

Aelian on Tortoise Sex and the Artifice of “Erotic Love Magic”

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I. Introduction²

For the Roman author Claudius Aelianus (Aelian, ca. 175–235 CE), intercourse is not a simple issue for animals.³ In his book *On Animals*, Aelian introduces the tortoise as follows: “Tortoises are the most lustful land animals but the males only, the females do not willingly mate.”⁴ Luckily, nature offers a solution to this dilemma. Male tortoises, Aelian states, use a plant to stimulate an appetite for sex in reluctant female tortoises.

Christopher Faraone, in a sophisticated analysis of the anecdote, considers it evidence of “love magic.”⁵ He connects the anecdote with much earlier Greek rites via their standard classification in this category. Ancient Greek love magic includes *agape*-inducing formulas/rites used by men to turn women into passionate lovers and *philia*-inducing formulas/rites used by women to attract men.⁶ The category “love

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³ For biographical information on Aelian, see: Aelian and N. G. Wilson, *Historical miscellany (1906983)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2-18, Aelian, *An English translation of Claudius Aelianus' Varia historia* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 4-10; Steven D. Smith, *Man and animal in Severan Rome: The literary imagination of Claudius Aelianus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 11-28.

⁴ Tortoises appear in Book 15, near the end of the nineteen-chapter treatise, right after the evil reptile Sepedon (*NA* 15.18) and right before the Niban cock, famous for being silent (*NA* 15.20).

⁵ Christopher Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 161-166. In one of the few other recent references of the anecdote, Stephen Smith briefly refers to it as an example of morally questionable, hyper-sexed animal behavior (Smith, *Man and animal in Severan Rome*, 77). Aelian, however, does not make any direct statements about morality.

⁶ In addition to Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, see C. Faraone, “Agents and Victims: Construction of Gender and Desire in Ancient Greek Love Magic,” in *The Night of*

magic” is widely used to evaluate and classify rites, adopted recently by Radcliffe Edmonds.⁷ Evidence includes the use of lead tablets with cursing formula (fourth century B.C.E.), rites related to intercourse or sexuality found in the Greek papyri (first-fourth centuries C.E.), and numerous Greek and Roman literary anecdotes about goddesses or women who poison or attempt to poison men for marital or love interests.

This chapter argues that the tortoise anecdote illustrates a complex interaction of ideas about anatomy, behavior, and female agency that does not easily support the modern category “erotic love magic.” Animal tales outline fantasies of female desire against the background of what women were considered capable of and their likely intentions. The tortoise anecdote presents explicitly and again covertly a social schema that is both surprisingly plastic in regard to sexuality and relentlessly rigged against females.

Much has been written on the intersection of women, gender, and magic.⁸ The point argued here is not simply that women are more likely to be charged with engaging in magic, a widely accepted position that is usually introduced *after* a basic definition of magic is established.⁹ Instead, in the ancient evidence as well as in the modern category of “love magic,” I will argue, human agency is constructed with the tools of gender in a way that skews discussions of female intentions. The tendency to find some form of deviance in female behavior or in their intentions whether in the ancient world or in modern scholarship, is due to the worry about female agency that permeates the evidence and cuts off alternate, less negative explanations for their behavior. Female agency is both deficient in contrast to male agency and inherently suspect. The tortoise anecdote offers a particularly striking example of this phenomenon. I will first unpack the details of the tortoise anecdote, then consider the range of evidence associated with “love magic” and finally consider the role of behavior in ancient notions of gender with a focus on the example of courtesans.

Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in ancient Greece and Rome, ed. M. Nussbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 400-426.

⁷ Radcliffe G. Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁸ See for example Kimberly B. Stratton and Dayna S. Kalleres, *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁹ As a recent example, Edmonds defines magic in a context-free manner as “use of extraordinary means.” See Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon*.

II. Aelian's tortoises and their *iunxes*

No explanation is given, or even hinted at, for the special place that tortoises occupy as both sex-prone and sex-disinclined extremes. We have no evidence that Aelian observed animal behavior directly. His collection of animal anecdotes resembles other late antique collections, composed primarily of citations from texts. They are a "secondary species of book creation, like criticism and commentary," built on "gathering, shifting and compiling" other texts.¹⁰ The writers who compiled these works were "heroic explorers of the book world, bringing back precious nuggets of information and organizing them."¹¹

The stories are meant to be entertaining.¹² In his literary presentation of "believe it or not" animal behavior, Aelian outlines the general contours of erotic desire, giving examples of the extreme versions found among animals (the parrot wrasse is most lustful fish, etc.). In doing so, he offers what we might call a "full body" physiological theory of sexuality. The animal anecdotes place the various types of animals on a multidimensional scale in terms of both anatomy and behavior, thereby defining both the flexibility and the limits of the cosmic infrastructure for channeling erotic desire. As Faraone explains, eros "for the Greeks was clearly and narrowly defined as a dangerous, unwelcome, and irresistible lust that aims squarely and explicitly at sexual intercourse."¹³ Erotic desire courses throughout the animal and plant world and animals acted out based on their circumstances. Animals engage in types of behavior that animals of the opposite sex sometimes manifest. Citing the tortoise anecdote, Faraone calls this the reversal of natural sex. The male partridge, for example, is said to mount males when females are not available, due to its high level of erotic desire.¹⁴ Animal desire can also be directed at humans, as

¹⁰ Jason König, Greg Woolf, "Encyclopaedism in the Roman Empire," in *Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. J. König & G. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 36.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Aelian does not talk about one animal at a time but instead, "to avoid tedium, weaves a meadow or chaplet" (*NA*, Epilogue).

¹³ Faraone, "Agents and Victims: Construction of Gender and Desire in Ancient Greek Love Magic," 403.

¹⁴ *NA* 7.7. Smith argues that in this anecdote, "sexual behavior between males is the quintessential sign of an inability to moderate or control sexual desires." See Smith, *Man and animal in Severan Rome*, 183. But Aelian does not condemn the partridge any

when a male dolphin falls in love with a young boy.¹⁵ In addition to being reversed, erotic desire encounters all sorts of other problems, including inclinations that are built into the natural world, such as the female tortoise's aversion to intercourse.

For the female tortoise's disinclination, Aelian cites an authority: the Roman senator Demonstratus.¹⁶ He bases his explanation of female tortoise aversion to intercourse on anatomy, in a dramatic case of anatomy as destiny. During intercourse, the male pushes the female into the ground and leaves her upside down. Her heavy shell makes it hard for her to turn back over after intercourse, so she becomes dinner for an eagle. What would otherwise be protective, the shell, becomes a trap and a death sentence. Aelian emphasizes this point: "This then is what the females dread ... and since they are reasonable and prefer personal safety to pleasure, the males are unable to coax them to the act."¹⁷ Everything about the females' behavior is reasonable – and the term here used for "reasonable" is the classic word "moderation" (*sophrosunai*).

A solution to this problem is ready at hand. Aelian explains, "by some mysterious nature the males hold out to them an erotic *iunx*, a 'banisher of all fear.'"¹⁸ Our interest is peaked about this enigmatic sexual aid available in the natural world. The meaning of *iunx* comes in and out of focus in both ancient sources and modern attempts to fix a distinct meaning.¹⁹ The device sometimes is a small wheel which makes

more than he condemns the male tortoise for being the most lustful of land animals or female tortoises for reasonably not wanting to engage in intercourse.

¹⁵ *NA* 6.15.

¹⁶ Nothing is known about this figure beyond Aelian's reference to him. He is knowledgeable about fishing and, beyond that, the "science of the soul." Besides political standing, the senator has both practical knowledge and philosophical sophistication.

¹⁷ *NA* 15.19.

¹⁸ *NA* 15.19. Aelian also mentions an *iunx* as the model for the partridge's cry (*NA* 4.16.24). For other uses see Sarah Johnston, "The Song of the Iynx: Magic and Rhetoric in Pythian 4," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 125 (1995): 183.

¹⁹ In the 1940s, following Cook, Gow associated "*iunx*" with a "golden bobbin" on late fifth-century Attic vases, constructing one far-reaching model for all uses of the term: A. S. F. Gow, "IUNX, POMBOS, Rhombus, Turbo," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 54 (1934): 1-13. For a more recent study that differentiates among uses of the term, see C. Faraone, "The Wheel, the Whip and other Implements of Torture: Erotic Magic in

eros-representing sounds.²⁰ Some examples are held by Eros and brides on Greek vases, related in the latter case perhaps to the special erotic (man-drawing) power of brides.²¹

According to Pindar, Jason used an *iunx* to attract Medea (*Pythian Odes* 4.214). In Pindar's version the object is associated with Aphrodite and appears to include a living wryneck bird (genus *Iynx*) bound to a wheel.²² Pindar specifically employs the image of the *iunx* to emphasize "a sound that was seductive and persuasive, but that also – like so many seductive and persuasive sounds – was possibly deceptive, spelling ruin for its listener."²³ Johnston rejects Faraone's synthetic characterization of the *iunx* as a tool for "whipping" up love and instead argues that Pindar has yoked together two items, the wheel and the bird, as his distinct model of persuasion.²⁴

The device produces an onomatopoeic representation of Eros. If the *iunx* is a wheel used to drag a person towards the user, it works by producing a sound that represents Erotic desire, now channeled in an isolated and intensified form. Present in a diffused state throughout the world of animals and humans, the sound can be synthesized in a specific location and directed at a specific person. Every *iunx* is therefore a dangerous type of condenser, locating a force in the cosmos and focusing it for targeted use.

The factor uniting the word's many uses is an enigmatic capacity to direct erotic desire towards a specific person in a concentrated, materialized form. While frustrating to modern scholars, it is by its very nature a mysterious object and that mysteriousness is part of its power. But it does always indicate something that makes a powerful force manifest and hence available for use.

Pindar *Pythian* 4.213-19," *Classical Journal* 89 (1993): 1-19, critiqued in turn by Johnston, "The Song of the Iynx." See also Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 102-103.

²⁰ Edmonds, who translates it as whirligig, conflates the *iunx*, the *rhombos*, the *strophalos*, and the "Thessalian wheel," all of which Edmonds connects with the drawing down of the moon: Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 20. Horace, *Epod* 5.45-46, cited by Edmonds, does not include a reference to '*iunx*', only Thessalonian "voces."

²¹ For examples see Gow, "IUNX, POMBOS, Rhombus, Turbo," 1 and 4.

²² Translated as "wryneck" in Pindar, and G. S. Conway. *The odes of Pindar* (London: Dent, 1972) and transliterated in Johnston, "The Song of the Iynx."

²³ Johnston, "The Song of the Iynx," 178.

²⁴ For a full list of the uses of the term *iunx* in classical authors see *Ibidem*, n. 12.

As if to address this dilemma, Aelian offers several distinct glosses of the *iunx* to help the reader understand what he is talking about. He modifies the term with the phrase “banisher of all fear.” This phrase is cited from an episode in the *Odyssey* where Helen puts a drug (*pharmakon*) into the wine in order to make the warriors less afraid:

Then Helen, daughter of Zeus, took other counsel.
Straightway she cast into the wine of which they were drinking
a no-sorrow (*nepenthe*) drug to quiet all pain and strife, and
bring forgetfulness of every ill.²⁵

In Aelian’s case, using the phrase from the *Odyssey* associates the *iunx* with Helen’s use of a drug despite the fact that in the anecdote it is the male tortoises who employ the herb. Helen’s story is the reverse of the tortoise anecdote: a woman gives men herbs. The additives have an extraordinary effect since they cause men to not react to grievous events such as the death of a friend. They are not, however, categorized as being magical.

Aelian next glosses the *iunx* with a comparison to Theocritus’ songs, building his literary model on Theocritus’ previous literary description:

But it turns out that the *iunxes* of an amorous male tortoise are not songs, by Zeus, such as those which Theocritus, the composer of playful herding songs, sings, but a strange herb of which Demonstratus admits that neither he, nor anyone else, knows the name.²⁶

Theocritus’ *Idyll* 2 describes a jilted woman named Simaetha who tries to get her lover Delphis back by invoking Hecate and the Moon with the repeated phrase “*Iunx*, draw that man to my house.”²⁷ The wheel in this representation is not the sexual power of the bride, but an even greater danger in the hands of an angry female. A man is unlikely to be a match for a jilted woman who is able to condense and deploy erotic desire materialized in both the wheel’s movement and its sounds. Any use of a desire condenser by a female is likely to be suspect since it gives her an unfair advantage, surely a male fantasy about female intention and the potential of their erotic power to go haywire.

²⁵ *Od* 4.219-221.

²⁶ *NA* 15.19.

²⁷ My translation, which follows Johnston’s choice of transliterating the term *iunx*.

While Aelian does not know the name of the herb, tortoises have no problem finding it. The tortoise's access is something humans can only envy. This point reinforces other stories about animals that have a special ability to use plants without some of the problems humans encounter. For example, Aelian describes a dog able to uproot a particularly toxic root that would kill a person who touches it.²⁸ He does not use the term *magic* anywhere in his text as he outlines these capacities of animals and plants, though it is often added to English translations.²⁹

Aelian then describes the herb's use and effect:

At any rate, if they [male tortoises] hold this herb in their mouths, this ensures the exact opposite to what I have described above, for the male becomes enervated, while the female, who hitherto was fleeing, now is burning; she is made wild with frenzy and desires intercourse.³⁰

The tortoise anecdote does not demean or judge the males' use of herbs negatively. On the contrary, herbs are the best possible solution. The males may have been temporarily less "manly" but the herbs rectified the problem and permitted eros to achieve its goal of intercourse. This is a story with a happy ending, at least for the male tortoises.

III. The social context of the tortoise anecdotes and the category of "erotic love magic"

Ancient charges against women are sometimes rejected as evidence only of misogyny or eyed with suspicion. Michael Satlow argues, in his analysis of stereotypes of women in rabbinic literature, that dramatic rabbinic claims about the ubiquity of witchcraft among women "cannot be considered to be accurate historical accounts."³¹ They are accurate

²⁸ *NA* 14.27.

²⁹ Gordon, for example, classifies Aelian's dog anecdote as an example of magic. Richard Gordon, "Aelian's Peony: The location of magic in Graeco-Roman tradition," *Comparative Criticism* 9 (1987): 77.

³⁰ *NA* 15.19.

³¹ Michael Satlow, "Fictional Women: A Study in Stereotypes," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. P. Schäfer, Vol. 3 (Heidelberg: J.C.B. Mohr, 2002), 225-243. Contrast this view with those of Meir Bar-Ilan in "Witches in the Bible and in the

accounts of something, but not of female practices. Working in a different historical context, Carlo Ginzburg painstakingly attempts to sort out idiosyncratic women's confessions of witchcraft that might have reflected actual practices from stereotypical, and hence basically invalid, confessions extracted by inquisitors. Ginzburg concludes that "folkloric elements appear which are foreign to the inquisitorial image."³² His argument stands or falls with how persuasive the search for these "folkloric" elements is judged to be. Analyzing the tortoise anecdote, Faraone argues that it is a female-to-male reversal of common female behavior because "Greek women apparently did give poisons to their husbands, albeit in very small amounts, in the belief that these substances would make the men love them more or become more affectionate toward them."³³ Confidence in the charges is reinforced by the category "erotic love magic" which gives credence to charges of poisoning found in literary texts by tying them to the evidence of women's practices found in ritual texts. It is essential, then, that the category be carefully drawn from tight and clear correlations between ritual practices and literary charges.

These connections, however, are unstable. Starting with Theocritus' portrayal of erotic magic, since it looms so large as a model for the category, it is dependent on previous literary anecdotes more than on contemporary ritual practices and certainly more than on some stable set of ritual practices. J. H. Hordern argues that Theocritus' literary depiction is dependent on the earlier work of the mime Sophron.³⁴ This dependence, Hordern argues, explains why the literary depictions are more unified than the ritual evidence.³⁵ Fritz Graf contrasts the form of the rite Theocritus describes with the rites preserved in Greek papyri.³⁶

Talmud," *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* 5 (1993): 7-22 and Rebecca Lesses, "Ex(or)cising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69:2 (2001): 343-375, who are more optimistic about retrieving women's practices.

³² Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the witches' Sabbath* (1st En. Ed.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 13.

³³ See also Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 112. See also p. 116 and Faraone, "Agents and Victims: Construction of Gender and Desire in Ancient Greek Love Magic," 405.

³⁴ J. H. Hordern, "Love Magic and Purification in Sophron, PSI 1214a, and Theocritus' Pharmakeutria," *Classical Quarterly* 52 (2002): 164.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 175-185.

Graf notes that the modified sacrifices in the Greek papyri are “mainly strange fumigations practiced with aberrant substances” while in Theocritus’ rite, less aberrant sacrifices and “sympathetic” practices dominate.³⁷

While the large corpus of rituals included in the Greek papyri has a few items that overlap in terms of goals with those in the category erotic love magic, categorizing the rites by goals overlooks their differences. These rituals in the Greek papyri, though they are similar to “small-scale, private, domestic rituals conducted by ordinary householders for their household deities,”³⁸ reflect a professionalized group of practitioners. We have no evidence that women were part of this group or engaged in the rituals.

All the ritual techniques included in “erotic love magic” can be employed for good or bad. Songs were neutral if powerful tools. Greek *epodai*, like the parallel Latin *carmina*, were employed in healing rituals and other types of religious rites.³⁹ Songs could have both positive and negative ends, based on who was using them and for what purpose. Singing is good when it heals and bad when used to steal someone’s crops.⁴⁰

A drug is a neutral agent that can be used for good or bad purposes. When the difference between a woman handing her husband a remedy or a poison is “determined by the qualifying adjective *bonum* or *malum*,” the modifier takes on supreme importance.⁴¹ Using herbs could of course be for the purpose of healing. Women engaged in “root collecting” even as the social role of the healer was closed. This split highlights the limits of female agency around healing; they could do ad hoc healing, especially of family members, but could not function in more public social healing or specialist roles.⁴²

Even the term “iunx” has different meanings which point to magic as only one possible interpretation. Marinus describes Proclus using

³⁷ Ibidem, 185.

³⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Trading Places,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. M. Meyer & P. Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 25.

³⁹ Pedro L. Entralgo, L. J. Rather, John M. Sharp, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

⁴⁰ James Rives, “Magic in the XII Tables Revisited.” *Classical Quarterly* 52:1 (2002): 270-90.

⁴¹ David Kaufman, “Poisons and Poisoning Among the Romans.” *Classical Philology* 27 (1932): 156-167.

⁴² Lesses, “Ex(or)cising Power.”

one to move rain clouds, a helping gesture.⁴³ According to Philostratus, Apollonius of Tyana saw golden iunxes suspended from the ceiling of the Babylonian king, whose sounds were referred to as “tongues of the gods.”⁴⁴ He also describes golden iunxes hung in the temples for Apollo, the sound being as persuasive as that of Sirens.⁴⁵ The object becomes “love magic” only when it is connected to threatening women.

Questioning the category “love magic” does not imply that women eschewed all ritual activity related to eros. Women did engage in rites to influence husbands and lovers. In one of the widely cited examples for the category “love magic,” an otherwise unknown fourth-century B.C.E. woman named Phila used a lead binding formula to prevent a man named Dionysophon from marrying someone else. The tablet includes a lengthy statement that includes “I bind by a written formula” and asking the dead man and the “daimones” to prevent Dionysophon from marrying anyone but her. The tablet was then thrown into a grave, the quickest route to those who might deliver on her request.⁴⁶ In the social imaginings of female agency it was possible to conceive of a woman engaging in a rite that asked both a dead person, perhaps one of the unhappy dead, and earth-connected divine beings for help. The lengthy verbal formula included both cursing and blessing formulas. In this example, the protagonist blesses herself as she curses others.

However, this example is not good evidence for the category “erotic love magic,” for two reasons. First, as Emmanuel Voutiras states, “after reading the whole text one comes to realize that it can be called a love charm only in a very wide sense of the term, for it is not at all concerned with matters of love or physical attraction: its main theme is conjugal life.”⁴⁷ Secondly, the ritual is comprehensible within the framework of Greek religious practices as a special type of revenge prayer; “in specialized forms of prayer such as prayers for revenge the distinction between cursing and praying was not always recognized.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 30.

⁴⁴ *VA* 1.25.

⁴⁵ *VA* 6.11. Both anecdotes are briefly mentioned in Johnston, “The Song of the Iynx,” 183–184.

⁴⁶ See Emmanuel Voutiras, *Marital Life and Magic in Fourth Century Pella* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1998) and Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 97–98.

⁴⁷ Voutiras, *Marital Life and Magic in Fourth Century Pella*, 35.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 46, n. 107.

Cursing is the flipside of the religious coin of blessing and one cannot exist in a religious system without the other.

The literary anecdotes present a very different picture. Some refer to the practices of goddesses, and famous mythic figures are not direct guides to real women's behavior.⁴⁹ Rather, the stories are better described as reflections of male fears about goddesses, who combine two frightening traits: power and femaleness. They tell us little about women's cooking and gift-giving other than that these practices took place in a society replete with stories about dangerous divine females who threatened men.

Stories about women and herbs are easy to find and fall into two types: intentionally poisoning the men in their lives or, at best, unintentionally harming them. Plutarch recounts the story of a woman who was accused of poisoning her husband and, in hopes of leniency, claimed that she had only been trying to attract him.⁵⁰ He strikes a practical tone when he warns brides that if they are thinking of poisoning their husbands, the example of Circe should convince them otherwise.⁵¹ He stresses Circe's failure: her men were of no use to her, because she turned them into "dull-witted, degenerate fools." Plutarch basically charges Circe with incompetence, which must have been reassuring for male readers. She is a goddess and yet ends up with men unable to perform, surely a joke about misguided female attempts to influence male sexuality with the punch line that even a goddess is not very good at it.

These anecdotes are stabilized as proof of actual practices by their connections with rites. For example, Faraone points to a curse tablet placed in a temple by a woman hoping to refute a charge of attempting

⁴⁹ See Jo Ann Hackett, "Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near Eastern "Fertility" Goddesses," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989): 65-76 for the problems with ancient near eastern goddess/human female comparisons and Nicole Loraux, "Review Paul Friedrich's *The Meaning of Aphrodite*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 261-263 for Greek goddess/human comparisons.

⁵⁰ *Moralia* 256c. Cited by Faraone as evidence of women's practice. See Faraone, "Agents and Victims: Construction of Gender and Desire in Ancient Greek Love Magic," 405.

⁵¹ *Moralia* 139a. Cited by Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 113-114. John Chrysostom, also cited by Faraone, warned that married men should "watch out" lest they be drawn away from their marriages by magic. See Faraone, "Agents and Victims: Construction of Gender and Desire in Ancient Greek Love Magic," 408.

to poison her husband.⁵² All this practice proves is that women were charged with poisoning men and that the best they could hope for is to refute the charges by pleading lack of intention. All the evidence toggles between two limited choices: a woman who wants to harm her husband or lover, and one who harms him but only by accident. These limited choices are found in the different versions of the Deianeira/Hercules story. In some, she wants to kill her husband and in others she accidentally kills her husband Heracles by giving him a poisonous shirt.⁵³

Accidental versus premeditated fatal poisoning is a stark depiction of the limits of the system: women had to protect themselves by using the available strategies of self-protection. Other defenses used by men were not available to women. They could not claim that their actions were better classified as the actions of healers, of philosophers, of those who study nature and its forces and of sacred practitioners rather than of magicians, all used by Apuleius in his *Apology* (158/9 CE). Claude Lévi-Strauss recounts the story of a young man who began to heal people in order not to be killed as a witch, since that was his socially available option.⁵⁴ Outright denial was not one of his choices. So women also had to operate within the confines of, on the one hand, the hostile intentions they were imagined to have and, on the other, the basic fear of their capacity to enact those intentions. They had to make a defense that was reasonable in the eyes of the male-run system.

IV. Acting like men and the limits of female agency: the case of courtesans

In the tortoise anecdote, the female tortoises begin to act like the males, while the men acted more like females. That is, in the tortoise allegory of human behavior, the herb “forces women to pursue the male practitioner in the same manner as men are (‘naturally’) predisposed to

⁵² Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 114.

⁵³ For Faraone, “Her actions are part of a widespread pattern in which wives use love magic as they jockey among their competitors for the support and favor of their husbands.” C. Faraone, “Aphrodite’s Kestos and Apples for Atalanta: Aphrodisiacs in Early Greek Myth and Ritual,” *Phoenix* 44 (1990): 112-113.

⁵⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Sorcerer and His Magic,” in *Structural Anthropology*, ed. C. Lévi-Strauss (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

pursue women.”⁵⁵ Thus Aelian’s herb “inverts the ‘natural’ gender of the animal.”⁵⁶

This is an entertaining vision of something that in the human world had much more sinister implications. Behavior was a powerful means of sorting out male and female. Maud Gleason, in her study of ancient physiognomic texts (second century C.E.), concludes that gender was distinct from anatomical sex: “The essential idea here is that there exist masculine and feminine ‘types’ that do not necessarily correspond to the anatomical sex of the person in question.”⁵⁷ Masculinity was grounded in physical attributes such as beards and genitalia but at the same time remained fluid. It therefore had to be anchored by correct behavior. The problem with acting “like a woman” was heightened when the action had classificatory power over gender determination.

As recent scholarship has discussed at length, based on a “one-sex” theory of the body found in many ancient texts, female organs were thought of as inside-out male organs.⁵⁸ Behavior could thus turn a male into a female and vice versa. This fluidity of gender could be used in many different ways as a means of social critique. As Gleason points out, charges of incorrect behavior could function as a means of illegitimizing some types of male behavior. Behavior that was gendered female could be used to divide men into legitimate and illegitimate males.⁵⁹

If behavior were a means for moving between the endpoints of female and male, the impact of action at the two ends of the spectrum was not evenly distributed. Females are not the opposite of males but rather a deficient form of male. Females have fewer modes of action and fewer that are not looked at with inherent suspicion. That is, women could not easily act like men, or even engage in actions that looked too male. Behaviors were limited by restricting agency that might move females closer to the male standard.

⁵⁵ Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 161.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 165.

⁵⁷ Maud W. Gleason, “The Semiotics of Gender: Physiognomy and Self-Fashioning in the Second Century C.E.,” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of the Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. D. Halperin, J. J. Winkler, F. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 390.

⁵⁸ See (Laqueur 1992) and Gleason, “The Semiotics of Gender,” 390.

⁵⁹ Gleason, “The Semiotics of Gender,” 394-399.

The potential disruption caused by female sexuality is especially salient in the case of courtesans. As Faraone has explained with great insight, courtesans function like men to the extent that they are outside male control.⁶⁰ Courtesans' freedom from male control, and even worse, their possible subjection of men, raises disturbing issues of female agency. Everyone – that is, both males and females – had to worry about these women and to circumscribe their power in some way lest they accrue too much.

Lucian writes, “Old women of the Thessalonian kind make women desirable even if they are entirely despised.”⁶¹ His depiction of courtesans swapping recipes, in addition to entertaining the reader, displaces the source of desire. The association between the allure of prostitutes and magic is cemented here. Men only find prostitutes desirable because these conniving women force men to desire them. It teaches us that courtesans are not in truth attractive: men would not find them so if not for these women's disturbing power to fool and ensnare men. This is an entirely negative view of female agency – which, again, is fraught, since here the ability of females to be attractive to males leads to trouble for *women*.

This jab at older women and their protégés packs a tremendous social punch because it raises questions about women's allure in general. It is a fantasy about desire, especially as that desire encodes a conflict for men: are women really attractive, or do they just manage to make men *think* so? Attributing female desirability to female ruses is a very tempting route to take and one of tremendous convenience for men. The basic strategy of displacing male desire has been used throughout the centuries. If men have trouble correctly channeling their eros, it is the fault of women. Stories about these troubles, and the female stratagems they lead to, do not give us insight into the daily behavior of people who operated within that system.

Men's negative stereotypes of women do grant women some real social power, though of a distinctly circumscribed type. Courtesans, for

⁶⁰ Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*.

⁶¹ *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 4.1. Women connected to Thessaly, no matter what types of actions they were engaged in, are likely to be considered witches by ancient writers and modern scholars. For instance, Burkert calls a priestess from Thessalonica who feeds a bull special herbs based on her knowledge of plants a witch. Walter Burkert, *Structure and history in Greek mythology and ritual* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1979), 159.

example, had greater than average female agency – as long as their actions were based on a type of negative social agency. Prejudices can offer power to the stereotyped group, as in the process of “self-primitivization,” whereby members of the group adopt a negative stereotype and try to use it to increase their power and independence.⁶² This move increases the self-primitivizers’ power because it uses the labelers’ fears against them. In the case of courtesans, it is possible that taking on and exaggerating male fears of female sexuality could have increased their power vis-à-vis men. Part of their trade secrets would be how to use distorted male ideas of female power to their advantage.

V. Concluding thoughts

All the ancient literary anecdotes struggle with males’ dependence on females. Women are indispensable, valued, and idealized for their roles in the kitchen and the bedroom, but feared for exactly the same roles. As Froma Zeitlin remarks of the attribution to Clytemnestra of both maternal and sexual strategies used against Orestes, “it is the emblem of the basic dilemma posed by the female: the indispensable role of women in fertility for the continuity of the group by reason of her mysterious sexual nature, and the potential disruption of that group by its free exercise.”⁶³

Perhaps the most striking point in the tortoise anecdote is its illustration of the limited agency females had: they are inherently intercourse adverse because they want to live and yet they are inherently easy to manipulate due to the power of herbs. The male tortoises are the actors. The herbs change female behavior for the benefit of the males. Female sexuality is closely connected to violence and death.⁶⁴ In a society in which rape was a way of acquiring a wife, these associations are not a surprise. If the anecdote is meant to tell us something about the human world, it is a grim story.

⁶² Gananath Obeyesekere, *Cannibal talk: The man-eating myth and human sacrifice in the South Seas* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005), 120.

⁶³ Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 96.

⁶⁴ In another connection between sexual desire and death in Aelian, fishermen, aware that the parrot wrasse is the most lustful fish, attach a fishing line to a live female and pull her along to attract male fishes, presumably to their death (*NA* 1.2).

In these anecdotes, we see the boomerang dilemma of female agency just as in our society, women who make sexual-assault accusations often find themselves sexualized in the process. Women who were not courtesans were likely to be accused of using illicit means, even when they, like female tortoises, had no agency at all. To argue that women poisoned their husbands and lovers by accident is to try to mitigate skewed evidence. Ultimately, Aelian's anecdote presents female tortoises as having absolutely no agency of their own, perhaps a grim reminder of the suspect and narrow spectrum of agency that all females – tortoise, women and goddesses – share.

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