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Magic use in Roman Sexuality

Women or men who were unable to find a partner or who suffered from infertility sought medical or magical practice. Fertility was important in Roman society since the main goal of a married couple was to produce viable offspring (Soranus: Shelton no. 27). Romans viewed sexuality not only as a means to produce offspring, but also as the ability to perform adequately for a partner (Petronius 2009: no. 129). Magic played a vital part in Roman society, and was used to increase fertility of both men and woman through the use of spells, potions, and religious ceremonies. Romans also integrated the use of magic into their literature, showing the prominence of the practice, an example being Petronius' *Satyricon* where the main character Encolpius is plagued by impotence.

The Romans' view of sexuality was hugely important to their culture and lives, and fertility was a common source of stress. This pressure on both men and women lead to the use of erotic-magic to obtain sexual prowess. "Who is ignorant of the joys of sex? ... The father of truth, Epicurus said all you need is love," (Petronius 2009: no. 132). Petronius' comment is a good example of the necessity of sex for Roman men. Men felt that sexual performance was a primary goal, anything less was unacceptable. In Petronius' *Satyricon* sex is depicted as a major part of Roman life (Gill 1973: 183). Both men and women felt pressures to perform adequately in bed, upon marriage songs were sung to the newly weds where emphasis was placed on having successful intercourse (Catullus: Shelton no. 56). Petronius also describes the importance of sexual performance with Encolpius's failure to become erect with Circe,

and the following humiliation and punishment Encolpius faces (Petronius 2009: no. 127). If a man suffered from erectile dysfunction, such as Encolpius, he was lacking not only the ability to produce offspring through sexual intercourse, but also he lacked a vital part of his identity (Gill 1973: 181). Petronius shows this with the disgrace that Encolpius feels when he is whipped for his impotence. Encolpius then tries to separate himself from his impotence, the cause of his misfortunes. For as long as he suffers from erectile dysfunction his identity is tarnished (Petronius 2009: no 132). Extant magical texts assume men will be the primary users of erotic magic, as they used the magic to obtain women when they became overwhelmed by sexual desires (Dickie 2000: 563). "The recipes in the magic formularies take it for granted that it will be men who perform erotic magic... the motives of the men ... are either to enjoy the sexual favors... or to better themselves by securing a good marriage," (Dickie 2000: 565). Women too faced embarrassment and distress from not being able to be married and produce children; they were then an undesirable burden to their family (Catullus: Shelton no. 326). In Rome a woman's primary sexual objective once married was to produce offspring, not to achieve her own pleasure. It was also not uncommon for a woman to be asked about her ability to conceive children, leaving infertile women in distress (Soranus: Shelton no. 27). Romans view of sexuality was complex, but those who could not perform sexually or suffered from infertility were outcasts, even in the eyes of the law under Augustus (Dio Cassius: Shelton no. 39).

The use of magic in Roman fertility was extensive, ranging from religious ceremonies, and potions, to spells. Magic is defined as an extra-ordinary practice, which one turns to when ordinary solutions are insufficient for handling one's problem (Edmonds 2014: 283). Magic displayed a permanence and universality throughout the Roman Empire, allowing a

consistency within the types of magic performed (Luck 2008: 51). There are three types of magic that were most used in Roman society. First there was homeopathic magic, where a person imitated the action that they wished to be affected (Burriss 1928: 116). Secondly contagious magic, this used an object: hair, clothes, or nails; that was once a part of or was in contact with an individual (Burriss 1928: 116). Lastly, there was sympathetic magic, where “sympathy” was supposed to exist between the influenced object and an object, which has been in contact with it (Burriss 1928: 116). It is argued that there is no clear distinction between religion and magic, allowing religious ceremonies to also be considered a type of magic (Luck 2008: 34). One important religious and magical ceremony for fertility that the Romans performed was the Lupercalia. The Lupercalia occurred on February 15th, and Luperci, young men dressed in goatskins, used goatskin whips to purify the city (Shelton 1998: 382). The women who fell into their path were struck to stir up the reproductive powers within the women and aid in fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth (Plutarch: Shelton no. 423). There were also a large number of practices that were used for issues of impotence and fertility in both Roman men and women. One way to cure a man’s erectile dysfunction was to smear a preparation of honey and pepper onto the penis, or to use an Indian herb recommended by Theophrastus (Edmonds 2014: 284). Women also looked to Theophrastus for plants to aid conception, while foods with anise were also supposed to restore fertility that was damaged by witchcraft (Edmonds 2014: 284). Spells were also used to aid in sexuality, as Petronius writes spells and potions were used to cure Encolpius of his impotence (Petronius 2009: no. 134; 138). Romans performed various practices to increase their chances of fertility, going to extreme lengths to avoid being labeled as infertile.

Romans made use of erotic literature and art, both of which reflect the magic use in Roman society. Petronius's *Satyricon* shows the importance of sexuality and fertility in Roman society, but also includes extravagant erotic scenes (Sandy 1969: 296). Although *Satyricon* focused on the turmoil of an impotent man, Roman literature almost exclusively portrayed woman as the ones engaging in erotic-magic (Dickie 2000: 564). Women were displayed as erotic-magic users by male authors as a way to take the magic out of the male sphere, were it often belonged in Roman society (Dickie 2000: 564). This also related to the Roman idea that witch-like characteristics are associated with any person with erotic influence, both in and out of literature (O'Neill 1998: 65). An example of the women with witch-like characteristics is exhibited in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; several women are depicted as witches who perform erotic-magic to lure in men (Segal 2002: 1-5). Although there were differences in the portrayals of exact magic use in Roman society in art, there were some truths that stood out. First, the Romans utilized magic to aid in fertility and second, these magical practices encompassed spells and potions, both of which used by Romans.

Roman society stressed a married couple's ability to produce viable offspring. Those who were not able to perform to this standard were seen as a burden, and an outcast. This caused plenty of distress amongst Roman men and women plagued by infertility, leading them to turn to magic for a cure. Roman magical practices encompassed spells, potions, and religious ceremonies, which were used by both men and women. Magic use to cure infidelity was so prominent in Roman society there was much art created and literature written about instances where magic was used to help those in need of romance or heirs, one prominent example of this is Petronius' *Satyricon*. Fertility and sexuality was an important part of

Roman culture, and the prevalence of erotic-magic in Roman literature echoes the desperate cries of those affected by infertility.

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