Remedium amoris:  
A Curse from Cumae in the British Museum

One of the very first publications of lead curse tablets (defixiones, κοτόδομα) in modern times is that by Wilhelm Henzen, who presented, in 1846, along with a drawing of it made under the supervision of Theodor Mommsen himself, an example, of Roman Imperial date, that had been found in a grave at Cumae and was then in the possession of William Temple, British legate at Naples. I have been able to study the tablet in the British Museum, where it is now housed, and to arrive at fuller readings. These last I am happy to offer here to Eugene Lane, in whose contributions to our studies we all rejoice.¹

It is a text of particular human interest, having as its purpose not only to bring supernatural vengeance on an errant wife but to enable the wronged husband, evidently still in love with her, to hate her and to lose the memory of his desire for her. As such it is both a request for vengeance, “because she first broke faith with ... her husband,” and a Trennungszauber that is so far unique in being written on behalf of one of the parties to be separated.²

Its bibliography may be briefly summarized. Not long after Henzen’s edition of 1846, which was evidently based on autopsy, Johann Franz presented, as CIG III 5858b,³ a slightly different text along with a drawing (Fig. 2) whose source is unrecorded; this last is presumably only a simplification of that published by Henzen (Fig. 1). Whether or not the tablet was available to Franz, he apparently did not examine it: if he had, he no doubt would have abandoned certain of his assumptions of errors in the drawing. For example, Henzen’s transcription, the drawing, and indeed the tablet itself show

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The text has been reproduced, occasionally with new readings from the drawing or with conjectures, by Carl Wachsmuth (1863:562), Georg Kaibel (IG XIV 872, with the drawing of CIG), Richard Wünsch (DTWü p. xv), René Cagnat and Jacques Toutain (IGRR I 415), and Auguste Audollent (DTAud 198).⁴ My autopsy may well be the first since 1846. Henzen’s readings are the best of those published; Kaibel’s, largely conjectural, which are reproduced by Cagnat and Toutain, are easily the worst.

A few edges and some of the inscribed surface have corroded away since Henzen’s time. A chief

¹ I would thank the staff of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities for their kindness, Jaime B. Curbera and Olli Salomies for useful suggestions about the proper names, and Allaire Stallsmith for the information about the modern Cretan spell (notes on 15-18 infra).

² Requests for vengeance: The basic treatment is Versnel 1991. For the publication of some 120 further examples, in Latin, see Tomlin 1988 (Bath, Rom.Imp.). Prayers/requests for vengeance normally eschew the apparatus of “black” magic, such as voces magicae, maternal lineage, and the application of analogies; all three occur in our text, which according to Versnel’s classification would fall into a “borderland” between prayer and magic.

Τrennungszauber: We have such separative curses on lead tablets (Attica: DTAud 68-69 [IV³, see note on line 24 infra], SEG 35.220-22 [IIIP]; Boeotia: Ziebarth 1934:1040-42, nos. 22-23 [Hell.]; Nemea: SEG 30.353, Miller 1980:67, inv. IL 367, 372 [Hell./Rom.Imp.]; Oxyrhynchus?: SupplMag 55 [IIIP]; Rome: Bevilacqua 1997 [Imp.]), papyrus (e.g. PGM LXVI [IIIP/IV³]), and even gemstones (e.g. Bonner 1950:277, no. D150 [Rom. Imp.]), ἀπὸ ἑνήκειαν: ἀπὸ ἑκατοντάδας ἀπὸ ἑκατονταδέκατος ἀπὸ Grammatikaki and Litinas 2000 [Rom. Imp.], same formula but with ἰδίον οὖν: for examples in Demotic and Coptic see the list at SupplMag II, p.222, n.1). It is common to find such separative magic as part of positive love-charms—“turn X away from Y so that X will come to me” (e.g. Voutiras 1998 [Pella, IV³]). PGM 0 2 Κάηον ποῖον τόπον καὶ ἀλλοτρίου ἀλλατού, ἀλλοτριός ἀλλατού σῶμα, τὰ μὲν άριστα ἀποτέλεσμα ἀπὸ τῆς ἀναλογίας τοῦ AΠΟΛΛΩΝΙΟΥ τοῦ ἄνδρος σωτῆρος (IIIP)—but this is not the case in the Cumaean curse.

³ CIG III appeared in fascicles in the years 1845-53; I do not know the exact date of that with 5858b.

⁴ Karl Wessely (1886a, on lines 6-10; 1886b:181, on lines 7-9) has discussed the voces magicae of the text. Audollent noted that G. Minervini (1847-48, non vidi) had also treated of the text.
difficulty for transcription today is that the lead is unusually dark and has been covered with wax for preservation. This means that it has been virtually impossible to produce raking shadows in order to identify letter-strokes. Legible photography or tracing has been out of the question. The present transcription should be regarded as only provisional, therefore; the tablet needs to be cleaned and then reread again. I have been glad to have frequent recourse to the drawing made under Mommsen’s eye; it is not entirely accurate, I must report, but I offer it to show the general shape and layout of the inscription. In my transcription, letters that appeared in the drawing but are now lost are underscored. I would caution the reader of the apparatus criticus below that Franz and Kaibel used square brackets ([ ]‘s) to indicate not only lacunae but also their own additions and alterations; unwilling to guess what they might mean in any instance, I have reported in my apparatus criticus these brackets as printed.

The inscription begins with a line of magical signs (charaktêres). The text proper divides itself into basically four parts:

I. (a) Magical names (2-3); (b) adjuration in the name of a deity (4-9); (c) command (pl.) (10-11); (d) justification (12-15).

II. (a) Analogical magic (15-16); (b) in the name of a deity (17-18); (c) command (sg.) (18-27).

III. (a) Magical names (28-30); (b) command (pl.) (30-39); (c) justification (39-40).

IV. Magical names (41-42?).

British Museum H. 0.233, W. 0.120 (top), 0.108 (middle), 0.115 (bottom) Cumae

Charaktêres

1 [Ορ. ? ω τήν ορέ ος... [κλ.]]
2 ηθίται ου την ομοιομονήν... [κλ.]
3 δαιμονιος και ποιημένει ος εν τω [τό-
4 πω τοῦτο θηλασμόν και ἄρρενην τόν,
5 ἐξορκάζω μή λαός το θανατον δομημα τῶν
6 Ἐρρημαὶ θη ταύρα καβαρεταφερεστή θη [ςτερε]
7 Ἰωα Ιωακεὶν θη λαοὺς μεταφέρειν [κλ.]
8 νυκτισμοῦραν αὐταναφεξή θὲ [κλ.]
9 ο σπανός ως λαοῖς εἰπωμεν ἀμήν ...
10 ο τῶν διαν φασίλος, ἐξορκιζομεν, [κα]
11 ο τῶν φιλιαν βασιλείας, δηλούμεν ἢ ἔπειρα
to τῶν κυριακίνων θεῶν. Τεσσάρων
13 θεούς ἑν δὲ οὐσίας τὸν ἐκφερέται τουτος
14 θυμαὸν οὐσίας τριανθίσαι, ἐν ἐστιν -
15 πε οὐσίας τοις Μυστικάς ὅπω τιθομεθα
16 ἥν θα εἰς ταύτα σκότος κατ’ ἐπετείρην
17 [κρεθερός κλ.] ευφοριακύμα[ν κλ.]
18 μελετή, διάκοπται τῇν στοργήν, τὴν
19 φιλίασι. Δῦν συνήν [εἰς Τρόπος τοῦ]
20 δε εν φωτιν δος συνήπαθεν δοειν (?). Εἰς ξώ-
21 λυς θεῶν, εἰς τό βιον, εἰς τὸ θέσω
22 ἐν οὐσίας τον καθέστος ἐν ἐστιν
c
23 Βασιλείας Εὐαρστον ἐν ἐστιν ἐν Βασιλείᾳ
c
24 Μυστικας Μπεϊ[ν] σύνην, λαβηκ
25 συνήν λαβηκ 'Επετείρημα 'Εκεῖ
26 Φημίζε, δυν έστεκεν Βε τρούντα Μεγαλιμ. -
27 [λο, δ]ν εἰς τιν [ἐν Βετρούμ] τος Εὐριπός στος
I. (a) Or[-—]NAIAIOPHORFIOS [-—]ETH TOUTO SOUPEMONDES[-—]. (b) Demons and spirits in this place, of <sc. prematurely dead persons> female and male, I adjure you by the holy name of ERÊ-
KISIPHThê ARARACHARARA ÉPHTHISKÎRE LÀO IABEZEBYTH LANÀ BESAPHLAN.[-—]NKÊPAMMOUR-
PHAÎNTINAXO[-—]. (c) King of the ..., arouse yourself, and king of the dead, ... with the underworld
gods. (d) For these things come about through Valeria Quadratilla, whom Valeria Eunoea bore, whom
Valerius Mysticus begot.

II. (a) As the light announces to gods the things in darkness under orders of ..., cut off the delight,
the love (for her). (b) Bind (?) her into Tartarus. And grant those in (the) light to (hate her?). Let Vale-
tria Quadratilla, whom Valeria Eunoea bore, whom Valerius Mysticus begot, enter into hatred of gods,
into fear. Let Vitruvius Felix, whom Vitruvia Maximilla bore, whom Vitruvius Euelpistus begot, hate
her, come to have forgetfulness of her.

III. (a) [——]IECHEAI Typhon, MA[-—]ON BARBAROUTH DATA ACHON, (b) grant (pl.) (——) Vitru-
vius Felix, whom Vitruvia Maximilla bore, whom Vitruvius Euelpistus begot, to enter into hatred and
to have forgetfulness of his desires for Valeria Quadratilla, whom Valerius Mysticus begot, whom Va-
leria Eunoea bore. [——] Control (pl.) (sc. her), you [-—], with remaining (?) punishments ... (c) because
she first broke faith with Vitruvius Felix her own husband.

"IV. — [— IAKOUBEEYNTON[—]TA ...."

2.-3. How much, if any, of these lines we should consider Greek words I would not guess. We have several magical texts, roughly contemporary with the Cumaean, in which the syllables *borphor-* and the like appear, e.g. the curse tablets *SEG* 35.213-23, invoking Typhon, who appears in line 28 below. What is preserved of line 2 is suspiciously similar. Editors have tried *κακοί θεοί* which, if a Greek word, is a *hapax*; Kaibel proposed *δαίμονες* and Franz dismissed the drawing and read *γυναίκας*, but there is too much room in the lacuna, and line 3 inescapably has ςυ. I should not rule out the possibility that we have not ςυ[...] but further *charakterès*. In the next line the editors may be right in seeing not *voces magicæ* but τούτῳ and υπερ θησιν διομήν, which would in fact fit the traces, but it is hard to interpret as Greek the immediately preceding the last phrase. A possibility for the lacuna at the end of line 3 is ςυ(ε)."n

4.-5. *Cf. PGM* IV Ὠρούς πάντος τούς δαίμονες 346 τοὺς ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τούτῳ συντελεστηθέντας πῶς ἄλλα 347 μοι τοῦων καὶ ἀνεχθέντας μοι σεθέντων, ὅτες πον' εἰ. 348 εἰς ἀφίνην εἰς τῆς γάλας, in a formula for an erotic charm, which was evidently quite popular, for five curse tablets from Egypt (*SupplMag* 46-50, II/III) reproduce it. The accompanying instructions in the papyrus state that the lead tablet on which the formula is to be inscribed should be placed πορεία ἐν τῇ θησεῖ (333), at the grave of someone whose death has been premature or violent. This would be the meaning of ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τούτῳ on the Cumaean tablet. The papyrus formula allows that the dead person may be either male or female; so too the Cumaean text, which was evidently copied from a formulary with a similar phrase, but here something has gone wrong, the syntax of *θηλακῶν καὶ ἔρωτασ[.....]"n

7.-9. The palindrome here is quite common in magical texts of Imperial times; I have counted 19 other instances. Here it is slightly misspelled: θῆς is repeated rather than reversed, and the normal form has *θησία*. As to whether any of it has any recoverable meaning, there are the speculations adduced at Preisendanz 1949:135-36. The “holy name” (3) here includes the palindrome, *Iaω* (Yahweh), and *Ie(n)eo(h)*, which in several texts directly follows the palindrome. The vocables *λακος* and *βοσφολος* seem to be unique here. We often find the palindrome *καὶ πιεύμετα* as part of the Hebrew divine name, e.g. *PGM* VIII 16α, 26, 476, 477. I am therefore tempted to wonder whether the syllables *λακος* and *βοσφολος*—may have begun life as a miscopying of it.

10.-11. Presumably the two kings should have complementary rôles or realms; the ἐννυθαμάτων of line 10, as corresponding to the δαίμονες of line 11, is probably not right. Is it a corruption of δώρῳ?

12.-13. Τούτῳ διερήχεται διὸ ὁ Οὐράνιος ὁ Ὀροπᾶς. This is the first sign that the text is an appeal for vengeance, the writer being careful to note that the spell is a reaction to another’s deeds rather than merely the aggressive magic motivated by *phthonos* or the will to dominate. We may compare the phrases *καὶ ἐπεξερήμωσεν* (sic) 26 on a curse tablet from Oropos (Petrakos 1997:745, II4) and *καὶ ἐπεξερήμωσεν* (for *καὶ διερήχεται*) 27 on another, from the Athenian Agora (*SEG* 30.326, I-III). Below (39-40), *defigens* includes another justification for his actions: it was she who first broke faith with him, her husband.

14.-15. Nothing is commoner in Greek magical texts under the Empire than identification by maternal lineage, with the ritual formula *καὶ ἐνυθαμάτων* or, less often, *καὶ ἐν* (see Jordan 1976, Curbera 1999); the present spell is apparently unique in giving both parents’ names. (K. Preisendanz prints *PGM* LXXI as if both mother and father are to be named, ὡς ἐκατερός ἡ δίνα, διενυθαμάτων δύο δίνακα, but,
like Franz and Kaibel, he often, as here, uses [ ] where the Leiden Convention would require < >; the papyrus is indeed intact in this line, ἄπαινοςνuv being no doubt a marginal gloss wrongly incorporated into the main text. As in Modern Greek, it would mean “bore,” not “begot.”

Having both maternal and paternal lineage for each spouse, we may reconstruct a stemma:

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Vitruvius Euelpistus ~ Vitruvia Maximilla
    |       |
Vitruvius Felix ~ Valeria Quadratilla
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The parents were evidently all liberti, receiving their masters’ gentilicia; in addition, three of them have Greek cognomina, another possible indication of servile background.

15.-18. I have not found, in magical texts, any good parallel for the conceit of the light announcing dark matters to gods. There is a curiously similar passage, however, also with the phrase κατ’ ἐπτομήν, in a speech addressed apparently to the Sun: *PGM* LXII Διασταθήσω 30 τὸ σκύτος καὶ ἐπτομήν (iambic trimeter) τοῦ θεοῦ ὑμᾶστο καὶ προσελθέω τὸ ἱερὸν ὄνος 31 ἐκ τοῦ ἐπιροῦ εἰς τὴν ἔκπυσσον, in which the light overcomes the darkness by order of the cosmic god. We may compare addresses to the Sun, XIV 11 κατ’ ἐπτομήν τοῦ θεοῦ (unnamed) and XII κατ’ ἐπτομήν τοῦ ὑμᾶστο τοῦ θεοῦ ἰσακ τὸν ἰδωντὸν ἀζυλείωσθαι. The Cumaean text has already invoked his name in line 8, which is that of the ὑμᾶστος θεός. In lines 17-18 he is given apparently another mystical name, whose elements I have not found in other magical texts, but the transcription is far from sure.

The sentence beginning ὅς τὸ φῶς makes us expect a correlative, “so too ....,” possibly something on the order of “so too let this tablet announce the wickedness of Valeria Quadratilla;” what we find, though, is an awkward shift of thought: “interrupt the delight, the love....” We may suspect that the entire formula for the analogical magic that is implied here was once longer but over time has become truncated. We may compare an instance of analogical magic on a curse tablet from Olbia (*SEG* 37.673, Hell.; cf. Jordan 1997), whose text, addressed to a ghost, begins γάρ ὁ πάγος ὁ χεινὸς κατὰ τὴν αἰωνίαν, θυίῳς ὑποτάξοντας (plus other names). ἐπὶ [ὁκό] οὖν παρελθεῖται χεινοτάτα ... “Just as we do not know you, so too may Eupolis ..., at whatever lawsuit they are present ....” The verb of the σάμως clause has somehow dropped out, but it was no doubt something like “fail to know how to offer their evidence.” We may also cite a spell for warts from today’s Crete, also based on analogical magic and also to be performed at a grave, whose occupant is presumably also unknown to the speaker. If there is any continuity in these matters, its beginning and that of the Olbian spell have a common background: οὐκ θνησθέν Ἰάρμω πωλοῦσις σαμὶ σαμὶ “Just as I do not know who is here inside.” We expect “so too may the warts not know how to stay on my hands” or the like, but we find instead θαλὺς μὴ διαρκήσῃ πότε θανάσων αἱ κοτόται ἀπὸ τοῦ χέρας μου “thus may I not know when the warts will leave my hands.” But ignorance is not the purpose of the spell, which is rather to get rid of the warts. The analogy has somehow degenerated, conceivably through the omission, over time, of phrases in the original.

We are not explicitly told whose delight and love are to be cut off. I assume that it is Vitruvius Felix’ and others’ for Valeria Quadratilla. Below (24-25, 33-34) he is to come to hate her and to forget his desire for her.

18.-20. Although plural beings are addressed in line 6 (ἐξορκάζω ἡμᾶς), the verbs here are in the singular. Such shifts are hardly infrequent in magical texts: cf. *DTAud* 241 (Carthage, IIIIP?), which begins in the plural (ἐξορκάζω σαμίς ... ἐκατοστείρησε σαμίλος, κ. ιόμος, κ. ἐπίρμος, κ. ἐπιλείψεαι, etc.), shifts to the singular (κατανίκησιν ὑμῶν τὰ κακά ..., ὁμομορφοῦσαι ὑμῶν τὰ ἐμνησθαῖα, etc.), and then returns to the plural (ἐκατοστείρησετε). R. Wünsch (1911:11) remarks that “zwei fluchrezepte sind hier ineinander geflossen: das erste setzte mehrere geister..., das andere nur einen dämon in bewegung.... Später wird zum ersten formular zurückgekehrt.” The present text returns to the plural in line 30 (ὁδόν).

The editors have transcribed ] παρέκαθι (or παρέκαθα) τοῖς δὲ ἐν φωτ. some restoring part or all of ἐν. The particle δὲ, however, suggests that τοῖς should begin a new sentence, and indeed autopsy shows
that the η of περά is an impossible reading. The first letter is τ, the high horizontal extending well to the right of the vertical; elsewhere on the tablet, η is formed without any such extension. We therefore presumably have a very short sentence between φίλης ης and τοίς δε. I restore [εἰς Τῆα]τοράς exempli gratia and propose δοκιμάζω rather than the editors’ δοκεί as the verb. Its second letter is η, ε, or ο. If [εἰς Τῆα]τοράς is correct, the phrase δοκεί εὐθύνη [εἰς Τῆα]τοράς is hardly idiomatic, however, but it happens that a formula recurrent in contemporary curse tablets from the Athenian Agora has a similar phrase with the substandard positive subjunctive of command: δοκεί εἰς τὸν πᾶσαν αὐτῆς δοκεί ως στὸν αἰώνα καὶ κυριάκος καὶ ἀπολύεται αὐτῇ. (SEG 35.213-24).

For the phrase ἐν ὑπατί in the next sentence I have found no parallel, but the concept is perhaps to be found in a recently-published curse tablet from Spain (Barchín del Hoyo, Cuenca, I-IP, Curbera et al. 1999), in which the writer invokes those below and then those above (ceteros quos merito devovi supra; cf. τοῖς δὲ ἐν ὑπατί). The verb itself in 20 is almost certainly δοκεί (η or ε). The command with the plural δοκεί below (30-34) has the structure δοκεί plus dative plus infinitive. Here presumably the structure is “and to those (in) the light, grant δοκεί” plus another infinitive. The traces would allow μεν εἰς ὑπατί. εὐθύνη μου ὑπατί or the like; if the conjecture is correct, Valeria Quadrilla is literally to be sent to Hell, to the realm of the “king of the dead” (11), to incur the ἠλλοκοτιος of the chthonians subject to him (12), and those (τοῖς δὲ ἐν ὑπατί?) ruled by the other king who is summoned (10)—the living? the gods of the heavens as opposed to the chthonians of line 12?—are to hate her.

22.-23. Note the spelling Οὐναλ- here and above but Βαλ- elsewhere.

24. In an Attic curse tablet of IVa we apparently have the motif of the spouse’s forgetting his desire: DTAud 68A ἔπι τοῖς ὑπατίσσαν Χεράφιων θεοῦ ὑπατικός καὶ τοῖς πόλεος τοῦ θεοῦ ὑπατικοῦ ὑπατικὸς καὶ τοῖς πόλεος τοῦ θεοῦ ὑπατικοῦ ἔστω ὑπατικός. (καὶ τοῖς πόλεος τοῦ θεοῦ ὑπατικοῦ ἔστω ὑπατικός.

28.-30. The curse tablets from the Athenian Agora cited above (18-20) also invoke Typhon, giving him the Hebrew divine name Σεθώ, the opening of line 28 presumably consisted of epithets and other voces magicæ, which would have extended into line 30. In line 29 the letters are more widely spaced than elsewhere, the γ of Ἐτοιν standing beneath the η of the Ἐτοιν of 28.

30.-31. The phrase εἰς μελετημένος is superfluous here, occurring as it does in line 33.

37. LSJ list both Henzen’s ἐκποιοῦσας της (“dub.1.”) and Kaibel’s ἐκποιούσας της, citing this passage as the one instance of each verb. Both entries should be deleted, for ἐκ cannot be read. The letter is η, formed like that of ἐκτεστ (19). I have not found a restoration for the unpromising ἐκ, however.

39.-40. Here we have the main justification for the curse. Editors have supplied μεν ποιαν (or μεν ποιαν) but consistency demands a gentilicium here, and the verb can in fact take a personal object, e.g. LXX Isaiah 1.2, Mark 6.26.

41. A final magical name. The traces of the name of the right of the first lacuna are compatible with Ἰγκουβίωο-, which is found, for example, at SEG 35.227 (curse tablet, Athenian Agora, IIIIP), in the appellation Τυάνας ἱεράς κότιος ἱεράς κότιος ἱεράς κότιος etc.; ἱεράς ἱεράς ἱεράς are part of a common logos: cf. Moraux 1960:17 n.4.
Remedium amoris


CIG. Corpus inscriptionum graecarum (Berlin 1828-77, repr. Hildesheim 1977)


DTAud. A. Audollent, Defixionum tabellae quotquot innotuerunt (Paris 1904, repr. Frankfurt 1967)


Grammatikaki, E., and N. Litinas, “Μαρταλιτική ζωή και Μαγικός Ύμνος,” Διηγήματα 1:61-69


IG XIV. G. Kaibel, Inscriptiones graecae Siciliae et Italiae (Berlin 1890)

IGRR. Inscriptiones graecae ad res romanam pertinentes (Paris 1906-27, repr. Chicago 1975)


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PGM. K. Preisendanz, Papyri graecae magicae. Die griechische Zauberpapyri (²Stuttgart 1973-74)


SEG. Supplementum epigraphicum graecum (Leiden, Aphen aan den Rijn, Amsterdam 1923-present)


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