Bad Girls: The Role of the *Mala* in Ancient Greek and Roman Literature

In this paper, I define the characteristics of the *mala* and document the ways in which the language of power and control is used with *malae* in Plautus' *Casina*; the elegies of Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid; and Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*. Despite the fact that the *mala* is one of the most pervasive characters in classical literature, this paper is the first to look specifically at the figure of the *mala* as a distinct character type that is defined by her participation in the transaction of advice giving.

Other articles that have had similar goals include Arthur Wheeler's two-part article, which explores the topic of erotic teaching although it mainly focuses on Roman elegy and a wider selection of Greek sources, whereas this paper places the greatest emphasis on Roman comedy. Wheeler's article examines the process of erotic didacticism, which is more limited in its scope than the process of advice giving, which covers a wide variety of advice both erotic and nonerotic. In addition, he does not address how this process causes women to be labeled as "bad" or the concept of the *mala*. Both Sharon James' article, "The Economics of Roman Elegy: Voluntary Poverty, the *Recusatio*, and the Greedy Girl" and "*Ipsa Dixerat*: Women's Words in Roman Love Elegy," address the similarity in the speech of many elegiac women. However, in the first article, instead of attributing this pattern in the speech of elegiac women to the process of advice giving which promotes the same basic set of instructions across several genres, James claims that they are characteristics driven by their profession as sex workers, not individual character flaws (*The Economics of Roman Elegy* 225). In the second article, James acknowledges the process of advice giving, but does not focus on it. She notes that all these courtesans follow the advice of Dipsas and Acanthis *(Ipsa Dixerat* 315). While this paper shares many similar areas of discussion, it omits any detailed discussion of the process of advice giving.

The figure of the *mala* or "bad woman" is present in much of Ancient Greek and Latin literature. In this context, being a *mala* means being a woman who participates in the process where an older woman advises a younger woman about how to profit from men who will pay to sleep with her. The *mala* assumes many different forms from the *lena* (madam) and the *puella* (girl) of Roman love elegy to the ἑταίρα (courtesan) of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* and is also present in Roman comedy. Although *mala* is a Latin word, Lucian's work provides examples of the same type of "bad women" who advise other women how to profit from their lovers. The characteristics of the *mala* that are present in all of these genres highlight the fact that this character is an important vehicle for expressing cultural anxieties surrounding women. This paper focuses on defining the characteristics of the *mala* in these different literary contexts and genres and documenting the ways in which the language of power and control is used with *mala*e. Above all, power characterizes the *mala*. She has power over men, language, and worst of all, she has the power to transform other girls into *malae* through her teaching.

This paper brings cultural specificity to a seemingly generic concept by examining this specific definition of "bad." Examining the process of advice giving and establishing the *mala* as a character type provides a new way of understanding many major genres of both Greek and Roman literature and the anxieties that drive these texts.

Select Bibliography:

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