

SPELLS, POTIONS, HUSBANDS AND WIVES: A CONTRIBUTION
TOWARDS THE STUDY OF GREEK LOVE MAGIC IN ANTIQUITY¹

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ABSTRACT: In Greek antiquity love potions and spells were not only part of prostitutes' professional equipment. Our evidence points also to the repeated use of love magic by married women. We should take into account the possibility that their magic might well have contained some "standard", "regular" formulas of erotic magic, including spells of attraction and binding spells. Male prejudices and fears (stimulated by incidents of poisoning and overdose) bestowed such female magic with a sinister aspect: these were just power-usurping, harmful or murderous, ubiquitous machinations. In reality, for a frustrated woman, who was craving for intimacy and mutual commitment, love charms and potions were less risky and easier solution than a romance or attempts to get the divorce.

In his study of the society of Classical Athens V. Ehrenberg wrote: "The fear of being poisoned was, it seems, frequent and genuine. Women were supposed to be favourite customers of those who traded in drugs, particularly in love potions"². Certainly, but who were these women anyway? In the literary tradition love magic is usually associated with *hetairai* and prostitutes, and there is some evidence for this kind of clientele in the extant magical spells and formularies³. It seems, however, that potions and spells were not only part of prostitutes'

¹ Greek and Demotic spells are cited as *PGM* (*Papyri Graecae Magicae*) and *PDM* (*Papyri Demoticae Magicae*) in translation by Betz 1997.

² Ehrenberg 1951: 198. See recently Pollard 2001: *passim*.

³ Scholars are often inclined to place extant love spells in the *demi-monde* of courtesans, prostitutes, and their enamoured clients. According to Dickie 2001: 79–107, prostitutes were the main object of the binding love spells. This conjecture is open to debate, as in dealing with them not spells but money and/or status were needed, unless we credit the Greek men with excessive romanticizing of the working girls. Dickie allows for the fact that in the larger cities of Hellenistic and Greek-Roman Egypt emancipated women who were neither prostitutes nor wives enjoyed sexual relations with men outside marriage (especially widows and women who were divorced or separated from their husbands).