusion with Persia during their second invasion of mainland Greece helped cement the region's reputation as foreign (i.e. un-Athenian). This only becomes more relevant as Thessaly recurs in literature as a source and location for witchcraft and monstrosity.

<sup>113</sup> This oft-cited portrayal of dogs, alongside the association with beasts of the Underworld like Hades' Cerberus, lead early scholarship on the Greek perception of dogs to be largely focused on negative and impure aspects. A more ambiguous and holistic interpretation of the Greek perception of dogs has emerged in recent years. (See: Burnett, Anne Pippin. "Hekabe the Dog." *Arethusa* 27, no. 2 (1994): p.151–64.)

<sup>114</sup> In *Politics*, Aristotle describes a natural slave as "anyone who, while being human, is by nature not his own but of someone else" and further states "he is of someone else when, while being human, he is a piece of property; and a piece of property is a tool for action separate from its owner." (*Pol.* 1254b16–21.) Aristotle also addresses the questions of whether slavery can be natural or whether all slavery is contrary to nature and whether it is better for some people to be slaves. He concludes that: "those who are as different [from other men] as the soul from the body or man from beast—and they are in this state if their work is the use of the body, and if this is the best that can come from them—are slaves by nature. For them it is better to be ruled in accordance with this sort of rule, if such is the case for the other things mentioned." (*Pol.* 1254b16–21.) This is relevant as it alludes to the philosophical binding of enslavement and monstrosity or dehumanization. (For translation see: Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 264. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932.)

<sup>115</sup> An action, in this sense, is a voluntary behavior that expresses the agent's decision to pursue a certain end, and decision, Aristotle says, "is not shared by things that lack reason" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III 2, 1111b12–13).

can surmise some of the ancient attitudes which linked the two.<sup>116</sup> Not only do dogs display degrees of “human” qualities, such as their loyalty, protectiveness, and ability to follow instructions, they also live physically close to their human masters, often in the same house.

In the words of classical scholar Anne Pippin Burnett, commenting on Hecuba’s transformation into a dog, “In the everyday world, then, the Greek dog represented the wild made tame. An animal slave brought into the house although he did not belong there, he could be petted or maltreated, and he could be sold. His enemies were those of his master, his friends, his master’s friends, and he protected household property as if it were his own.”<sup>117</sup> This seems an even more fitting comparison when applied to a woman, such as Hecuba, as in the ancient world they too were sold and brought into a new household to protect the property of and bear children for their husband. Both dogs and pigs in particular as litter animals bear a connection to the female sphere in their association with fecundity, fertility, and in the case of dogs, fierce maternal care. Thus like pigs, dogs carried strong cultic associations. In particular dogs became associated with Hecate, who herself was associated with childbirth, and like a dog was known as a guardian and watcher of the gates.<sup>118</sup> She remained one of the only deities with which dogs are associated, perhaps the only one to take dogs as her special sacrificial victims.

This use of dogs as sacrifice for Hecate seems to be recorded in the mime fragment of Sophron’s *Women who say they expel the goddess*. This scene and its parallels offer some of our most direct references to enslaved women performing witchcraft, in this case in ancient Greece. Because of this, references to monstrosity with regards to the enslaved women in this scene stand

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<sup>116</sup> One example of this link was the ‘dogskin’ cap or *kunē* which was said to have been worn by Spartan helots.

<sup>117</sup> Burnett 1994: 157

<sup>118</sup> Burnett 1994: 155

out as especially significant. In this mime, the apparent mistress commands, “You, give me the sword; bring the dog here.” (lines 7-8).<sup>119</sup> This is followed shortly by an invocation offering the sacrifice to Hecate, where the same character says, “Now keep quiet while I fight against this one. Lady, food and perfect gifts you will [receive in plenty]...” (lines 15-18). Even further when Hecate has “arrived” in the scene, a fragment describes, “A dog barking loudly before the house,” (fragment \*9), as a dog barking at the crossroads was also a common sign of Hecate’s presence.<sup>120</sup> As a goddess of birth, Hecate naturally dealt with impurity, and embodied a power that could both absorb and emit danger and filth.<sup>121</sup> Perhaps that explains why the women in this scene, as well as the scene it inspired in Theocritus’ *Idylls*, seem to both summon and protect against Hecate. Just as the pig, symbol of Demeter, was used to ceremonially purify the Assembly at Athens, the puppy as Hecate’s symbol was used for domestic purifications (in the *periskylakismos*).<sup>122</sup> In the fragmentary mime by Sophron, another chthonic figure known as Mormolyca is also summoned or mentioned. Her appearance is particularly important in the case of enslaved women performing witchcraft, as Mormolyca encapsulates some of the fears and negative stereotypes associated with enslaved women.

In the scene where Mormolyca appears in the mime fragment, the word “dog-shameful” also appears in the text.<sup>123</sup> This insult matches the aggressive and scornful tone that the mistress

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<sup>119</sup> Once again, translation and commentary referenced for Sophron, see: Theophrastus, Herodas, Sophron. *Characters. Herodas: Mimes. Sophron and Other Mime Fragments*. Edited and translated by Jeffrey Rusten, I. C. Cunningham. Loeb Classical Library 225. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

<sup>120</sup> Commentary on Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: p.301. It is also worth noting that Sophron lists Hecate as "ruler of the dead" (fragment \*7). A related scholiast on Theocritus' *Idyll* 2 confirms that this is a reference to Hecate, and further elaborates that she is also referred to as the "nurse of Persephone". Once again, a connection can be drawn between chthonic magic and enslaved women.

<sup>121</sup> Burnett 1994: 156

<sup>122</sup> Johnston, Patricia A., Attilio Mastrocinque, and Sophia Papaioannou. (2016). *Animals in Greek and Roman Religion and Myth*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. p.393-4.

<sup>123</sup> Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: p.297, line 27

Simaetha takes with her enslaved helper, Thestylis, when directing the preparations for a ritual in the scene which Sophron inspired in Theocritus' *Idyll 2*. Therefore, it is possible that this fragment would have been directed at one of the enslaved characters seemingly being commanded around by the unnamed mistress of this scene. Mormolyca, whose name contains both 'mormo' meaning "fearful" or "hideous" and 'lyca' meaning "of a wolf", was a chthonic female entity often invoked by Greek mothers and nurses to frighten children into behaving.<sup>124</sup> Here, it is especially relevant that the name indicates some kind of wolf-like quality, a form of monstrosity. It is also noteworthy that she was apparently described as the 'wet nurse of Acheron' in this fragment, according to scholiast from Apollodorus' *On the Gods*.<sup>125</sup> A wet nurse in antiquity would have very often been an enslaved woman, so the use of a wet nurse as a chthonic demon is just one way in which the connection between monstrosity and enslaved women can be implied.

In the poem *Idyll 2* by Theocritus, written in the third century BCE, we encounter an enslaved woman practicing magic in a more direct passage. Here as in the Sophron, there is an enslaved female character assisting the preparations for a ritual invoking Hecate. The character of Thestylis who assists Simaetha in her ritual has, as discussed in my previous chapter, a unique amount of agency despite her silent obedience. She is the one to prepare the materials and perform the tasks of many parts of the ritual, such as circling the bowl for the ritual in laurel leaves, scattering barley grains on the fire, and chanting the incantation which sets the intentions for their sympathetic magic.

"First barley grains are melted in the fire. Scatter them on, Thestylis. Where have your

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<sup>124</sup> Used elsewhere in Theocritus (*Idyll 15*, line 40) to mean a she-monster or bogeyman.

<sup>125</sup> Rusten & Cunningham (ed. & trans.) 2003: p. 297

wits flown off to, you wretch? Have I become an object of scorn to you too, then, you vile girl? Scatter it on, and at the same time say, “I scatter the bones of Delphis.” (lines 18-20).

However, she is *not* the one to suffer symptoms of monstrosity in this piece. Although she is associated with Hecate simply by aiding in this ritual, it is Simaetha who takes on the ghoulish traits of a deathlike state. Simaetha complains that since she saw Delphis (before their meeting facilitated by Thestylis), “Often my skin would become as pale as fustic, and all the hair began to fall from my head, and only my skin and bones were left,” (lines 88-89). She also laments, “Ah, cruel Love, why, like a leech from the marsh, have you fastened on me and drunk all the black blood from my body?” (lines 55-56). This mention of black blood parallels an earlier reference to Hecate in the poem as Simaetha implores deities for their assistance in her spell. “Cast a fair light, Moon: to you I shall chant softly, goddess, and to Hecate in the underworld, at whom even dogs tremble when she comes among the tombs of the dead and the black blood,” (lines 10-13). Of the four goddesses who Simaetha petitions, it is interesting that the one who seems to “arrive”, just as in Sophron, is Hecate. Just as in Sophron, it could be said that the effects which plague the demanding mistress fall within her realm of power.<sup>126</sup> This is a way that magic seemed to level the playing field, throw off the balance of power and fortune when introduced to a situation, and in this case Simaetha appears to be paying the price.

The theme of monstrosity is also present in Vergil’s retelling of this bucolic poem, *Eclogue 8*. This version of the tale of a scorned mistress trying to win back her lover with the

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<sup>126</sup> Hecate’s “arrival” is noted in lines 35-36 of *Idyll 2*, as Simaetha orders, “Thestylis, the dogs are howling for us in the town: the goddess is at the crossroads— clash the bronze quick as you can.” It should be noted that while I refer to the likes of Hecate, Artemis, Selene, and Aphrodite as separate deities they often shared aspects and syncretisms, especially in magical practices.

assistance of an enslaved woman dates to approximately 38 BCE, some two hundred years after Theocritus. It creates similar background characters to those of *Idyll 2*, including a network of locals and foreigners with access to and knowledge of magic. Whereas Simaetha procured her drugs from “an Assyrian stranger”, the unnamed mistress of *Eclogue 8* acquired her herbs and poisons from a known magical practitioner named Moeris.<sup>127</sup> Moeris is said to be able to quote: “Turn wolf and hide in the woods, oft call spirits from the depth of the grave, and charm sown corn away to other fields.”<sup>128</sup> This shape-shifting, especially into a wolf or a dog, is another common form of monstrosity associated with women and magic. Intriguingly, the mention of charming corn from a field also recalls one of the earliest references to magic in Roman history, from the Twelve Tables. Although by the time of authors like Lucan or Apuleius, the conceptions of magic from Homer or the Twelve Tables may have already been archaic, it is clear that many of the same ideas and practices were still fairly universal across Mediterranean societies. Aside from shape-shifting, the association with necromancy or death is also present, very common in connection with depictions of marginalized women performing magic. In this scene, we see the claim that Moeris, who aids the women in their ritual, is said to be able to call spirits from the grave.

Another example can be found in first century BCE Roman author Propertius’ *Elegy 4.5*, which curses a ‘bawd’ or *lena* named Acanthis. Unlike the pastoral and fictional setting of the previous depictions, Propertius draws on exaggerations of his own life drama for the content of his elegies. Predominantly, the scenarios stem from his turbulent love affair with his “sweetheart”, a courtesan he calls Cynthia. It is in this context that we are introduced to the bawd

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<sup>127</sup> Translations of Virgil come from: Fairclough (trans.) 1916, references are to Theo.*Id.*2.162 and Ver.*Ecl.*8.95-98.

<sup>128</sup> Verg.*Ecl.*8.97-99

Acanthis, subject of *Elegy* 4.5, who meddles in Propertius' romance. The authorial persona describes her as a witch "skilled enough to win over even Hippolytus" (line 5) and elaborates her powers thus:

"She dared to put spells on the bewitched moon and to hide her shape under the form of a night-prowling wolf; she tore out with her nails the undeserving eyes of ravens so as to be able to blind watchful husbands by her arts; she consulted screech owls on how she might have my blood, and for my undoing gathered the charm that drips from the pregnant mare. She would ply her trade in the darkness, like the bookworm which bores through papyrus and the untiring mole that drills its subterranean path," (lines 9-20).<sup>129</sup>

It is revealed that Propertius despises Acanthis because the *lena* has been in the ear of Cynthia, giving her advice (such as to avoid the artists with empty pockets, never to turn down a paying customer, and to play tricks to build jealousy and intrigue).<sup>130</sup> Propertius mentions the "charm that drops from the pregnant mare" in his elegy, which refers to hippomanes, also an ingredient used by Simaetha in Theocritus' *Idyll* 2 as it was thought to induce love.<sup>131</sup> He also mentions that she plies her trade in the darkness, meant as a sinister detail, but likely a real reflection on the practice of magic by marginalized women who could not do business in broad daylight.

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<sup>129</sup> Translation from: Propertius. *Elegies*. Edited and translated by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 18. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

<sup>130</sup> Interestingly, this advice mirrors closely the advice given to the character of the prostitute Philematium by the *lena* Scapha in Plautus' comedy *Mostellaria* (lines 157-294). Thereafter, Philematium's patron Philolaches proceeds to call Scapha a witch (*venefica*) repeatedly. (See: Plautus. *The Merchant. The Braggart Soldier. The Ghost. The Persian*. Edited and translated by Wolfgang de Melo. Loeb Classical Library 163. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.)

<sup>131</sup> Theo.*Id.* 2.48, one theory about the substance's reputation as an aphrodisiac was that it induced the mare to bond with and feed her foal after birth.

Following in the trend of Virgil and Propertius, Ovid's poetry also includes a monstrous, shape-shifting character, and once again it is a marginalized woman. Written roughly the same time as Propertius' *Elegies* (around 16 BCE) and heavily inspired by them in both form and content, Ovid's *Amores* tell a dramatized version of his own experiences in love with a woman named Corinna. His *Amores* 1.8 similarly tells the story of another old *lena*, named Dipsas, who gave Corinna extensive advice on life and love. She is similarly described as a fearsome and cunning old woman. Ovid claims that:

“She knows the ways of magic, and Aeaean incantations, and by her art turns back the liquid waters upon their source; she knows well what the herb can do, what the thread set in motion by the whirling magic wheel, what the poison of the mare in heat. Whenever she has willed, the clouds are rolled together over all the sky; whenever she has willed, the day shines forth in a clear heaven. I have seen, if you can believe me, the stars letting drop down blood; crimson with blood was the face of Luna. I suspect she changes form and flits about in the shadows of night, her aged body covered with plumage,” (lines 5-14).<sup>132</sup>

Within this small excerpt, we can see many of the same references which cropped up in Homer, Euripides, Theocritus, Virgil, and even the fragments of Sophron. “She knows well what the herb can do,” almost exactly mirrors Circe's Homeric epithet of *polypharmakos*, "knowing many drugs or charms", the same term used for Medea in Apollonius' *Argonautica*.<sup>133</sup> The phrase, “...what the thread set in motion by the whirling magic wheel,” refers to the spinning of the *iunx* or jinx wheel also referenced repeatedly in Theocritus (the repeated chorus of “*Magic wheel*,

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<sup>132</sup> Translation from: Ovid. *Heroides. Amores*. Translated by Grant Showerman. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 41. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914.

<sup>133</sup> Hom. *Ody.* 10.276, Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 3.27



*draw that man to my house,*”). Ovid’s narrator also refers to ‘drawing down the moon’ (“...crimson with blood was the face of Luna,”), a magic ritual associated frequently and predominantly with women, also referenced in the other repeated chorus of Theocritus’ *Idyll 2* (“*Note, lady Moon, whence came my love,*”).<sup>134</sup> Finally, the narrator of the *Amores* also describes Dipsas as a shape-shifter, specifically a bird. While we have discussed the associations of other animals like pigs, dogs, and wolves, birds are also a common iteration of the shape-shifting trope.<sup>135</sup> These references of witches transforming into birds bears resemblance to the myth of Furies, or Erinyes, another set of iconic female monsters. These were goddesses of vengeance usually depicted as ugly winged women with hair and legs covered made of serpents, seen as the embodiment of curses.<sup>136</sup>

The depiction of the marginalized female witch as a monstrous hag in Greco-Roman literature reached a sort of peak dehumanization with the character of the necromancer Erichtho in Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, written around 61-64 CE. She appears in Book XI of the civil war epic, as Pompey’s troops force Caesar’s armies to fall back to Thessaly. As the armies wait for battle, Pompey’s son Sextus seeks out the most powerful witch in Thessaly, Erichtho, to help him tell the future. What follows is one of the most important passages of the book and what would become one of the most famous and lasting portrayals of a witch in antiquity. Much like the other

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<sup>134</sup> Drawing down the moon is a magic ritual associated specifically with women and the worship of some aspect of the syncretic moon goddesses of the Mediterranean, such as Selene, Hecate, Luna, and Artemis. It is also specifically associated with Thessaly, an area known for witchcraft, which will be discussed further below. (See: Edmonds, Radcliffe G. 2021. *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World*. Princeton University Press.)

<sup>135</sup> Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, but the novel’s main character Lucius witnesses his host’s wife, Pamphile, transform into a bird before attempting his own transformation with the help of the enslaved girl Photis (Apul. *Met.* 3.12-20).

<sup>136</sup> The Erinyes association with Hecuba has already been briefly discussed. As chthonic deities, they were also often associated with Perspephone, as were Hecate and the *lamia* Mormolyca. Their description as the embodiment of curses (particularly in response to deeds like patricide or matricide) is also reminiscent of the use of curse tablets.

examples of this trope from Roman literature, though all fictional, this passage also offers us insight into the changes into the broader attitude towards magic in Mediterranean societies, namely, that witchcraft was increasingly seen as something profane, secretive, often foreign, and unsettling (if it were to be taken seriously).

The scene begins with a passage on Thessaly and its myth, its “cruel witchcraft”, and its “baneful herbs”.<sup>137</sup> Intriguingly, the narrator mentions Thessalian witchcraft as “[that] which the gods above abominate”, perhaps referencing the way in which magic supposedly bound the will and power of the gods to the agendas of mortals. Knowing this meant that human tragedies like infidelity, heartbreak, or the loss of a child might be ascribed to meddling from the seemingly perfect gods without dissonance as magical interference. The gods, in theory, were all-powerful and favored the Greek and Roman people- and yet they could be controlled by even the most relatively powerless members of those societies, like women, foreigners, and the enslaved. It is a curious contradiction, as Lucan puts it,

“Why do the gods trouble to heed these spells and herbs, and fear to despise them?

What mutual bond puts constraint upon them? Must they obey, or do they take pleasure in obedience? Is this subservience the reward of some piety unknown to us, or is it extorted by unuttered threats?”<sup>138</sup>

Acknowledging how much power normally marginal figures like Erictho or Simaetha could have over life, love, and death- and the anxiety this belief may have brought to someone who held it- would not have been comfortable for an elite audience like Lucan, Virgil, or Euripides. We

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<sup>137</sup> Translations from: Lucan. *The Civil War (Pharsalia)*. Translated by J. D. Duff. Loeb Classical Library 220. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928.

<sup>138</sup> Duff, J.D. (trans.) 1928: lines 491-496.

might consider the increasingly inhuman and repulsive stereotype of the witch throughout antiquity, as empires expanded and myths proliferated, in part as a reflection of this anxiety.<sup>139</sup>

Far from the enchantment and even seduction of early witch figures like Circe, Erichtho is described thus: “Haggard and loathly with age is the face of the witch; her awful countenance, overcast with a hellish pallor and weighed down by uncombed locks, is never seen by the clear sky.”<sup>140</sup> She is also referred to in detail as a cannibal, one of the most socially abhorrent associations of antiquity as it is now. These vivid scenes of gore harken back to the imagery evoked of dogs eating corpses in Homer and of Hecuba’s transformation into one. The threat of cannibalism also recalls the myth of Mormolyca, who was said to eat children. The connection to the supernatural, undead, and inhuman is clearer in this poem than ever before.

The poem also mentions ‘investigating the stars with Assyrian lore’ (i.e. astrology) as one of the forms of magic, alongside others like haruspicy and augury, which Sextus failed to consult for insight. Although tangential, this recurring mention of the Assyrian origin of certain popular magic practices underscores its association with the foreign, a trait which also applied to many enslaved women. This passage also makes clear, however, that Thessaly had maintained a reputation for being otherworldly and full of outsiders for the “civilized” authors of Greco-Roman antiquity like Lucan. Indeed, the trope or myth of the Thessalian witch existed long before Lucan made it iconic. Thessaly’s reputation for the supernatural is evident in the many mythic figures associated with the region, like Chiron, Asclepius, Jason, and Medea. While Medea is most famously remembered as a powerful sorceress and wicked figure, she is literally

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<sup>139</sup> We should also recall, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter, that this popular trope of a witch and the associations with it persisted well beyond antiquity, into the early modern and modern eras, where it became the basis of witch hunts and accusations.

<sup>140</sup> *LCL* 220, lines 515-519.

described as “skilled in many herbs”. In this sense, she fits in with the likes of famous healers Chiron and Asclepius and the general association of the region with herbs and potions.<sup>141</sup> The persistent connection between Thessaly and women performing witchcraft is again significant because the magic of herbs and potions, *pharmaka*, for which this region is known is also the kind commonly practiced by and associated with enslaved women in literature.

Although Lucan’s Erictho serves as a telling, if exaggerated, case study for the treatment of witchcraft and marginalized women by the first century CE, perhaps a more interesting and insightful bookend for these tropes comes about a hundred years later with the works of Apuleius. The recurring themes of role reversal and monstrosity are at the center of the narrative of *The Golden Ass*, which has been interpreted as a metaphor for the perils of experiencing enslavement. Not only that, but as an author who was famously accused of practicing magic (and appeared to empathize with the threat of enslavement), Apuleius is the ideal author to consider both the literary and lived associations with witchcraft towards the end of Greco-Roman antiquity.

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<sup>141</sup> It is notable that while this region’s association with herbs and potions for male figures like Chiron and Asclepius is one of healing, for female figures like Medea and Erictho it is almost uniformly negative or evil. In my opinion, this is related to the increasing male dominance or control over the practice of medicine throughout antiquity (replacing folk practitioners, nurses, and midwives who would have more often been women). The gender biases in medicine which began as it was explored throughout antiquity by thinkers like Galen and Aristotle have a lasting impact on our medical systems and practices today.

## Chapter 3

### A Metamorphosis

Up to this point, many of the sources which have been discussed with regards to their portrayal of enslaved and marginalized women performing witchcraft stem from what might be thought of as the ‘center’ of the ancient Greco-Roman world. That is, much of the literature has been written by famous and elite male authors, often operating out of the core of the society (mainly Athens and Rome).<sup>142</sup> Euripides, for example, lived just after the beginning of the Classical period and the rise of democracy in Athens, remembered as a golden age of art, politics, and scholarship. Although we can still extract valuable insights about contemporary Greek society through his works, he was particularly far removed from the realities which marginalized or enslaved women would have faced. It is true that his works like *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, and *The Trojan Women* are clearly reflections of the anxiety of enslavement, perhaps intensified by the prolonged conflicts of the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars experiences. In particular, they seem to reflect anxiety towards social death, as personified by the tragic female figures in these plays. They do this, however, in a setting steeped in mythology, perhaps removed a comfortable distance from the reality of the author.

Theocritus, writing from a less “central” Greek location (generally thought to be the island of Kos, though he was said to have lived even further afield in Alexandria) represents a step away from this center. Although still an educated and wealthy figure based on his works and travels, Theocritus does not occupy the same elite and central status as Aristotle, Plato, Sophocles, or Euripides. It is interesting, then, that his poetry seems to offer a more nuanced and

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<sup>142</sup> It must be noted that to an extent, this is a logical consequence of where and when we have the most material to be preserved.

subversive depiction of an enslaved woman performing magic than the Athenian greats.

Theocritus was said to be well-traveled, as is evident in his works, which depict life far outside the center of the Greek empire. His pastoral poetry, as we've seen, was inspired by subjects drawn from the periphery: sewing-women, a harvest feast, shepherds, a ritual performed in the night by an enslaved woman and her mistress. Theocritus was also a product of the Hellenistic period, when the "center" of Greece (and thus the Greek identity) had changed significantly.

The Roman sources which have been discussed, then, could be said to represent a step back towards the proverbial center. By 149 BCE (the end of the Third Punic War) at least a century after the death of Theocritus, Rome had secured their first overseas territories. Most significantly, this included Sicily, Hispania, and Africa. Their destruction and mass enslavement of Carthage had changed the nature of Roman society, creating a momentum for conquest which would continue for centuries. It is from this restless period of political instability and growth for Rome (from the end of the Republic into the height of the empire, comparable in its historical memory to the beginning of the Classical period in Greece) that many of my Roman sources derive. The likes of Virgil and Ovid are the famous voices of this era, funded and inspired by the growing Roman dominance over the Mediterranean. As I've noted, these two created their most famous works close to the heart of the empire, in Rome itself. These works of poetry, drama, and prose (like the *Eclogues*, *Amores*, and *Metamorphoses*) set the stage for a changing Mediterranean world, if you will, from the top down. One thing is clear, however: that despite the changing attitudes, ideas, and practices, this is still a world saturated with magic in familiar forms. This magic was also still associated with the marginalized, such as women, foreigners, and the enslaved. Although women, the enslaved, and in particular the formerly enslaved had

gained some societal mobility in the era of the Roman empire, this improvement was limited and subjective, and witchcraft remained as a subversive avenue to agency.<sup>143</sup>

Although many of the famous Roman authors, like the Greeks, frequently dealt with witchcraft as a subject in literature both directly and indirectly, it can be difficult to gauge how close these references are to real beliefs. Subjects like nature and medicine, once inseparable from magic beliefs, were also increasingly rationalized and controlled by patriarchal Roman authorities. And yet, the proliferation of shared magical beliefs throughout the Mediterranean persisted and even expanded with the changing empire. While exaggerated and ghoulish portraits of witches like Lucan's Erichtho from the mid-first century CE might lead us to believe witches had moved closer to the realm of fiction, as they are largely perceived today, other sources show us that the threat of witchcraft, especially performed by marginalized or enslaved women, was still an active force. And indeed, the same themes which have emerged for centuries in association with that witchcraft, those of role reversal and monstrosity, are still present towards the end of Classical antiquity. The best source to use as a centrepiece for the examination of the change in these themes towards the end of this period, then, would likely be one written outside the elite "center" of ancient Rome. It is lucky that such a source exists and offers fascinating insights into the more peripheral world towards the end of classical antiquity: the works of Apuleius.

Apuleius was an author, philosopher, and rhetorician living in Numidia in the Roman province of Africa in the mid-second century CE. Although he described himself as a prolific author in both Greek and Latin, his few surviving works are in Latin prose. Most of the

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<sup>143</sup> We can infer this from the recurring stereotypes of figures such as witch bawds Acanthis and Dipsas who were able to interfere with the love lives of the young men in Propertius' *Elegy* 4.5 and Ovid's *Amores* 1.8 (respectively).

biographical information we infer about Apuleius stems from his *Apologia*, a speech purportedly written in defense of the accusation that he used magic to seduce a wealthy widow named Pudentilla to marry him and delivered before the proconsul of Africa.<sup>144</sup> Although he is better remembered for his famous novel *Metamorphoses*, which will be discussed shortly, this artful speech offers another dimension to our understanding of the treatment of witchcraft by this period.<sup>145</sup> In this carefully constructed speech, Apuleius both admits to and refutes this accusation of witchcraft, specifically love magic. He does so in part by referencing famous literature about love magic, including some sources which should be very familiar to us by now. Having been accused of sending his servant shopping for spell ingredients for erotic magic at the fish market, Apuleius cheekily refutes:<sup>146</sup>

“Let me tell you, Tannonius Pudens, how little you knew when you took fish to be a proof of magic, whereas if you had read Virgil, you would certainly have known that the things usually required for this purpose are different. For as far as I know he lists soft wreaths of wool, leafy boughs, balls of incense, threads of different colors, and moreover laurel leaves that crackle, mud that hardens, wax that softens, all of which he included, this time in a serious poem.” (30.60-7)<sup>147</sup>

While in this passage Apuleius seems to poke fun at the very idea of the accusation, he elsewhere refutes his use of witchcraft not because of its absurdity, but rather because of its

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<sup>144</sup> It is largely assumed to be autobiographical but interpreted by some as a tongue-in-cheek defense of Apuleius against his contemporaries, see: Apuleius. *Apologia. Florida. De Deo Socratis*. Edited and translated by Christopher P. Jones. Loeb Classical Library 534. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

<sup>145</sup> For commentary and translation, see: Apuleius. *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass), Volume I: Books 1-6*. Edited and translated by J. Arthur Hanson. Loeb Classical Library 44. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

<sup>146</sup> Interestingly in parallel with our sources to this point but more explicit, Apuleius takes the time to note that his enslaved servant Themison is quite skilled in medicine. (35.4)

<sup>147</sup> It should be familiar that he is referring to Virgil’s *Eclogue* 8, specifically lines 8.64–65, 73–75, 80–82.



logic. Apuleius cleverly points out that his experiments with and the study of the natural world, such as those of herbs and potions, belong to the same school of scientific thought as Aristotle or Hippocrates.

This is very interesting as a contemporary acknowledgement of a fact which is significant in the modern study of ancient magic, that it resembled and overlapped with other essential spheres of ancient life. He endicts his opposition saying, “Let him read the treatises of the ancient philosophers, and learn at last that I was not the first to investigate these subjects: it was my predecessors long ago, I mean Aristotle, Theophrastus, Eudemus, Lyco, and others later than Plato. These have left us very many books on the generation of animals, their diet, their anatomy, and all their characteristic features.” (36.3-4). In an even cheekier rebuttal, he states:

“I will talk only of aquatic creatures, not touching on other ones except when they share distinguishing features. Listen therefore to what I have to say. You will immediately clamor that I am listing words of magic in Egyptian or Babylonian style: sharks, mollusks, creatures with soft shells, with hard shells, with cartilaginous skeletons, with sharp teeth, amphibious, with scales, with plates, with membranous wings, with webbed feet, creatures solitary and gregarious. I could go on, but it is not worth it to spend the day on these matters, so that I have time to get to other ones.” (38.6-9)<sup>148</sup>

Reminding his rhetorical audience how similar the practice of witchcraft could look to biology or medicine was a clever technique, but also a useful insight for modern audiences. We are offered new context not just for the practice of, but the attitude towards witchcraft in this period.

Apuleius’ *Apologia* is confirmation that although its framing and connotations have changed, the

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<sup>148</sup> This line is also noteworthy for confirming that Babylon and Egypt still held a strong association with the practice of magic, perhaps even stronger than in earlier sources. We know, for example, that Apuleius traveled to Egypt and was likely an initiate in the cult of Isis, a personal connection to the area as a site of magic.

practice of magic still proliferates the thought and culture of the Mediterranean, even on the relative fringes. He shows that what might be exaggerated and demonized as witchcraft were the essential practices of ancient life, with changing connotations. Or, rather:

“According to them, I used magical arts and marine charms to seduce a woman, though just then, as they will fully admit, I was among the mountains of inner Gaetulia, where you find fish from Deucalion’s flood. Well, it’s lucky for me they do not know that my reading also includes Theophrastus’ *On animals that bite and stun* and Nicander’s *On Remedies for poisonous bites*: otherwise they would accuse me of being a poisoner too.”  
(41:5-7).

It is with this added context from the *Apologia* that we begin to examine Apuleius’ more famous work, the *Metamorphoses*.

Apuleius claimed to have inherited a significant sum from his provincial magistrate father, he traveled extensively to Athens, Italy, Asia Minor, and Egypt, studying a variety of subjects, becoming an initiate of several magical cults or mysteries, and apparently burning through his inheritance in the process. His works seem to reflect these travels and offer a real sense of the contemporary world, mirroring the political, economic, and social structures of the Roman Empire of the mid-second century. This is especially true of his most famous work, his *Metamorphoses*, commonly referred to as *The Golden Ass*. As Keith Bradley puts it in his essay “Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction”, which examines the metaphorical implications of the transformations undergone in the *Metamorphoses*, “The story of the *Ass* is set in a historically recognizable world, and a world, it must follow, that is drawn to a considerable

extent from Apuleius' own experience."<sup>149</sup> This work, already unique within the ancient world due to its subject matter and tone, is especially significant as the only Latin novel which survives in its entirety. As such, it serves as an important and insightful focus for discussing the culmination of the tropes of enslaved women performing witchcraft in Greco-Roman antiquity. The recurring themes of role reversal and monstrosity are present and clear in this novel, which seems to examine the experience of enslavement more deeply than previous sources.

The story begins with the introduction of the narrator Lucius, a Greek traveler who finds himself in Thessaly on business. The setting of Thessaly should immediately stand out as a continuity with previous sources. As discussed in the previous chapters, it has been associated with the performance of witchcraft by marginalized women since at least the era of Euripides' *Medea*, and likely well before. True to the origins of this trope, the character who plays the most fateful role in the central plot of the novel is the enslaved girl Photis. Photis is a notable character first in the power she has over the free young educated man, Lucius, then in the role she plays in accidentally transforming him into a donkey. This fateful mishap directly combines the themes of role reversal and monstrosity or dehumanization, as will be discussed in further detail. It also demonstrates a sort of uneasy understanding of the experience of enslavement (a transformation which could, in theory, befall any man, woman, or child with the swiftness and potency of a magic curse).

Although other authors like Euripides have reflected on this possibility in their works, it was often through a lens far removed from their own in time, setting, or gender.<sup>150</sup> Apuleius, by

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<sup>149</sup> Bradley, Keith. "Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000): 110–25. p.122

<sup>150</sup> Setting works during the fictional or distant Trojan war, the enslaved characters who are most direct are former nobility like Hecuba, Polyxena, and Andromache (with the exception of the chorus of the *Women of Trachis*).

contrast, seems to insert himself directly into the role of the character who is magically transformed and metaphorically enslaved. Lucius, who speaks throughout the novel in the first person, is described in similar terms as Apuleius describes himself in other writing.<sup>151</sup> If his *Apologia* is to be believed, Apuleius had experience with the subversive world of magic practitioners which has often involved enslaved women. It has also been speculated that he may have had more personal reasons to consider the experience of enslavement, such as the possibility of debt bondage after quickly spending his inheritance.<sup>152</sup> It is with this in mind that we examine this final recurrence of the themes of role reversal and monstrosity and their significance, beginning with role reversal.

The role reversal which occurs in *The Golden Ass* involving the enslaved woman Photis happens well before her use of magic in the narrative. Her control over Lucius seems to begin with their love affair, where Photis denies Lucius' first attempt to seduce her and calls him *miselle*, "poor little boy" (*Met.*2.7). Although the dynamic of a mistress (or *domina*) with the power to fulfill or deny the desires of a suppliant lover is common in forms like elegy, its implementation here between an enslaved woman and an elite free man is also significant. In many ways, it is reminiscent of the very effects of love magic Apuleius was accused of in the *Apologia*, as well as many of the other scenarios we've examined in which instances of erotic magic arise. Further regarding their role reversal, there is a scene before the transformation in which Photis takes charge of their lovemaking, assuming a traditionally masculine position (known colloquially in the Latin world as *mulier equitans*). Not only does this scene (2.17-18)

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<sup>151</sup> Perhaps most significantly in the last book in particular the protagonist represents himself as a *Madaurensis* (*Met.* 11.27.9).

<sup>152</sup> Lucius uses the language of debt bondage (*addictus*) when he professes his love to Photis and attempts to persuade her to share her knowledge of magic with him (*Met.* 3.19).

reflect a reversal in gender, status, and power between Photis and Lucius, it foreshadows his transformation into an equid at her hands.<sup>153</sup>

Lucius defines himself from the beginning of the novel as a man of learning, a scholar, and measures himself by it. It is the knowledge of magic that Photis clearly possesses which initially draws Lucius to her, although at times he seems to lose sight of that detail. This power imbalance, of an elite educated man desperately seeking knowledge from an enslaved woman, is a form of role reversal to being with. It is also notably in this context that Lucius describes himself using the language of slavery. He implores Photis, saying:

“ Show me your mistress when she is working at some project of this supernatural discipline, and let me see her when she is invoking the gods, or at least when she is undergoing a transformation. I have the most passionate desire to know magic at first hand, although you yourself seem to me to be no unskilled or inexperienced practitioner of the art. I know that clearly enough from my own experience: although I have always disdained ladies’ embraces, you, with your flashing eyes and reddening cheeks and glistening hair and parted lips and fragrant breasts, have taken possession of me, bought and bound over like a slave, and a willing one. In fact I do not miss my home any more and I am not preparing to return there, and nothing is more important to me than spending the night with you.” (3.19)

After this pleading, Photis eventually allows Lucius to witness her mistress Pamphile working magic when an opportunity arises.<sup>154</sup> Lucius is able to witness the magical transformation of

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<sup>153</sup> See: Adkins, Evelyn. 2022. *Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p.134.

<sup>154</sup> Although not before throwing in one more quick role reversal, in that to try to cheer him up after denying him she "out of her own generosity played the part of the boy" in their love-making, presumably taking a typically male role in a sexual position. This added erotic context is reminiscent of other scenes such as that of

Pamphile into an owl (which I will discuss further with the theme of monstrosity), and begs Photis to transform him with the same ointment. When she reluctantly agrees, he strips naked, covers himself in ointment, and watches in horror as he is transformed not into a bird, but a donkey. Photis rushes away to prepare the remedy, a garland of rose petals, and Lucius is left alone to consider his fate. He briefly considers retaliation, trampling her with his new hooves, a cathartic fantasy which likely occurred to many enslaved people. But realizing that he is helpless without her assistance, he accepts his humiliation and misfortune. This is only the beginning of his trials in his new role as a beast of burden.

The reversal experienced by Lucius from a free elite male to a mistreated, domesticated livestock animal, facilitated by the magic of the enslaved girl Photis, is perhaps the most direct we've encountered in literature so far. The parallels between his treatment as a donkey and the treatment of enslaved people are more than implied, they are stated. It begins with the loss of his voice and agency, as Lucius is unable to speak or act for himself for the majority of the novel. He is frequently beaten and threatened with torture from his first moments as a donkey, a dark reality in the lives of many enslaved people in the ancient world.<sup>155</sup> He is forced to do unceasing physical labor, including twice being made to turn a mill (*Met.* 9.12-13). Work in the mill recurs in literature as a punishment for enslaved, and Lucius' description of the miserable and inhumane conditions of the site are one glimpse into why that was so.<sup>156</sup> He is also sexually abused and exploited, for which he feels great shame, an almost empathetic depiction of another horrible reality for many marginalized and enslaved people. Finally, he is sold and handed off

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Simaetha in Theocritus' *Idyll II*, who plays the stereotypically male role of the pining lover and even performs stereotypically male magic like *agogoai*.

<sup>155</sup> We have remarked, for example, on the fact that the testimony of enslaved people in court was exclusively extracted under torture for centuries.

<sup>156</sup> Bradley 2000: 115

many times in the novel, emphasizing his status as an object or piece of property, not a rational creature. This leads us back to our second theme of monstrosity, and dehumanization.

Just as in previous examples of monstrosity or dehumanization, the types of animals involved in witchcraft are very significant. Here, the contrast between the animal Pamphile transforms into by choice and the animal Lucius transforms into by accident is also symbolic. As we've seen before, such as in the case of the witch Dipsas in Ovid's *Amores* 1.8, the transformation of a witch into a bird is a somewhat common iteration of the trope of shapeshifting. Birds are wild, undomesticated, free, and able to fly. This literal and metaphorical mobility was part of why they were a feared and expected form to be taken by shape-shifting witches. Owls, in particular, could move freely in the night and see in darkness. These freedoms and abilities clearly mark this as the more empowering transformation of the two, though still dehumanizing. An owl also seems to go hand in hand with the suspicion of witches plying their trade in the darkness, likely not just a literary trope but a reality of ancient magical practices.<sup>157</sup>

Lucius' transformation into a donkey, another occurrence of monstrosity in the text, holds very different symbolism. It has been discussed that the donkey is a beast of burden, making clear the metaphor for enslavement in the narrative. A donkey, unlike a bird, would have also been considered *tetrapodon* or livestock, parallel to enslaved people's categorization as *andropodon*. Lucius' experience as livestock seems to attempt to process the dehumanization of enslavement. This is evident, for example, in the scene which compares a livestock auction to a slave auction and finds them practically indistinguishable. Interestingly, the transformation into livestock animals also recalls an early iteration of this trope: the transformation of Odysseus'

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<sup>157</sup> We might consider, for example, the well-attested ritual of drawing down the moon which necessarily took place at night.

men into pigs. While the comparison to a pig or donkey is still dehumanizing, it is interesting to note that when men are transformed into beasts against their will, as in the case of Lucius and Odysseus' men, the animals they are transformed into still tend to be closer to humans than those associated with women.<sup>158</sup>

Although Lucius is eventually returned to his human form, it is not Photis who has a hand in it, but the goddess Isis herself. He had called out to her in his donkey form, imploring many names and aspects of goddesses (Ceres, Venus, Diana, and Prosperina are all summoned)<sup>159</sup> to save him:

“...by whatever name, with whatever rite, in whatever image it is meet to invoke you: defend me now in the uttermost extremes of tribulation, strengthen my fallen fortune, grant me rest and peace from the cruel mischances I have endured. Let this be enough toil, enough danger. Rid me of this dreadful four-footed form, restore me to the sight of my own people, restore me to the Lucius I was. But if some divine power that I have offended is harassing me with inexorable savagery, at least let me die, if I may not live.”

(11.2)

It is interesting that although his prayers are answered and his form restored, the power imbalance or role reversal which has affected Lucius throughout the narrative would remain in place in several ways. For one, he pleads to and is saved not just by any deity, but a foreign female goddess, Isis. It seems significant that he begs only the female aspects of deities for his redemption, and it is granted. The other is that although his freedom is restored, Lucius in a way

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<sup>158</sup> This is perhaps with the exception of transformation into a dog (i.e. Hecuba), although the duality of this animal association has already been discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>159</sup> As it has been noted, syncretism between aspects of deities is increasingly common in later sources regarding magic, such as the *PGM* of Late Roman Egypt.



remains servile through his choice to devote himself to Isis at the end of the novel. Once again we are reminded of the real lived experiences of Apuleius, which almost certainly involved participation in or at least study of some magic practices.

The simultaneous seriousness and levity with which Apuleius treats subjects like magic and enslavement is one reason why he acts as a good end point for this discussion of literature in classical antiquity. It can be difficult to grasp the message of a novel like *The Golden Ass* which seems to capture the torment of enslavement so viscerally, when we know that its author almost certainly went on to own slaves. But that poignant duality of knowing that anyone, including yourself, could be enslaved, knowing the horrors you might experience, and continuing to practice slavery was a societal ill that the Greeks and Romans were never able to solve. They were seemingly never quite able to shake the anxiety about the practice of magic by those very same people they mistreated, marginalized, and enslaved.

Like the practice of enslavement, this anxiety would persist well into the medieval, early modern, and modern periods, where it took new forms like the phenomenon of witch hunts. As the *Apologia* and other sources have helped to demonstrate, the practice of magic was a threat which was taken seriously throughout most if not all of antiquity. It was also a power which was available to the most disempowered groups of the ancient world, in particular enslaved women. Whatever form this power took, be it the practice of medicine, control over child-rearing, or simply the cathartic relief of feeling as if they had taken action towards their problems, it was a foothold in a world which silenced, dehumanized, and objectified them.

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