

The Role of Dogs in the Erotic Magic of the *Greek Magical Papyri*

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Abstract

This paper explores the symbolic and ritual role of dogs in the erotic magic of the Greek Magical Papyri (*PGM*). In Greek religion, dogs were frequently used in purification rites—rituals closely associated with the goddess Hecate, to whom dogs were regularly sacrificed and in whose cult they held a central role. Hecate was often depicted in the company of dogs, whose barking was believed to signal her presence. Drawing on this background, this paper examines the ritual use of dogs—and canine body parts—in erotic spells, where Hecate is invoked in her aspect as a dog. Special attention is paid to the semantic significance of the term κύων (*kyon*) and its adjectival and nominal derivatives, which function as epithets shaping the discursive construction of Hecate as a chthonic and threatening goddess.

1. Introduction¹

Erotic magic falls under the category of the so-called binding or attraction spells, as well as malevolent magic, which in the *PGM* mostly involve aggressive or violent attraction procedures commissioned by men to coerce women into sexual transgression. While there are literary references to this type of magic, our paper focuses on the texts commonly known by the generic name “Greek Magical Papyri” (*PGM: Papyri Graecae Magicae*),² namely the

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² The acronym *PGM* refers to the title of the corpus: *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri* (Teubner 1928-1931). From now on, we will refer to the corpus using this acronym. K. Preisendanz edited two volumes of *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri* (*PGM* I and II), published in 1928 and 1931 (Teubner, Leipzig). This corpus arrived at European libraries throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The third volume, which was to include the reconstructed hymns and indexes, could not be published because the Teubner publishing house was damaged during the 1943 air raid. The material that would have appeared in this third volume was later incorporated into the second volume of Albert Henrichs’s re-edition of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (1973-1974). A. Henrichs undertook a re-edition of the corpus with minor emendations in 1973-1974.

corpus of papyri with magical content dating from the second century BC to the fifth century AD. As Martín Hernández (2014, 42), among other researchers, points out, these texts should be called “papiros mágicos egipcios de época greco-romana”,³ since—although mostly written in Greek—they were produced in Egypt and contain passages partly written in Egyptian. These texts likewise reflect the fusion of Greek and Egyptian religious traditions (Ager 2022, 78).

Among the various ritual activities recorded in Greco-Egyptian magic manuals are ‘binding spells’— that is, ‘malefic’ or ‘aggressive’ magic designed to subdue rivals (in sports, law, or politics), or to compel the love of another person through the coercive force of a spell. These practices include spells of erotic attraction (*ἀγῶγαί*), ritual acts intended to lead the desired individual to the home or bed of either the ritual’s author or of the person who commissioned the spell (cf. Faraone 1999, 25-28). Men typically use such magic to awaken *eros* (erotic desire) in order to satisfy their sexual longing. What is particularly striking about many of these erotic spells is that they aim to awaken feelings of love and erotic desire in the victim, often by invoking a goddess to inflict severe bodily torments: “to destroy, to burn, to afflict, to torture: this is the language of love, at least in the spells under discussion” (Versnel 1998, 249).

The goddesses targeted in these rituals are chthonic-lunar nature deities, such as Hecate, who is often syncretized with Artemis, Selene, and Persephone. The frequent invocation of Hecate accounts for the prominent role of the dog in these ritual practices, where it assumes various functions and symbolic values.

The corpus of magical papyri was completed between 1990 and 1992 thanks to the work of R. W. Daniel and F. Maltomini, who edited the *Supplementum Magicum* (in two volumes). The corpus was translated into English in 1986 by a group of scholars under the direction of H. D. Betz in Chicago. This translation has the advantage of including the Demotic texts found in the documents—texts that were not edited by Preisendanz. There is also a Spanish translation of the PGM corpus by J. L. Calvo Martínez and Ma. D. Sánchez Romero, *Textos de magia en papiros griegos*, Madrid 1987. Following the *Supplementum* by Daniel and Maltomini, additional texts (including formularies and activated texts) have continued to be published in academic journals. Currently, an international team of researchers, under the direction of Ch. Faraone and S. Torallas Tovar, is preparing a new edition of the Greco-Egyptian magical formularies in three volumes, the first of which has already been published (Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2022). See also: W. M. Brashear, *The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey; Annotated Bibliography* (1928-1994), ANRW II. 18.5 (1995), 3398-3412.

³ “Egyptian magical papyri from the Greco-Roman period”.

Like all ritual practices, erotic rituals involve the preparation of offerings to be burned in honour of the deity, accompanied by hymns or prayers recited at the moment of burning the offering. Ritual activity consists of two instances: ‘what is done’ (τὰ δρώμενα), and ‘what is said’ (τὰ λεγόμενα). Within these dual aspects, the figure of the dog assumes different roles: on the one hand, it serves as an ingredient in the preparation of offerings, and, on the other, the term ‘dog’ functions as an epithet or symbolic designation of Hecate. We will focus not so much on its use in *praxeis* (ritual actions), but rather on its function as *symbola* or epithets of Hecate in the hymns and prayers of the *PGM*.

2. Dogs and Hecate in *PGM*

Hecate’s bond with dogs was special, for as Zografou (2010, 249) underlines, unlike other deities associated with various animals, the dog is the only animal linked to this goddess. Thus, in poetic and magical tradition, it was believed that the barking of dogs announced the goddess’s presence.⁴ One possible reason for this close affinity is that both Hecate and dogs—within Greek mentality—share ambivalent traits and behaviours. Moreover, the Greek philologist (2010, 252) points out that the bond between the goddess and the animal is clearly reflected by the fact that both fulfill the role of guardians. Hecate can play a beneficial role as a protective goddess of households or cities, or an infernal role as commander of spirits and ghosts, but she is always accompanied by one or many dogs. And dogs can act as human companions or guards of homes, but they can also behave disgustingly as scavengers or corpse eaters, or even become threatening for those who believe they represent or stand for unburied dead or ghosts.⁵ Bortolani (2016, 240) states that in Greek tradition, dogs embody a dual symbolism: on the domestic side, they are portrayed as protectors, assistants, and loyal companions to both mortals and deities—most notably Artemis, the quintessential goddess of hunt; on the other hand, dogs also possess a distinctly chthonic dimension, evidenced by their

⁴ Theoc. *Id.* 2.12-13, 35-36; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 3.1040, 1214-1217; Sen. *Med.* 840-3 and *OA* 949-987.

⁵ Dogs as restless souls or demons: Johnston 1990 ch. 9; Roscher 1896, 25-50. Here, too, the precise implications of this association remain uncertain. As Roscher points out, however, parallels can be found in other cultures, where dogs are portrayed both as demons and as protectors against them. Perhaps this duality reflects nothing more than reality: dogs are indeed both ferocious meat eaters and excellent guardians (cf. Plu. *QR* 276 f. 277a).

role as mythic beasts of the Underworld (such as Cerberus), and by the belief that the spirits of the unburied dead could manifest in canine form. As Mainoldi (1984, 46) points out, Hecate and her monstrous dogs guide the dead to the world of the living, and in addition she is “la déesse inquiétante et démoniaque, qui, la nuit, erre près des tombeaux pour effrayer les vivants”.⁶ It is precisely because of these threatening aspects that Hecate is invoked by practitioners in magical rituals.

In the coming subsections, we will analyze selected hymns embedded within several erotic spells of the *PGM*, in which the term ‘dog’ (κύων)—whether masculine or feminine—functions as an epithet or symbol (σύμβολον) of Hecate. We will also analyze how adjectives related to canine traits are used to evoke the chthonic, vengeful, and dangerous nature of the goddess.

2.1. Dog and dog-related terms as epithets or *symbola*

In *PGM* IV.1399-1434,⁷ we find a hymn to Hecate-Selene as part of a ritual procedure titled “love spell of attraction in the presence of heroes or gladiators or those who died violently” (Ἀγωγή ἐπὶ ἡρώων ἢ μονομάχων ἢ βιαιῶν). The hymn not only invokes other deities as assistants of the goddess, but also calls upon “those who died untimely and violently” (φθιμένοις ἀώροις, βιομόροις v. 2). This invocation to the deceased reflects the belief that individuals who died prematurely before fulfilling the span allotted to them by fate remained in an intermediate liminal state. Suspended between both worlds, they could not fully pass to the Underworld because they had not really completed their lives, according to the time agreed by destiny. This liminality rendered these special spirits suitable ‘instruments’ in the hands of magicians (see *S. fr.* 535; *E. Med.* 397; *Hor. Sat.* 1.8.33; Bremmer 2002, 77-81; Garland 1988, 77-78; Faraone 1991, 3-32; Johnston 1999, 204; Martín Hernández 2011, 95-115). Also invoked are the “unfortunate who left the light” (λειψίφωτες ἀλλοιόμοροι, v. 10), another reference to the ‘restless dead’—spirits whose final destination is not Hades, but who are

⁶ “the disturbing and demonic goddess, who, at night, wanders near the tombs to frighten the living”.

⁷ The translations of the *PGM* are by Bortolani 2016.

condemned to wander until their desires are fulfilled or their thirst for revenge is quenched. Their anomalous status granted them the power to intervene in the world of the living, either at will or when summoned, often bringing harm and distress (Johnston 1999, 84).

It is not until verse 29 that the proper name of the praised goddess is revealed: “O mistress Hecate” (κυρία Ἑκάτη). In the following verse, the author of the magical hymn uses a female animal epithet to characterize the goddess: “black bitch” (κύων μέλαινα, v. 30). This epithet reinforces the chthonic nature of the deity, highlighting her dark and dangerous aspect. As Dosoo and Galoppin (2022, 217) point out, it was usual to dedicate black female dogs to Hecate as a lunar and chthonic goddess. Likewise, black dogs were not only consecrated to her, but also served as her favourite sacrificial victims⁸.

In *PGM* IV.2242-2355, there is a hymn addressed to Hecate-Selene that is supposed to be performed during a ritual procedure entitled “inscription to the waning moon” (Δέλτος ἀποκρουστική πρὸς Σελήνην), in the context of an ἀγωγή ritual. It is worth mentioning that in this hymn the goddess is not invoked by her proper name; instead, she is addressed through epithets and attributive expressions that make reference to different aspects of her nature. In verse 10 she is called “maiden-like bitch” (ἰσοπάρθενος κύων), and again in verse 37 simply as “bitch” (κυνώ).

Later in the hymn, the author clarifies that the designation ‘bitch’ functions as a symbol (σύμβολον) of the goddess, referring to her secret names known only to the practitioner, which he has begun to reveal in the list of epithets found in verses 25-45 and 58-67 (cf. Addey 2011, 283-284). Then, he lists a series of actions performed by the practitioner, when he manipulates

⁸ It was customary to sacrifice dogs to Hecate (see Sch. Ar. *Pax* 277 b; Sch. Paus. I.1, 5; Lycoph. *Alex.* 88, Plu. *QR* 280b, among other examples). See Martín Hernández 2010, 28, n.29. A striking instance of this ritual practice is attested in a curse tablet where the sacrificial use of puppies is evident: “(*First tablet*) I denounce the persons written below, Lentinus and Tasgillus, in order that they may depart from here for Pluto and Persephone. Just as this puppy harmed no one, so (may they harm no one) and may they not be able to win this suit; just as the mother of this puppy cannot defend it, so may their lawyers be unable to defend them, (and) so (may) those (legal) opponents (*Second tablet*) be turned back from this suit; just as this puppy is (turned) on its back and is unable to rise, so neither (may) they; they are pierced through, just as this is; just as in this tomb animals/souls have been transformed/silenced and cannot rise up, and they (can)not...” (the rest is unreadable). Gaul, region of Aquitaine, ca. 172 AD (Gager 1992, no. 53).

these divine ‘symbols’. Thus, in verse 50 he declares: “I opened the locks of Cerberus, holder of Tartarus” (ἤνοιξα ταρταρούχου κλειῖθρα Κερβέρου), thereby unleashing the darkness of the Underworld over the entire world. The hymn continues to reference symbolic canine imagery associated with the goddess, notably in verse 92 when the practitioner mentions the “dark dog” (κύων κυάνεος).

Through these associations, the goddess—like the chthonic dogs that accompany her—is portrayed as capable of leading the dead into the world of the living and instilling terror. This power is linked to her role as “guardian of the dead” (νερτέρων ἐπίσκοπε v. 23), underscoring her liminal and fearsome nature.

In *PGM* IV.2522–2567, we find a hymn to the syncretic goddess Hecate-Selene-Persephone-Artemis, to be performed in a spell of attraction (ἀγωγή). The reference to the dog serves to characterize the goddess’ behavior: “with... dogs” (σκυλάκεσσι, v. 7). Later, she is described as a “horse-faced goddess, howling like a dog” (ἵπποπρόσωπε θεά, κυνολύγματε, v. 24).⁹

In *PGM* IV.2714-2784, we find a hymn to Hecate-Selene-Persephone-Artemis to be performed, again, in the context of a ritual of attraction (ἀγωγή). Here the goddess is characterized with names referring to dogs. In verse 2 she is called Baubo (Βαυβώ), a proper name that can be understood as a *vox magica*, evoking the onomatopoeic repetition of syllables βὰύ βὰύ, reminiscent of a dog’s bark and related to the verb ‘to bark’ (βᾶύζω). This interpretation is plausible given Hecate’s association with dogs. Further reinforcing this connection, she is described in verse 7 as “dog-leader” (σκυλακάγεια). Another possible explanation for the name Βαυβώ is that, according to Chantraine (1968, 170), it refers to Demeter’s nurse, while as a common noun it denotes the female genitals, the vulva. In this way, the proper name is linked to Orphic tradition. There, Baubo, together with her husband, King Disaules of Eleusis, receives Demeter, who was searching for Persephone. She offers Demeter a refreshing drink (κυκεών), which the grieving goddess refuses; then, in an attempt to cheer her up, Baubo exposes her private parts, and this obscene display ultimately provokes Demeter’s

⁹ The translation of ἵπποπρόσωπε θεά is by Betz 1986.

laughter (*OF* 394 F, 395 F and 396 F; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.20.3). Moreover, associated with the Eleusinian goddesses, Baubo received cultic worship in Paros (fourth century BC, *SEG* 16.478) and in Thasos (first century BC, *IG* XII.5.227; cf. Richardson 2012, 226; Karatas 2019, 185).¹⁰

In this hymn, we also find allusions to the restless dead, who are guided by the goddess and her dogs. The practitioner invokes Hecate together “with those who died untimely” (σὺν ἀποφθιμένοισιν ἀώροις, v. 12) and “those among the heroes who may have died without a wife and children” (κεῖ τινες ἡρώων ἔθανον ἀγύναιοί τε ἄπαιδες, v. 13). These souls are described as “hissing wildly, with animosity in their hearts” (ἄγρια συρίζοντες, | ἐπὶ φρεσὶ θυμὸν ἔχοντες v. 14), reflecting their liminal and unfulfilled status. Their inclusion in the invocation underscores Hecate’s role as psychopomp and mistress of the dead, particularly those who remain unsettled or excluded from normative funerary rites.

In *PGM* IV.2786-2870, in a hymn to Hecate-Selene-Persephone-Artemis to be performed in a ritual procedure called ‘prayer to Selene for any spell’ (εὐχὴ πρὸς Σελήνην, ἐπὶ πάσης πράξεως), we find an enumeration of epithets and symbols referring to the attributes of Hecate related to dogs. She is depicted as having “the voice of a young dog” (σκυλακώδεα φωνήν, v. 17), and we are also reminded that dogs are her favourite companions, “fierce-minded dogs are your friends” (κύνες φίλοι ἀγριόθυμοι, v.19). This hymn also mentions her relationship with a monstrous dog, the doorkeeper of Hades: “you hold Cerberos in chains” (Κέρβερον ἐν δεσμοῖσιν ἔχεις, v. 51).

2.2. Dog as a component of *materia magica*

Through the corpus of the *Greek Magical Papyri*, Hecate is portrayed as an all-powerful goddess, which is why she can be invoked simply as ‘goddess’ (θεά). Thus, in the ritual known as ‘slander’ (διαβολή), found in *PGM* IV.2574-2622 A; 2643-2674 B, there is a hymn to this omnipotent deity. It should be made clear that these are not two separate hymns, but rather

¹⁰ This story remains present in Late Antiquity, as Karatas (2019, 83) notes: “Iambe/Baubo was mentioned again in the 2nd century AD—more than 300 years after Nicander—by Apollodorus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Arnobius, who give a similar account about Demeter and Baubo, as recorded in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Demeter’s arrival at Eleusis and Baubo’s jokes are at the centre of these accounts”.

two versions of the same practice copied within a single document (LiDonnici 2023, 174). The *διαβολή* is a ritual practice aimed at defaming the target of the spell in order to provoke divine wrath (Herrero Valdés 2011; Blanco Cesteros 2013, 213-214). The ‘slander’ typically focuses on recounting impious acts allegedly committed by the victim, which may include spreading religious secrets, offering sacrilegious gifts to the deity, or uttering blasphemy. In this way, the ritual seeks to turn the goddess against the victim and thereby legitimizes the use of magical practices.

In verses 2-14 the expert lists the ingredients for preparing an incense stick, which include ‘disgusting’ substances such as “substance of a dead dog” (*οὐσίαν νεκροῦ κυνός*, v. 4). The term *οὐσία* refers to the vital force, in this case that of the dog, since it serves as a bearer of magical power. Thus, Gallopin (2017, 327) takes up Jean-Pierre Vernant’s argument and states that “l’impur’ est une des qualités de la puissance divine”. Watson (2019, 134) argues, on the other hand, that the use of specific animals in certain spells was common practice. The inclusion of a dog in an erotic spell is not surprising, given its symbolic association with sexual activity. From Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (vv. 67-68), sexuality and shamelessness establish a link between women and female dogs or bitches, since Hermes places in Pandora’s head a dog-like or shameless mind (*κύνειόν τε νόον*). Margariti (2024, 53), following Franco (2014), further highlights that “dogs also have a special connection to women”, and that “the epithet *κυνῶπις* (dog-eyed or dog-faced) is used for shameless females, such as the murderess Clytemnestra and her adulteress sister Helen”. In the prose section of the hymn the goddess is also referred to with the epithet “mare bitch” (*ἱπποκύων*). Since the recipes analyzed do not specify the sex of the victim, it seems pertinent to consider the duality of the term *κύων*, which also means “penis” (see LSJ VII, Ar. *Lys.* 158). In this sense, it appears in epigrams from the Hellenistic period. Marcus Argentarius and Strato of Sardis use the noun *κύων*, playing on the double meaning of dog and penis (cf. Lilja 1976, 122-123).¹¹ The ancient Greek imagery linked the

¹¹ The term *κύων* is likewise connected to another expression, *kynodesme*, which denotes the practice—customary among athletes—of binding the penis with a cord. Zanker (1995, 28), however, proposes a different interpretation, one that is connected with the broader theme of shame: “To expose a long penis, and especially the head, was regarded as shameless and dishonourable, something we see only in depictions of slaves and barbarians”.

dog to female lust and shamelessness, but also to the human penis. We may therefore conjecture that dogs and canine imagery in aggressive magical recipes function both as feminine and masculine erotic symbols.

In the second version of this ritual practice (*PGM* IV.2643-2674 B), the preparation of “a repugnant incense” is explicitly mentioned. The qualification of this offering is due to the repulsiveness of the ingredients used in its preparation, as for example, “a dog’s embryo” (κύνειον ἔμβρυον, v. 3). This choice aligns with the broader magical strategy of using ritually impure or liminal materials to provoke divine attention and action. The use of canine matter, especially in embryonic form, may also reinforce associations with Hecate’s chthonic and erotic dimensions, as dogs are linked to both death and sexual excess.

3. Conclusion

In the Greek tradition, particularly in connection with Hecate, both good and bad aspects of the dog are prominent, as the goddess’s domains align with the dog’s roles in areas of influence. Hecate and the dogs can adopt positive roles, such as guardians of thresholds, but they can also embody negative or fearsome qualities when associated with the Underworld and the spirits of the dead who visit or linger in the world of the living. A plausible explanation for the prevalence of these negative values in the *PGM* lies in the nature of the hymns themselves—invocations of chthonic goddesses within the context of aggressive erotic magic. This ritual framework likely accounts for the emphasis on the sinister features of both the goddess and the animal associated with her. In the case of dogs, their symbolic connection to female lust and shamelessness further reinforces the logic of the spell, in which the female victim is expected to be drawn to such transgressive traits.

The sombre aspect of these rituals lies in the double form of violence they enact. The magician, relying on specialized knowledge and ritual expertise, seeks to compel the goddess to comply with the petition articulated in the hymn. At the same time, the goddess—accompanied by her infernal dogs—is herself charged with the task of subduing the spell’s intended victim.

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