CHAPTER TEN

INVERSION, ADVERSION AND PERSION AS STRATEGIES IN LATIN CURSE-TABLETS

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Four of the curse-tablets from the temple of Isis and Mater Magna in Mainz presented earlier in this volume by Jürgen Blänsdorf, and securely dated between 70 and 130 CE,¹ use compound forms of the verb *vertere* in idiosyncratic ways that suggest that their authors were improvising new uses for familiar ‘persuasive analogy’ formulas. In most cases the change in strategy seems to involve a shift away from the traditional concrete understanding of the trope (to invert or reverse the victim’s body, mind or speech) to a more abstract one that takes greater account of the figurative meanings of these compound words, namely personal hostility, bad luck and even death. Alerted to this development by Professor Blänsdorf’s publication of the Mainz texts, we began to look for similar cases in the published literature. Of the total of nine we found, six (including the four from Mainz) are located in Germania Superior, the others are widely scattered between central Italy, western Aquitania and the middle Danube. We also found three other analogous texts, equally scattered in space, from Carthage, Poetovio and the Brenner Pass area. This wide distribution of analogous strategies suggests that the phenomenon is independent of hand-books or models and represents the spontaneous adaptation of an image of reversal drawing on stock-phrases such as *mentem* or *animum avertere*, to alienate someone’s sympathies but also to drive someone mad or distracted, or *aversus esse a*, to be hostile to, to be strongly opposed to. As so often, areas already worked for tropes and figures in a given culture prove most productive in the creation of new

ones. We thus have two primary interests in this material: first, what does it imply about how curse-patterns developed in the Latin-speaking West; and second, what does it suggest about the relation between standard locutions, especially figurative usages, and curses formalised or solemnised by means of a ritual performance?

One of the new texts from Mainz curses a man named Ulattius Severus, who is alleged to have defrauded Florus of some goods (Text 1). In apparent response to this crime the wife of Florus inscribed a lead tablet with a ‘prayer for justice’ and deposited it in the sanctuary of Isis and the Mater Magna. Her prayer includes the following phrase (ll. 5–8):

\[
\text{quemadmodum} \\
\text{hoc ego averse scribo, sic illi} \\
\text{(rev.) omnia, quidquid agit, quidquid aginat, omnia illi aversa fiant.}
\]

Just as I write this in a hostile way, so may everything, whatever he does, whatever he attempts, everything go awry for him.4

The phrase \textit{aversa scribo} is unattested in other Latin curse-tablets, and the editor’s suggestion that it be translated ‘I write this in a hostile way’ is well within the range of Latin figurative usage (see n. 31 below). In the traditional language of the curses, however, verbs for writing or inscribing with a strong deictic emphasis (note the use of \textit{ego} and \textit{hoc} here) usually refer concretely to the act of inscribing the tablet. One would expect, therefore, that the phrase \textit{aversa scribo} should refer to the manner in which the victim’s name is inscribed on the surface of the tablet. In the Greek world, for example, we occasionally find formulas calling attention to the fact that the victim’s name or the entire text is inscribed backwards, such as in this IVª curse from Athens (\textit{DTAtt} 67): “Just as the words are cold and reversed (ἐπαρίστερα, lit. written right to left), so too may the words of Krates be cold and reversed”.5

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2 For the concept of ‘persuasive analogy’ (magic = good rhetoric) as opposed to ‘sympathy’ (magic = bad science), see Faraone 1991, 8.

3 Inv. no. 1.29 = Blänsdorf no. 7 here (p. 172). In Blänsdorf 2005, 21 n. 26, he translated the first phrase differently as “Just as I write this backwards…..” The definitive text will be published as DTM 3.

4 The translation is taken over from Blänsdorf.

5 Here the words are ‘cold’ because they are inscribed in lead and ‘reversed’ from the usual direction of writing (left to right). Another good example is a curse of similar date said to be from Dekeleia in Attica (\textit{SGD I}, no. 40): “Just as these things (i.e. the letters) are backwards so too may things be backwards for her” (ὡσπερ τοῦτο