

Love Magic: A Call for Contributions

It is one of the forms of magic which will immediately come to people's mind when prompted for an example, at the same time love magic is among the least studied. This project will take a broad, yet slightly restricted approach: it focuses on Greek and Roman Antiquity and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world, covering approximately 2500 years, and will look at texts and practices in Europe and the Mediterranean area. The rest of the world and older occurrences will be bracketed. Within these temporal and geographical parameters, contributors will use a range of sources and apply a wide variety of methods of selecting and ordering as well as of interpretation. Love magic itself is taken at its broadest sense to include divination or fortune telling in love affairs and (if offered) petitions and prayers.

Case studies are preferred with as much detail as possible, but sometimes a more indirect treatment may be necessary (in early 20th C. newspaper announcements, f.i., it is merely shown that particular fortune tellers practiced love magic, but its precise content is not available). Papers addressing problems of continuity and discontinuity of love magic in time and space are also welcomed.

Here I will give a preliminary outline of further possibilities. This is, of course, depended on surviving, including narrative (literary) sources, not meant to be exhaustive and open for expansion. There is also no intention to turn this into a "telephone book" (like in most encyclopedia entries). Particular instances will always be more coherent, not just because of limits in source material but also because of the tradition people worked in; because of available resources, the particularities of society, or the kinds of people involved.

Ideally one should investigate both text and context, how the practice of love magic is embedded in the wider society, and take account of the practitioners, their clients and recipients. Most societies had specialists in love magic, but who were they otherwise? What kind of public did they attract? What about gender, age, and class of experts and clients? What kind of relationships were at stake? Did it concern love triangles, or quadrangles, etc.? What about power relations, ill- or good-will, intention? This all should be discussed against the background of notions about love, marriage, and sexuality, as well as concepts of femininity and masculinity. And: did the reactions of the religious, or secular authorities veer towards participation, condemnation, tolerance, or indifference?

Sometimes it is only known that love magic was performed, at other times it is only transmitted what was performed but not by whom. In this last case one can look at the materiality of magic: the spoken words or the written texts (on paper, on wood, on clay, etc.). This includes particular objects, whether used for divination (cards, oil), or for influencing the attitude of the subject of desire (such as menstrual blood, pubic hair, or parts of deceased liminal bodies). It can also involve particular herbs and love potions. And how all these were applied. Or it may only be feasible to analyse the content spells and charms, look at the sort of ritual involved: predictive, binding, destroying, or otherwise, and determine the underlying magical principles: contagious magic, imitative (homeopathic) magic, or synechdotal (pars pro toto) magic.

The aims and purpose of those dabbling in love magic may have ranged from acquiring knowledge about future relationships as a form of amusement or a demand for guidance in love affairs, to acting in very particular cases, such as dealing with unfaithful lovers and with rivals. In what sense was love magic always egocentric? Did it concern lust, love, desire, or blind passion?

Finally one could look at the relation of love magic to other kinds of magic, involving death, destruction or prognostication.

I hope these brief notes will provide challenge and inspiration, or provoke criticism. If you want to point at literature relevant to the project, please do not hesitate to do so.

Abstracts should be 300 to 400 words long, the actual articles about 6000 words. Deadline for abstracts: March 2009; deadline for contributions: early 2010.

Willem de Blécourt

(wjcdeb@btinternet.com)