

Spells and Love

(Theocritus's second Idyll)

Martin Robertson

My bay-leaves, where are they? Bring them here, Thestylis,
and the stuff for spells. Wind scarlet wool round the bowl.
I'm going to bind my man to me, my hard love.
Eleven days, and he hasn't come to me,
doesn't know even if I'm alive or dead,
no knock at my door. . . There's someone else. Love's gods
have drawn his wandering fancy away from me.
I'll go tomorrow to Timagetus's club
and see him and tell him off for treating me so.
Now, though, fire-spells to bind him.

But, O Moon,
shine out while I croon, to you, goddess, and to Hecate,
your earth-dark Other who has even the dogs shaking
as she fleets by over graveyards, over black blood.
Be there, fell Hecate, see me through to the end,
and make these spells of mine not a thought less strong
than were Circe's or Medea's or blonde Perimede's.

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

Barley-grains first shrivel in the fire—why, Thestylis,
strew them on then. Stupid girl, what are you thinking of?
Would even you make a joke of me now, dirty creature?
Strew them on, and say "These are Delphis's bones I'm strewing".

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

Delphis hurts me. And this bay now for Delphis
I burn. The leaves crackle as the heat takes them,
flare up suddenly and not even ash is left.
May Delphis's flesh waste so in consuming fire.

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

Bran goes on next. Artemis, Moon, you can move
Death's adamant door, and anything else as stubborn. . .
—Thestylis, listen! The dogs in the town are howling.
Hecate's come to the cross-roads! Clash the brass quick!

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

The sea is quiet now, the winds are quiet,
but in my body the anguish is never quiet,
burning as I am all over for this man who's made me,
lost thing, no wife and now no maiden either.

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

As the flame melts this wax (O help me, goddess)
may this Myndian, this Delphis waste with love,
and as I whirl Aphrodite's brazen hummer
so may he turn and turn about my door.

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

Three libations to you, lady, and with each I cry
"Be it a woman he lies by, be it a man,
may he quite forget them, as once in Naxos, they say,
Theseus forgot Ariadne for all her beauty.

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

This maresbane grows in Arcadia, and all the foals
and their mothers, cropping it, run mad on the mountains.
So to this house may I see Delphis bolting,
a mad thing, breaking away from sport and friend.

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

This fringe from Delphis's cloak he lost, and I
now shred it and toss the shreds on the savage fire.
. . . O Love, harsh Eros, why do you cling so hard?
—pond-leech, sucking the dark blood out of me.

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

I'll pound a lizard and mix an ill drink for him
tomorrow. But now, Thestylis, take the ashes
while it's still night, and knead them into his door-sill
and as you do, whisper "It's Delphis's bones I'm kneading".

Draw him, bird-wheel, draw him (you know who) to my house.

—

Now I'm alone.

How did this love begin?

Where shall I start?

Eubulus's girl, Anaxo,
was picked to carry a basket for Artemis
to her holy grove in the feast-day procession
(they'd a lot of animals, even a lioness)—

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

—and Theumaridas' old Thracian nurse (she's dead now),
who lived next door, came and kept begging me
to come to the show with her, and I to my sorrow
did go, wearing my best long linen dress
and Cleurista's wrap borrowed to set it off.

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

About half way, near Lycon's, who should pass us
but Delphis, strolling along with Eudamippos.
Their beards curled yellower than goldenrod
and their chests shone brighter than you are shining, Moon,
fresh-oiled from a round of bouts in the wrestling-school.

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

I saw him, and my wits left me. My wretched heart
caught fire. I must have looked awful. I don't remember
a thing about the procession or how I got home,
and after that I went down with a high fever
—ten days and nights I couldn't get out of bed.

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

My colour faded—sallow as a dead leaf.
My hair fell out and my body thinned away
to skin and bone. I tried everything. There isn't
a wise-woman's house in miles I didn't visit.
But time went on and nothing changed at all.

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

At last I made my mind up. I said to my slave
“Thestylis, you must find me the cure for this.
That man from Myndus has got me, soul and body.
You go and watch by Timategus's place
(that's where he likes to practise and lounge about)”—

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

—“and when you see he's alone, give him a sign,
then say ‘Simaetha's waiting’, and bring him here.”
That's what I told her. She went, and brought him back,
Delphis (such a smooth skin) back to my house. . .
The moment I heard his light step through my door—

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

—I went colder than snow all over. A drenching sweat
stood on my forehead like dew and trickled down.
I couldn't utter, no more than a baby can
whimpering for his mother in his sleep.
I lay there, my living body stiff as a doll.

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

He looked at me, the rake, then lowered his eyes,
sat down on the bed beside me, and began
“I was coming, Simaetha. Your message to bring me here
was first by only as much as the other day
I managed to beat dear Philinus in a race.”—

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

—“I was coming, by sweet Love’s self I swear I was coming
for a proper serenade, with two or three friends.
I’d have brought the apples of Dionysus with me
and worn a wreath of the white poplar, the holy
tree of Herakles, wound with crimson ribbon.”—

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

—“And if you had let me in (and they say I’m handsome
and trim as any young man) that would have been lovely.
And if I’d got a kiss of your pretty mouth
I’d have gone to sleep happy. But if your door had been barred
be sure I’d have come again with torch and axe.”—

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

—“But as it is, I owe thanks first to the Cyprian
goddess, and after the Cyprian thanks, my dear,
to you, who brought me here and out of the flame.
I was almost burnt up already. Surely Love
builds a hotter fire than Hephaestus under Etna.”—

These are the springs of my love. Mark them, lady Moon.

—“He wantonly crazes the maiden out of her bower,
and the bride from her husband’s bed while it’s still warm.”

—

He’d the gift of the gab. And I didn’t need persuading.
I took his hand, pulled him down on the soft bed.
Skin to bare skin our bodies flowered, our faces
were on fire, and our whispers were as sweet as honey.
And not to make too long a story of it, dear Moon,
we achieved it all, came both to our desire.

Till the other day he'd no fault to find with me
any more than I with him. But today Philista's
mother (the flute-girl's) and Melixo's came
to see me early, Dawn pink in the sky,
with lots of stories—and that Delphis is in love.
She wasn't sure, she said, whether it was a woman
or a man, but all the evening he kept calling
for unmixed wine for a toast to Love, and he went off
in a tearing hurry, to garland that house, he said.
That's what my friend told me, and she's trustworthy.
And indeed he would come to me three or four times a day
and would even leave his precious oil-flask with me,
but now it's eleven days since I've even seen him.
He *must* have another fancy, and I'm forgotten.

Now with these love-spells I'll bind him. But if he hurts me
it's the door of Death, please Fate, he'll be knocking at.
I've bad drugs in my chest, Mistress, things I bought
from an eastern pedlar, who taught me how to use them.

But away, Lady, bend your team to Ocean
now, and I'll bear my longing as I have borne it.
Good-bye, Moon on your shining throne. Good-bye
you other stars that ride with the quiet night.