

Defixio Assignment FAQs

I have received a number of questions regarding innovation and originality in this assignment, so I thought I should let everyone see the answers I've given. The basic idea of the assignment is for you to synthesize elements from the material you've read and for you to analyze the way in which the elements are combined in your spell. To do this, you will have to use elements from the PGM and Gager, but you must also cite precisely where you are getting the elements and why you chose those particular ones.

I just wanted to ask a couple questions before I type up my spell. So my questions are:

- 1.) Is it okay to pull all of the elements of your own spell directly from spells in PGM or do the elements of the spell have to be entirely of your own design?*
- 2.) If we use greek words in our spell, it is okay to use words used in other spells, correct? (after all, I don't speak greek)*
- 3.) I feel that the binding spells are very similar to one another (same goes for the love charms), and so my final question is, to what degree do our spells have to DIFFER from the spells in the PGM? In an assignment where we are, in a sense, borrowing ideas from source readings, I was wondering where the line between borrowing and plagiarizing is drawn (just want to be on the safe side).*

I have one quick question about the paper. Obviously, we're not supposed to copy a spell directly out of the books, but is it ok if some of the element of the spell are directly quoted? For instance, when invoking the gods, should we just make up an invocation with names of gods that we came up with ourselves, or can we copy a form of an invocation? And if we want to say "let NN be cold and useless like this lead is cold and useless" can we actually say that, even though it's in many of the spells, or should we substitute the word "rock" or something. I'm just trying to figure out exactly how original, per se, this spell should be, considering that we're supposed to be citing parallels to other spells and it's supposed to be in an ancient context. I don't know if it should be kind of an innovative splicing together of various things that we've read, or if it should be totally original. I know that this question seems kind of ambiguous, but any input would be appreciated.

An "innovative splicing together" is precisely what I am looking for in this assignment, with the further qualification that you should document both your models and how you have innovated from them. After all, the magicians who were performing spells from the handbooks or from the traditions they had learned from their teachers were doing the same kind of innovation from models, using pieces of traditional spells patched together to suit their particular purpose or client (the anthropological term for the process is 'bricolage'). You will notice, in fact, that many of the names or epithets of gods in the PGM spells are repeated from one spell to another in almost precisely the same form. The similarities and variations between the handbook form of PGM IV.296 ff. and the performed versions found in Gager 29-30 and the handout from Supplementum Magicum are also instructive in this regard. The curse tablet formulae and the common similes were used because they were familiar from the tradition and served the basic purpose that the magician was trying to achieve. The innovations come in as the magician adapted the general formulae to the specific context of the spell, the client, the situation, the target, etc. Innovation also occurs when the

magician tries to improve the traditional formulae, improvising on the theme or adding new names or procedures.

The task is to combine suitable elements from a variety of the sources you've read and to cite the models from which you have taken each of the elements. You should also explain why you selected those particular elements, how they work in the spell you are composing, based on how they fit into the spells from which you took them. This process of explanation justifies your use of the elements, even if you copy an invocation straight out of one of the PGM spells, since you have to explain why you chose this particular invocation, with these elements, and put it in the place that you did in your spell, etc. The quality of the explanations is more important than the actual spell you put together, although the two facets of the assignment are obviously intertwined.

When you said to create a context for the spell, did you mean an ancient context or a present and personal one?

You should create an ancient context for the spell, taking as your model the kinds of contexts we have explored for the curses and love charms, i.e. the various agonistic contexts of the lawcourt, the market-place, the racetrack, etc. or the social and familial contexts of the love charms.

I've started on our first paper for Ancient Magic, and I was wondering if we are allowed to do our essays on other kinds of spells. I'm interested in tomb curses, and the Greco-Roman perception of Isis, and other Egyptian deities. Would a tomb curse be acceptable for this assignment?

The purpose of the assignment is to demonstrate your understanding of the logic and patterns of the Greco-Roman curse through the commentary that you make upon the curse that you compose. You could certainly compose something like an Egyptian tomb curse and explain the ways that it is different from the traditional patterns of the Greek agonistic curses as well as the shared characteristics. The key to success, however, lies in your citations of the materials we have been studying in class. You can get as wild and creative as you like, giving your curse a modern setting, an ancient Egyptian setting, an old Icelandic setting, a fantasy literature setting, whatever ..., but the task is to tie it back to the Greco-Roman tradition we are examining in class.

I'm not sure what you mean by your directions for citation, "You should cite the parallels according to the bibliographic form, abbreviations and conventions used in Gager." Could you clarify?

You should make sure that every reference you make to a parallel is clearly linked to the source from which you found it. Thus, if you include an element that appears in several curse tablets in Gager's collection, you could cite them as, e.g., Gager #15, 23, 48, 72, and 78. If the element appears in the Greek Magical Papyri, you might properly cite them as, e.g., PGM IV. 266-440, VII. 177-283, XXXVI.1-34. If you are going beyond these two basic sources to parallels mentioned in Gager or elsewhere, you should follow Gager's lead, e.g. DT 61 for tablet 61 in Audollent's collection, *Defixionum Tabellae*. The materials from the readings taken from the *Supplementum Magicum* collection of Daniel & Maltomini is properly cited as, e.g. SM 46. If you find yourself citing parallels from literature or others sources (such as those in Ogden's sourcebook), you should follow the conventions for citing ancient texts, e.g. Aristophanes, *Clouds* 746-57. If you have taken your reference from Ogden, then you should also include his reference, e.g., Ogden #214.

You should not simply cite Ogden's reference without the ancient text citation, nor should you refer to his page number (e.g., Ogden 2009: 237). Likewise, if you are bringing in a reference from literature such as Apuleius, you should cite the ancient text divisions, e.g. Apuleius, *Golden Ass* 2.12, instead of page number (31).

Can you elaborate specifically by what you mean when you say, "provide parallels for the features of your spell" for assignment 1? Does this just mean make sure that it corresponds to what we have already read about or at least in a similar manner?

When I ask for parallels to the features of your spell, I want you to cite other spells that have the same feature or use an element in a similar way. For example, if you use the Aski Kataski formula as voces magicae in your spell, you should, in your commentary, state that this formula is used in a binding spell in PGM VII 429-58 and in the love charm on the handout SM 49. If you use a simile, such as "as this lead lies cold and inert, so may NN lie cold and useless", you should cite the parallels in Gager (and the PGM) that were in the readings. This documentation of the parallels is an important part of the assignment because of the importance of using familiar traditional elements in the Greco-Roman tradition of magic. Thus, not only should the spell you compose share similar elements with the spells in the readings, but you should explicitly document those parallels.

When providing a commentary for my spell, should I attempt to explain something (an ingredient, a word) when I don't really know the reasons for its use? For example, I noticed that myrrh is a common ingredient in love spells. But I don't know why and if I choose to use myrrh should I make up a reason (myrrh is fragrant when burned and therefore makes a suitable offering to the gods) or should I just point to examples where myrrh is also used and leave it at that?

With regard to the assignment, it is sufficient to cite parallels in other spells of the same type. If you can figure out a good reason why the element might be common in the other spells, then you should explain that. You may not be factually correct in your reconstruction of the reasoning of the ancient magicians, but, then again, the ancient magicians were not always correct when they tried to figure out the reasons why a traditional element was present in the examples they were looking at. Reinterpretation and creation of new meaning is part of the innovation in the tradition. Cp. the use of lead in curse tablets - probably used originally for practical reasons like availability and softness, the lead was given various symbolic meanings by later users (cold as death, inert and useless, etc.) who probably imagined that these reasons were why the earlier users had chosen the material to begin with. So, if you put the burning of myrrh in your spell, you could quite legitimately include the reasons you mentioned as well as simply citing the parallels in other texts. While the bare parallels are sufficient, detailed reasoning and creative thinking are always better.