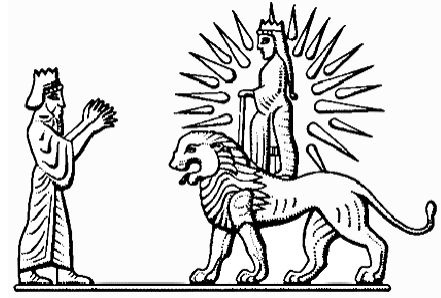


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***“From Magic Ritual to Semiotic Game. The Transformation of Neo-Assyrian Love Spells in Classical and Hellenistic Greece”***

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***Published in Melammu Symposia 3:***

A. Panaino and G. Pettinato (eds.),

*Ideologies as Intercultural Phenomena.*

*Proceedings of the Third Annual Symposium of the*

*Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project.*

*Held in Chicago, USA, October 27-31, 2000*

(Milan: Università di Bologna & IsIao 2002), pp. 61-74.

Publisher: <http://www.mimesisedizioni.it/>

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CHRISTOPHER A. FARAONE Chicago

## From Magic Ritual to Semiotic Game: the Transformation of Neo-Assyrian Love Spells in Classical and Hellenistic Greece

In a recent book, I show how two types of Mesopotamian love charms, one using an enchanted apple or pomegranate and another using a specially charmed belt or ring, both show up in Greek literary texts and then in our evidence for actual Greek rituals.<sup>1</sup> That the Greeks borrowed these rituals from the East seems undeniable, and as a result the Mesopotamian materials have been very useful in helping me reconstruct the history of these spells in the Greek world. But in doing so, I have been struck by the fact that in the Hellenistic period, and probably earlier, both the apple-ritual and the belt-charm become devices used in semiotic games by which lovers signal to one another their erotic intentions. These games turn on the fact that the lover understands that he or she is about to become the victim of a love spell. In the Greek world, at least, this is a very odd feature, because all other evidence suggests that love spells

were cast in secret against their victims and that this secrecy prevented the victims from using amulets or other devices to protect themselves. As far as I can tell from the extant Mesopotamian texts that I am aware of, this use of magic devices to signal erotic intentions does not exist. In my paper today, I will lay out the evidence for these two types of spells and argue that these semiotic games are most probably a Greek adaptation, although I am very conscious of the fact that the evidence for these rituals is very different in the two cultures: the Mesopotamian evidence consists of detailed recipes for rituals and devices, but lacks anecdotal sources for how these charms were viewed or deployed in actual social contexts. The Greek evidence, on the other hand, usually lacks such recipes and instead depends on passing literary references, jokes in comic texts and anecdotes from historical or philosophic writers like Plutarch.

<sup>1</sup> Faraone (1999) 69-77 (apples) and 97-109 (belts and rings). I use the following abbreviations that may be unfamiliar to the reader:

GMPT = H.D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago 1986)

KAR = E. Ebeling, *Keilschrifturkunden aus Assur religiösen Inhalts*, 2 vols. (Leipzig 1915-23)

A. Panaino & G. Pettinato (eds.)  
*MELAMMU SYMPOSIA III* (Milano 2002)  
ISBN 88-8483-107-5

PGM = K. Preisendanz [and A. Henrichs] (edd.) *Papyri graecae magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*<sup>2</sup> (Stuttgart 1973-74)

SM = R.W. Daniel and F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum*, *Papyrologica Coloniensia* 16.1 and 2 (Opladen 1990-92)

## Magical Cords, Belts and Rings

In the fourteenth book of the *Iliad*, Hera calls Aphrodite aside and makes an urgent, but mendacious request (14.197-210):

Now give me affection and desire with which you subdue all the gods and mortal men, since I am about to go to the ends of the generous earth to see Oceanus, the source of the gods and mother Tethys ....

I shall go visit them and I shall stop their ceaseless quarrels, since now for a long time they have stayed apart from each other and from their marriage bed, since bitter anger (*cholos*) has fallen upon their hearts. If I could with words persuade their dear hearts and bring them back to their bed to be merged in love with each other, forever would I be called dear by them and compassionate.

And so Hera, pretending to be worried over the stormy marriage of her parents, asks Aphrodite for help in bringing them back together in their bridal bed. Aphrodite agrees to help and gives Hera a special charmed belt or strap (lines 214-17): “She spoke and from her breasts unbound an elaborate *kestos himas*, on which had been wrought all enchantments: love, desire, and the whispered endearment that steals away good sense, even from the thoughtful.” There is some confusion about the expected effects of the strap. From Hera’s story quoted above, we

know it could be used to heal a marital rift by stopping quarrels and anger. If Hera the would-be-marriage-counselor had kept her word, she would probably have given the *kestos himas* to her mother Tethys to wear, presumably to attract her husband or calm his anger in similar fashion.<sup>2</sup> But this is never made explicit. As it turns out, however, Hera’s real object is to divert Zeus’ attention away from the battle that rages around Troy, and then to seduce and to immobilize him<sup>3</sup> in order that he might not hinder her from her own strategic objectives with regard to the Trojan War.

To what extent, then, does the story in *Iliad* 14 reflect actual magical practices in the ancient world? One could, of course, dismiss Aphrodite’s magical belt as the fantastic invention of an imaginative folk tradition, but there is, in fact, earlier evidence for such devices: we find that cords or straps very similar to Aphrodite’s *kestos himas* were employed as magical charms in the Near East at a time and place not very far removed from the Ionic center of Homeric composition: a cuneiform tablet from Assur<sup>4</sup> dating to c. 1000 BCE contains some purification rites for women and then a ritual with the rubric “Incantation to be recited when the husband of a women is angry with her”:<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Gantz (1993) 101, but see Redfield (1982) 196, who suggests in passing that Hera herself would have worn it and beguiled both her parents.

<sup>3</sup> The Homeric account is complicated by the addition of the god Hypnos, who is to put Zeus to sleep after the lovemaking session. Some might argue that sleep after coitus is a “natural” phenomenon in males, and that the poet has simply added the role of Hypnos as a humorous double motivation of sorts. I suggest in Faraone (1999) 119-31 that the sequence of sexual attraction followed by enervation is one common to

many *philia*-spells.

<sup>4</sup> Ashur lies on the Tigris River in northern Iraq, some 350 miles from the important Greek emporium at Al Mina; see Burkert (1992) 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> Scheil (1921) 21-27 no. 17, col. iii lines 10'-14'. I translate the French translation of Reiner (1966) 93, as there are no English versions available. Many thanks to my colleague Prof. Erica Reiner, who kindly checked the English for me to ensure no distortions have crept in.

The rite is accomplished (as follows): You weave together into a single strand the tendons of a gazelle, [hemp] and red wool; you tie it into fourteen knots. Each time you tie a knot, you recite the (i.e. preceding) incantation. The woman places this cord around her waist and she will be loved.<sup>6</sup>

The incantation to be used with this recipe is very fragmentary, but we can make out that it invokes Ishtar, a goddess often equated with Aphrodite, the owner of the Homeric *kestos himas*. A different recipe with the very same rubric preserves a prayer to Ishtar as the Morning-Star, a prayer that ends with the plea: “I call on you, O Ishtar ... because he does not tell me the words of his heart, because he is angry and does not talk to me ...”<sup>7</sup> It would appear, then, that the Assyrian procedure is a remedy for a situation quite similar to that of Hera’s parents in the *Iliad*; a specially made strap or cord is worn by a woman to heal a marital rift by assuaging the anger of the husband and making him more affectionate.

The underlying magical activity in the Mesopotamian spell is the tying of knots, presumably as a form of binding magic aimed at inhibiting the husband’s anger. As such, it is clearly related to another, much larger class of Neo-Assyrian magical spells, the so-called *egalkura* spells, which often involve the use of knotted or

beaded cords to enhance one’s attractiveness in the eyes of a superior. Two short examples will suffice to illustrate the genre:

You chant this spell seven times over a three-stranded cord of lapis-colored wool, you knot it (and) you bind it in your hem. And when you enter into the presence of the prince, he will welcome you (variant: “whoever looks upon you will be glad to see you”).<sup>8</sup>

You thread *ianibu*-stone and carnelian on a cord, (and) you repeat the spell three times. You place it on the teased side of your cloak. And when you enter into the presence of the prince, he will welcome you.<sup>9</sup>

Note that although neither of these two recipes hints at the prospect of increasing the bodily desire of the prince, these *egalkura* recipes do, nonetheless, have much in common with the Homeric strap and the amuletic cord used by an Assyrian wife against her husband. In each case social or political inferiors armed with a magically enchanted cord face their male superiors with hopes of being made more welcome or attractive. A somewhat similar form of this kind of “political” magic seems to survive in this late-antique recipe, written in Greek, but most probably of Jewish origin:<sup>10</sup>

*To restrain anger*: Enter the presence of

<sup>6</sup> Prof. Reiner informs me that the word for “love” used in this text encompasses both affection and sexual desire.

<sup>7</sup> Gurney and Finkelstein (1957) no. 257, rev. 2-9, translated by E. Reiner. In the prayer, Ishtar is addressed as she “who makes (men?) love, who brings back an angry man to the house of the bride’s family.” This recipe has the same rubric as the recipe for the cord, but an entirely different ritual; the text is very fragmentary, but Prof. Reiner was able to make out references to an altar, loaves, incense and an oil that is anointed.

<sup>8</sup> *KAR* 71.21-25, translated by E. Reiner. For a discussion of the ambiguous nature of these spells,

which are often found in collections of spells which range from explicitly erotic purposes to purely political or economic ones, see Scurlock (1989-90).

<sup>9</sup> *KAR* 71.1-11, translated by E. Reiner.

<sup>10</sup> *PGM* XIII.251-52, as translated and interpreted by M. Smith in *GMPT*. The spell is alleged to be from the “Eighth Book of Moses.” Such hoary eastern antecedents are usually fabricated by later magicians in order to make the spell more mysterious, and therefore more valuable to the customer; see Betz (1982). There are, however, indications of real Jewish influence here; see M. Smith (1984) and his comments *ad loc.* in *GMPT* 172-188.

a king or magnate, and while you have your hands inside your garment say the name of the sun disk, while tying a knot in your pallium or shawl. You will marvel at the results.

As in the *egalkura*-spells, a knot is secretly tied in or onto a person's garment in the hope of binding the anger of kings or other male figures of authority.

Another form of *egalkura* spell shows up in the Greek tradition and seems to be used for very similar purposes. Both the ancient Greeks and Assyrians apparently employed magical rings to increase their personal charisma, especially in the eyes of their kings and masters:

*Neo-Assyrian Recipe*: "Over a copper ring chant the spell three times. You place it on your finger. And when you enter into the presence of the prince, he will welcome you."<sup>11</sup>

*Greek Recipe*: "A little ring for success and for charm (*charis*) and for victory .... The world has nothing better than this. For when you have it with you, you will always get whatever you ask from anybody. Besides it calms the angers (*orgai*) of kings and masters. Wearing it, whatever you may say to anyone, you will be believed, and you will be pleasing (*epi-charis*) to everybody."<sup>12</sup>

The Greek recipe is preserved in a fourth-century CE handbook, but another collection of amulet recipes called *Cyranides*, which dates two or three centuries earlier, boasts similar powers for a number of gemstones, for example: if a man wears a *dendrites*-stone "he will be loved and well heeded by all gods and mortals

and he will be successful in whatever he wants" (1.4.45-51) or if a man wears a sapphire engraved with Aphrodite "he will be pleasing (*epicharis*), famous and victorious in every lawsuit" (1.10.39-42).<sup>13</sup> Another late Greek magical recipe claims that when *aerizôn*, a special kind of jasper, is set in a small gold ring, it is "especially effective before kings and leaders," a belief that also seems to have been known to Pliny the Elder more than three centuries earlier.<sup>14</sup>

All of this suggests a long standing Greek tradition of such devices, one that is only partially visible in our extant evidence and one that may perhaps be traced back directly to Mesopotamia. Indeed, the Assyrians similarly noted the special qualities of stones, including those that were effective for "being received with favor by the ruler."<sup>15</sup> Pliny may even have had direct access to such Assyrian lore through intermediaries such as Zachalias of Babylon, whom he cites (with disapproval) for the claim that the stone hematite was useful to litigants or petitioners appearing before the king.<sup>16</sup> There is, however, a hint that such rings were known in the Greek world much earlier than Pliny, for in Plato's *Republic* we learn about the gold ring that magically made Gyges "invisible" allowing him to enter the royal palace unharmed, seduce the royal queen and kill the king himself.<sup>17</sup> But regardless of their ultimate source, we should underscore the fact that most of these devices are worn by men<sup>18</sup> usually to influence the behavior of a male superior, either to ensure that

<sup>11</sup> KAR 71 rev. 9-11, translated by E. Reiner.

<sup>12</sup> PGM XII.270-273 and 277-280, as translated by M. Smith in *GMPT*. There follows a long incantation which is to be repeated thrice daily.

<sup>13</sup> *Cyranides* 1.4.45-51 and 1.10.39-42.

<sup>14</sup> PGM XII 201-202 and Pliny *NH* 37.118, who reports that sorcerers claim that a kind of jasper called *aerizousa*, is "useful for those who harangue the assembly." See Riess (1896) 76 for discussion.

<sup>15</sup> Reiner (1995) 121.

<sup>16</sup> Pliny *NH* 37.169; see Reiner (1995) 124.

<sup>17</sup> Plato *Republic* 2.359d-60a.

<sup>18</sup> This is made clear in the *PGM* recipe and the *Cyranides* recipes (in note 13) which use masculine participles throughout. One recipe, however, supplies a variant recipe if a woman is going to use it (*Cyr.* 1.10.39-42), suggesting, perhaps, that a male user was the norm.

they will “welcome” the petitioner, or (in the Greek example) to calm their anger (*orgê*) and replace it with friendship (*philia*).

It seems fairly clear that these recipes for knotted cords, belts and rings are designed to be used *secretly* by wives or male subordinates to diminish the anger and increase the affection of their husbands or kings. Such secrecy is, in fact, typical of most Greek and Mesopotamian love spells. It is, then, quite astonishing to find evidence of a similar device that proclaims its purpose quite openly: an epigram by Asclepiades, a poet who lived in the third century BCE suggests that some women purposely made their victims aware that they were the targets of their magical spells:<sup>19</sup>

I myself once played with easy Hermione, who wore a variegated girdle of flowers, O Paphian one, which had a golden inscription: “Keep loving me (*philei me*) forever and do not get angry (*mê lupêthêis*) if another man holds me.”

The device Hermione wears is usually interpreted simply as a blunt warning to her boyfriends that they must not get too possessive of her.<sup>20</sup> The first part of the inscription – *philei me* – is, however, identical to a brief incantation inscribed on a magic gemstone of Roman date that

depicts Eros with his hands bound behind his back.<sup>21</sup> This image is, in fact, well known in Greek love charms and suggests quite strongly that Hermione’s girdle was itself a magical device designed to ensure her boyfriends’ love and curtail their anger. Thus the intended effects of this girdle – to increase a man’s affection and curb his anger – align closely with the goals of the Homeric and Neo-Assyrian cords discussed earlier, and seem to be part of the same tradition – with one important difference: the girdle itself is inscribed with the incantation and is therefore legible to Hermione’s lovers, such as the the imagined character who speaks the words of the epigram. We might, of course, dismiss the inscribed girdle in the epigram as a poetic fantasy, but it fits well into the historical pattern whereby charms and incantations originally spoken over an object, gradually evolve into written charms inscribed directly onto the object itself. I will return to this point in my conclusion after I discuss the apple spells, but at this point I leave it as an open question: why would this woman Hermione, apparently a courtesan with several lovers, reveal to them that she was using a magic belt to bind their anger and ensure their affection?

## Apples and Pomegranates

Now let me turn to the second type of Mesopotamian spell borrowed by the Greeks and one which often appears within the context of traditional court-

ship and marriage: the throwing or presentation of enchanted “apples” (*mêla*)<sup>22</sup> or other kinds of fruit. The earliest Greek testimony to such a ritual is a papyrus

<sup>19</sup> Gow and Page (1965) 45 no. IV (= *Palatine Anthology* 5.158). The “Paphian one” is another Cyprian epithet for Aphrodite.

<sup>20</sup> Gow and Page (1965) ad loc.

<sup>21</sup> British Museum inv. no. 1468 (inscription: *philei me*). It seems fairly clear that gemstones with Eros

binding Psyche are aimed at females and those of Psyche binding Eros (or of Eros bound and alone) are aimed at controlling men; see in Faraone (1999) 53.

<sup>22</sup> I use the English word “apple” throughout to translate the Greek word *mêlon* when it appears without any further qualification; *mêlon* actually de-

scrap of Hesiod's lost epic poem the *Catalogue of Women*, which preserves part of the story of Atalanta, a young woman who vowed that she would only marry a man who could defeat her in a footrace. In Hesiod's version of the tale, Hippomenes, – acting on the advice of Aphrodite – carried three apples onto the racetrack, and threw them at various intervals during the contest. Only one small papyrus fragment actually mentions the apples:<sup>23</sup>

And she, quick as a harpy [ ... ] snatched it. And he threw the second one to the ground with his hand. [...] swift-footed Atalanta held two apples (*mêla*) and she was near the end of the race. But he threw the third to the ground, and with it he fled death and dark destruction.

In their interpretation of this strange scene, scholars have in the past rightly pointed out the frequent appearance of apples as love tokens in elegy, amatory epigrams and romances, and they have repeatedly suggested that fruits designated by the term *mêla* originally played a role as engagement or wedding gifts.<sup>24</sup> This practice is, in turn, usually compared with ancient Greek fertility rites such as the throwing of nuts or the dedication of seeds at agrarian festivals since, it is argued, apples, quinces,

pomegranates and other fruits designated by the term *mêlon* contain many small pips, and thus are suitably many-seeded symbols for fecundity.<sup>25</sup> In fact a closer look at the use of apples in marriage rites and seduction scenes reveals that they were designed to produce sexual desire in the female, not fertility, and as such merit a close discussion as a form of erotic magic.<sup>26</sup>

From their very first appearance in Greek literature, this class of fruit was connected with weddings. Stesichorus describes how presumably friendly on-lookers pelted the wedding chariot of Menelaos and Helen with “Cydonian apples” (quinces) and flowers.<sup>27</sup> The text does not, however, provide any obvious explanation for the custom, and vase paintings which depict mythical brides holding apples are similarly mute.<sup>28</sup> Later accounts of actual wedding ceremonies suggest, however, that the appearance of such fruit in myth reflects its use in actual ritual. Strabo, a native of Pontus, tells us in passing that among the Persians a girl on her wedding day was allowed to eat only apples and camel marrow (15.3.17). We might hasten to dismiss this information, were it not for evidence of a similar custom among the Athenians. Indeed, Plutarch describes a

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signates the entire class of fruit that grows on trees; thus the word frequently refer to apples and quinces, but can also designate tree-fruit with stones, such as peaches and apricots. When a writer wishes to be more specific the word is modified by an ethnic; thus, e.g., a *mêlon persikon* (“Persian apple”) = a peach and a *mêlon kydonian* (“Cydonian apple”) = a quince. For some reason, the specific type of fruit is only rarely indicated. A parallel in painting and sculpture seems to be the generic round fruit, said to be pomegranates or apples, held in the hands of archaic statues of Hera and Persephone, the two best known Greek patronesses of marriage.

<sup>23</sup> Hesiod, frag. 76 18-23 M-W.

<sup>24</sup> This is a much discussed topic: Trumpf (1960), Littlewood (1967) and Brazda (1977). Trumpf gives

a particularly good discussion of apples, pomegranates and quinces in early Greek love poetry.

<sup>25</sup> Brazda (1977) 42-45.

<sup>26</sup> Detienne (1979) 41-44, anticipates some of my arguments here about the predominately erotic nature of the apple in Atalanta's story and the pomegranate in Persephone's. I should perhaps note what seems so obvious: in heterosexual relationships in a culture with primitive contraception, an aphrodisiac is inevitably a source of fertility.

<sup>27</sup> Stesichorus, 187 (PMG).

<sup>28</sup> Brazda (1977) mentions, e.g., a depiction of Theseus offering an apple to Ariadne (36, n. 1) and describes a vase-painting of the wedding of Jason and Creusa, who holds an apple (43 n. 1).

special set of Athenian laws allegedly handed down by Solon,<sup>29</sup> which concerned the marriage of *epikleroi*, “heiresses”:<sup>30</sup>

It is a good provision, too, that the heiress may not choose her consort at large, but only from the kinsmen of her husband, that the children may be of his family and lineage. Conformable to this, also, is the requirement that as a bride she eat a quince (*kydonian mêlon*) and then be shut up in the bridal chamber with the bridegroom; and that the husband of an heiress shall approach her thrice a month without fail. For even if no children are born, still, this is a mark of esteem and affection which a man should pay to a chaste wife; it removes many of the annoyances which develop in all such cases, and prevents their being altogether estranged by their differences.

Although this law is ultimately concerned with protecting a family’s wealth by producing legitimate heirs, Plutarch clearly saw another benefit; along with the thrice-monthly conjugal visit, the eating of the quince was somehow supposed to encourage sexual intimacy between the couple.

The presentation and consumption of apples seems then, in certain parts of Greece at least, to have been a customary prerequisite for the wedding night. There is, moreover, further evidence that the fruit was often “delivered” by throwing it at or near the bride, as we find both in the myth of Atalanta and in Stesichorus’ description of the wedding procession of Helen, mentioned earlier. Noteworthy in

this regard is the Athenian custom of throwing apples for explicitly erotic purposes, which is widely attested by the peculiar expression “to be hit with an apple.” In Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, for example, an upholder of traditional Athenian values gives a young man a stern lecture, which includes the following exhortation (lines 996-997):

... and don’t run into the house of a “dancing girl” (*orchêstris*), lest while you stand there gaping after those things you get hit with an apple thrown by a little whore (*pornidion*) and wreck your good name completely.

Ancient commentators on the passage and later lexicographers mention that the expression “to get hit by an apple” was Athenian slang for “to become enamoured or sexually excited,”<sup>31</sup> from which it is usually inferred that the character in Aristophanes is using the expression metaphorically to mean: “don’t be a fool and fall in love with a hooker!”. This is a convenient argument for modern scholars, but I have, in fact, argued in my book that Aristophanes is most likely referring to a popular fear that Athenian prostitutes actually used such spells to attract their customers,<sup>32</sup> and that the popular saying “so-and-so got hit by an apple” originally voiced suspicions of an attack of erotic magic.

I am able to make this argument thanks to the discovery in the late 1970s of a large fragment of a Greek magical handbook dating to the time of Augustus, which provides us with our earliest and best evidence for the use of apples as

<sup>29</sup> Most scholars have accepted Plutarch’s repeated assertion that this law was attributed to Solon, e.g. Lacey (1968) 89-30.

<sup>30</sup> Plutarch *Solon* 20.3; cf. *Moralia* 138d and 279f, where Plutarch cites the law (in both texts saying simply “bride” and not restricting the provision – as he does here – to the marriage of *epikleroi*) in two

completely different contexts. For the *epikleros*, see Katz (1992).

<sup>31</sup> Aristophanes *Clouds* 997 with scholia. For the various lexicographers, see Littlewood (1967) 154-155.

<sup>32</sup> See in Faraone (1999) 150-58, for evidence that prostitutes and courtesans regularly employed erotic magic.



actual erotic spell:<sup>33</sup>

Incantation over an apple (*mêlon*). (Say it) three times:

I shall strike with apples (*mêla*) ... To whichever woman I give or at whichever woman I throw the apple (*mêlon*) or hit with it, setting everything aside, may she be mad for my love – whether she takes it in her hand and eats it ... or sets it in her bosom – and may she not stop loving me. O lady Cyprogeneia bring to perfection this perfect incantation.

The incantation itself is in verse and belongs to a long tradition of hexametrical erotic charms that is attested by much earlier writers such as Pindar and Aristophanes.<sup>34</sup> The spell also describes a ritual that seems to include both of the traditional variations discussed above for the use of apples in Greek wedding ceremonies and in myths concerned with courtship, where the fruit can be either presented to the woman or thrown at her. A similar variation is permitted in the girl's reaction; she can either take and eat the fruit or merely hold it in her bosom.

You can see, therefore, that the charmed apple has a long history in ancient Greece. But as it turns out this type of magic spell existed at a much earlier period as well – albeit just beyond the borders of the Greek world. A cuneiform collection of Neo-Assyrian ritual texts dating to the tenth century BCE provides a startling parallel:<sup>35</sup>

Its ritual: either <to> an apple or to a

pomegranate you recite the incantation three times. You give (the fruit) to the woman (and) have her suck the juices. That woman will come to you; you can make love to her.

This recipe is part of a short collection of magical rituals all used by men to attract and seduce women.<sup>36</sup> The parallels with the Greek rituals under discussion are obvious: an incantation is spoken thrice over the fruit, which is then given to the victim to eat. In the incantation which precedes this apple spell, moreover, Inanna is invoked as the goddess “who loves apples and pomegranates.” As we have seen, in Greek myth it is Aphrodite who suggests that Hippomenes and others use apples to obtain their brides-to-be and the Berlin papyrus likewise ends with an appeal to Cyprogeneia (= Aphrodite). Given the general agreement among scholars that important aspects of the cult of Aphrodite were borrowed or otherwise adapted from the complex of beliefs which surround the Near Eastern goddesses Inanna and Ishtar,<sup>37</sup> it is not difficult to suppose that this ritual use of “apples” also made its way into the Greek world connected in some way with the worship of Ishtar.

The mention of pomegranates as an alternate fruit in the Assyrian spell also elucidates an obscure detail of the Greek myth of Persephone: in our oldest extant version, the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, Hades gives the kidnapped girl a pomegranate seed to eat and thereafter she

<sup>33</sup> *SM* 72, col. i lines 5-14. The papyrus now resides in Berlin, so we classicists are accustomed to referring to this spell as “the Berlin apple-spell.”

<sup>34</sup> Faraone (1992 and 1995) discusses this tradition of hexametrical charms.

<sup>35</sup> *KAR* 61.8-10; for this translation and commentary, see Biggs (1967) 70-74, who also reports the existence of another fragmentary spell, *KAR* 69.4-5: “Its ritual: over either a pomegranate or an apple you recite the incantation seven times, then give it to the

woman ...” Ebeling (1925) 9 n. 3, long ago pointed to the parallels between this incantation and the Greek tradition of tossed apples.

<sup>36</sup> The other spells in this series involve making effigies inscribed with the name of the desired women (*KAR* 61:11-21 and *KAR* 69:6-19 and 20- rev. 1) or burning incense and libating beer, while reciting an incantation (*KAR* 69: rev. 2-9 and rev. 10-12)

<sup>37</sup> Burkert (1992) 97-99 and Mondi (1990).

must remain with him as his wife. The event is described twice in the hymn. In the omniscient narrative of the action, the poet reports the following after Hades agrees to let Persephone return to her mother:<sup>38</sup>

Thus he (sc. Hades) spoke, and wise Persephone rejoiced and quickly leaped up in happiness. But he on his part gave her a honey-sweet pomegranate seed to eat, having secretly consecrated it in order that she might not remain continually at the side of grave Demeter of the dark *peplos*.

Later in the same poem, when Persephone is closely interrogated by her mother, she gives a somewhat different version of the incident:<sup>39</sup>

Immediately I leaped up with joy, but he secretly threw me a pomegranate seed, sweet food, and forced me to taste it against my will. (411-13)

This incident has traditionally been interpreted as an example of a widespread folk belief that if one eats the food of the dead, one must remain with them, but the relationship between Hades and Persephone is obviously much closer than simply that of a host and his guest, and most commentators agree that there is some special erotic character of the pomegranate which leads to its appearance here.<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting, moreover, how easily

the setting of this scene – a bride and groom at a wedding banquet of sorts in the groom’s home – recalls the law of Solon regarding the quince publicly presented to and accepted by the Athenian bride. The formality of both scenes suggest that the quince and pomegranate, in addition to their role as a magic charm, also played some kind of symbolic role. A plaintive speech addressed by one of Lucian’s courtesans to her faithless boyfriend provides yet another nice parallel, and gives us some further insight into the symbolic nature of such aphrodisiacs when they are presented and accepted in a public setting (*Dialogues of the Courtesans* 12.1):

And finally ... you took a bite from the apple (*mêlon*) and leaning forward you somehow shot it into her lap – without even trying to hide it from me! And she, for her part, kissed it and stuffed it between her breasts under her girdle.

As in the story of Persephone or the magical spell preserved in the Berlin papyrus, the etiquette of the activity described here is very bizarre indeed: an amorous young man takes a bite from an apple and then tosses it into the lap of a woman he wishes to seduce. But in fact, Lucian’s version of this rite reveals precisely how the presentation of a traditional aphrodisiac seems to evolve (in the Greek world, at least) into a symbolic

<sup>38</sup> *Hymn to Demeter* 371-74. In my translation here I follow Myres (1938), who argues that Hades performs some kind of circular motion or similar consecration ritual connected with “binding magic” that binds Persephone to Hades. Although I see no specific reference in the Greek to “binding magic” *per se*, this approach does make much better sense of the placement of the purpose clause and certainly ought to be connected with it, i.e., (paraphrase): “... having secretly consecrated/manipulated it (i.e., the seed) in order that she not remain continually at the side of grave Demeter of the dark peplos.”

<sup>39</sup> *Hymn to Demeter* 411-13. The Greek phrase *em-*

*bale moi* is extremely odd. Richardson, (1974) ad loc., translates “put in my mouth” with obvious discomfort, admitting that “the use of *embale moi* without further specification (e.g., *stomati*) is unusual for early epic.”

<sup>40</sup> Richardson (1974) ad loc. Allen *et al.* (1936) ad loc., suggest the pomegranate either served as a fertility charm or as an aphrodisiac. Detienne (1979) 42 discusses the evidence for pomegranates used as gifts for newlyweds, and rightly suggests that they and other kinds of *mêla* “act directly, like a drug or an incantation.”

act, for by hitting the girl with a piece of fruit, a man indicates his intent to seduce her, and by willingly putting the apple to her lips or hiding it away in her bosom – the same two possibilities anticipated in the Berlin apple-spell – the woman knowingly subjects herself to the power of the charm, and by doing so returns a message of her willingness to be seduced. A similar set of messages is clearly understood in a Hellenistic epigram that addresses a young girl as follows:<sup>41</sup> “I hit you with an apple. And you yourself, if you willingly love me, re-

ceive it and give me a share of your virginity.” Here, as in many of the other examples of apples presented in an erotic context, the female victim seems to be aware that the apple is indeed an aphrodisiac, for her active role in taking it in her hand apparently will signal her consent (“... if you willingly love me”).

This two-step process – presentation and acceptance – is, in fact, a shared characteristic of several of the texts under discussion, and can be conveniently summarized as follows:

	Male Action	Female Reaction
1) KAR 61 (10th cent. BCE)	recite charm give apple	suck its juices
2) Hom. Hym. Dem. (6th cent. BCE)	1) give seed 2) give seed	1) eat it 2) unwillingly taste it
3) Anth. Pal. 5.79 (Hellenistic)	throw apple	accept it willingly
4) Berlin papyrus (1st cent. BCE)	recite charm throw apple	take it in hand and eat it or place it in bosom
5) Lucian (2nd cent. CE)	throw apple	kiss it and place in bosom

Although in each of these texts we see the same action and reaction, some of them presume that the female is unaware of the magical properties of the apple and is tricked into bringing herself into contact with it. In the third and fifth cases the women clearly understand the power of the enchanted apple and willingly take or eat it, a feature that may help explain the use of the apple-aphrodisiac in wedding ceremonies, where it may have functioned as a sign of the bride’s consent.<sup>42</sup> The quince legislated for the Athenian heiress certainly provided the

bride with a public forum to accept the fruit willingly and thus, like the courtesan described by Lucian, display her consent to the seduction which is always implicit in marriage. Since the Persephone story turns on the fact that Hades tricked her into eating the pomegranate seed, we must presume that she was unaware of its erotic power. It is most interesting, however, that in the two actual recipes for such spells (nos. 1 and 4), we also assume that the female will unknowingly take the apple and eat it.

<sup>41</sup> *Palatine Anthology* 5.79.1-2, where it is attributed to Plato. Page (1981) 163 describes it as “unmistakably Hellenistic in style and spirit.”

<sup>42</sup> Compare, e.g., Patterson (1991) 55, who suggests

that the gesture of *anakalupsis* (the uncovering of the bride for the first time) symbolized the bride’s consent to the marriage. For female consent in Greek marriage generally, see Redfield (1995) 181.

## Conclusion

Why is it, then, that in Greek literary texts men and women so often use these enchanted apples openly as symbols to communicate erotic intent or willingness, whereas in our actual Assyrian and Greek recipes they enchant the apple or pomegranate in secret, so they can trick the victim into eating or touching it without realizing its power? The answer lies, in part, in where the apples are presented and by whom. From the texts discussed above, it is clear that this semiotic use of love spells appears in two places: the first is in a ritual performed in the public gaze of an Athenian wedding or (in the mythic world) in the myth of Hippomanes' public race with Atalanta, a story that explores the tensions that surround marriage. The second site of these semiotic fruit is, however, in the rather dimly lit world of courtesans and prostitutes. In the former case, it is important to point out that the only historical evidence for the *actual* ritual presentation of such fruit seems to be limited to a very special and unpopular kind of Athenian marriage, where a young woman is forced to marry someone who is usually much older, often unattractive and in some cases a fairly close relative. Since the success of this kind of marriage depends on the couple having sex and producing a male heir, it seems that the quince was used in one of two ways, either with or without the bride's knowledge of its power. In the first instance, the groom (with the family's endorsement) gave the quince to the bride because he and they believed that such a fruit (presumably when properly enchanted) would force the unwilling woman to be sexually attracted to the groom who handed it to her

– this would be the functional explanation for using the quince, and we might wonder if its power was ever revealed to the bride. A second explanation would be based on the semiotic power of the fruit, which is publicly presented by the groom and accepted by his wife to be: in this alternative reading of the scene, the bride knows all about the alleged power of the quince and by eating it publicly sends a clear message to the groom and the assembled guests that she has given her consent to the marriage. From the extant evidence, we cannot tell which of the two scenarios is correct, but I suspect that the second alternative is probably closer to the truth – why else would it be necessary to eat the quince publicly at their wedding feast before retiring for the evening. It is, you will recall, precisely at her own wedding feast that Persephone is offered and accepts the pomegranate seed from Hades.

All other cases of the use of apples to signal desire or consent involve non-citizen women of ill-repute, for example, the courtesan in Lucian's dialogue who picks up an apple that has been thrown in her lap and wedges it down between her breasts. In this situation, it is clear that the young man signals his desire to make love by throwing the apple, and the courtesan responds by taking and keeping it. In the passage from Aristophanes' *Clouds*, moreover, we see that a courtesan herself can use the same trick. Here, too, it is unclear to me whether the semiotic explanation cancels out the functional, for the young man will get the message whether the fruit is actually enchanted or not. If it is enchanted, it simply makes the prostitute's work easier!

In the end, I think it is perhaps easier to explain the semiotic use of this ritual in the demi-mondaine world of courtesans, where men and women apparently talked more openly about their desires and where the women at least were all experts in every kind of erotic magic possible. There is, on the other hand, a good possibility that their public and open deployment of these apple spells may ultimately derive from its use in wedding ceremonies, for we know that ancient Greek courtesans frequently co-opted the traditional vocabulary of courtship and marriage to talk about their own relationships. In this light, a courtesan who uses of this element of the wedding ritual may in fact be offering a parody of it. For example, the woman addressed in the epigram quoted earlier was most certainly a courtesan or a woman of ill repute, but the poet addresses her coyly: “And you yourself, if you willingly love me, receive it and give me a share of your virginity.” This woman was most probably not a virgin, but the presentation of the apple recalls the wedding scene discussed earlier. There is, however, a major problem with seeing imitation or parody here: there are only two anecdotes about the use of the apple at a wedding, whereas there are several examples involving courtesans and prostitutes.

There is one other place where we see the same kind of transmutation of a normally hidden love charm into a device for sending messages. As we saw earlier, most of the enchanted cords or belts were deployed by women or other social inferiors against men in positions of power, and in every case these devices were hidden from sight and apparently used without the man’s awareness. With one important exception: the inscribed girdle of the courtesan Hermione, which brazenly

advertises its power to make men more affectionate and less angry. Here, too, I would argue that in the more open and honest world of courtesans and their customers, Hermione’s charm can operate both as a charm and a real warning. Her boyfriends, upon reading it, learn that they have either fallen under its spell or are about to do so. According to the analogy of the apple spells, this advertisement of the spell allows them to give their consent to the charm: if they choose to continue undressing Hermione, they do so with the understanding that they are placing themselves under the magical effects of the girdle and will accordingly treat her with affection and not with anger. On the other hand, there is a more straightforward “reading” of the inscribed girdle, which in fact lays out plainly the rules of the game: as a courtesan, Hermione has many lovers and she insists none of them should be jealous or angry about it.

Finally, what are we to make of the fact that the Mesopotamian spells are regularly used in secret against their victims, while the Greek spells are sometimes deployed publicly to send messages? Can we explain this difference in terms of an historical development or as a result of the cultural differences between the original Mesopotamian culture in which these spells apparently originated and the Greek culture in which they are used in this peculiar semiotic way? This would not, of course, be unparalleled, for we know of an number of instances in which a device or an image serves one function in a Near Eastern culture, but when taken up by the Greeks takes on another, often very different function. Have these love spells, then, been transformed by the Greeks into vehicles for communication? Or are we simply fooled by the random survival of

different kinds of evidence? Indeed, if we had more light-hearted or comic literary texts about the lives of Mesopotamian courtesans, would we discover that

they, too, were aware of the semiotic potential of their magic belts and enchanted apples?

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