

# LESBIANTIQUITY

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**HERMES  
TRISMEGISTUS**

**SHE'LL BE LOVED  
BY A FRICATRIX**

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Hermes Trismegistus translation, introduction, and notes © Rachel Hart 2024

Latin text from: Wilhelm Gundel, ed., *Neue astrologische Texte des Hermes Trismegistos: Funde und Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der antiken Astronomie und Astrologie* (Munich: Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1936)

Back cover art: 'Astrologer' © Emily Setzer 2024

## THE TRANSLATOR

### Dr Rachel Hart

Most recently I was a lecturer at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, where I created and taught Classics courses on subjects including Near Eastern literature, food and drink, and warfare. My scholarly research focuses on various aspects of social identity in the ancient world, as well as violence in literary and visual culture. I am currently starting my post-academic life in El Paso with my partner and our son.



## HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

Hermes Trismegistus is the name given to the author of a series of wisdom texts written in antiquity, though he himself is most likely a legendary figure rather than historical. Today he is remembered largely as a father of alchemy and esoteric studies. In antiquity, Hermes Trismegistus was a syncretized combination of Greek and Egyptian deities, mainly Hermes (Greek god of messages and secrecy, among other things) and Thoth (Egyptian god of writing and magic). Hellenized Egyptians recognized the similarities in these two deities, combining them into a singular figure.

In keeping with this origin, Hermes Trismegistus is said to be the author of a variety of texts, collectively called the *Hermetica* or the *Book of Hermes Trismegistus*. These texts were collected together during the seventh century AD and include elements that date as early as the second century BC.<sup>1</sup> The author(s) of the *Hermetica* show clear knowledge of both Greek philosophical traditions and Egyptian wisdom literature, reflecting the syncretic nature of Hermes Trismegistus. The texts of the *Hermetica* are often separated into two parts: the 'technical' works (on astrology, magic, and alchemy) and the 'philosophical' works (philosophy, religion, cosmology).

The astrological passages below come from the *Liber Hermetis* ('Book of Hermes'), which can be roughly dated to the fourth century AD, though it also contains material from earlier Greek astrologers such as Ptolemy and Manetho, as well as ideas from the Egyptian third century BC.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brooten (1996) p. 130.

<sup>1</sup> Boehringer (2021) p. 255; Brooten (1996) p. 130 n. 52.

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## ROOT & BRANCH READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore  
a variety of options for the text:  
any variants in the original < Greek Latin > texts  
and the various possible meanings in English.

Our translations are rooted in the words  
of the original text, replicating when possible  
word order, root meanings of words, and  
grammatical gender (  $\begin{pmatrix} [n] \\ [f] \\ [m] \end{pmatrix}$  ) of words about people.

You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

## LIBER HERMETIS 80\*

if indeed there is a feminine birth, she will be  $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{profane} \\ \text{incestuous} \end{array} \right\rangle$  and very common or a public prostitute and useless [things] in life she will do, just like a man with other women or with concubines  $\left( \begin{array}{c} \text{uniting} \\ \text{coming together} \\ \text{having sex} \end{array} \right)$ .



Si vero nativitas fuerit feminina, incesta fit et valde communis vel meretrix publica et inutilia in vita faciet, tamquam vir aliis mulieribus vel concubinis coiens.

\* Gundel p. 80 ll. 30–32 (also numbered 27, *Codex Harleianus* fol. 31 r. 1).

## NOTES

This passage follows a list of inappropriate social behaviors attributed to men born under a waning moon in the confluence of Venus and Saturn. Such men are unlucky in marriage and children, and their associations (with widows, sexual laborers, servants...) do not support a stable or desirable family life. We are then told the habits of women born under such celestial circumstances.

- *incesta; profane/incestuous*: in its root meaning, *incestus* refers to the quality of being religiously unclean or profane, and sometimes is further specified by context to refer to incest, which is the likely reading here. Brooten (1996 p. 131 n. 57) notes that, for the astrologers, 'incest is impure and illicit' because it ignores social boundaries between family members, especially hierarchical distinctions. There is no sense of power imbalance in the astrologers' discussions of incest, only a collective understanding that it is a type of sexual impurity, where the person born under a given sign will be the initiator in the act (Brooten 1996 p. 131 n. 57).

- *communis; common*: in the sense of 'ordinary', i.e. not of elevated status.
- *meretrix publica; a public prostitute*: *meretrix* is a relatively neutral Latin term for a sexual laborer, compared to the more derogatory *scortum* (Adams 1983 p. 325). Because of this distinction, authors with a heavy moralizing approach tend to use the term *scortum* for all sexual labor to emphasize the distaste they hold for such individuals (Witzke 2015 p. 8). We might expect the astrologers to follow this same pattern of moral superiority; however, Hermes Trismegistus uses *meretrix* to maintain his polite tone while adding the modifier *publica* to specify that he still sees this type of woman as distasteful, a woman laboring in public rather than the relative privacy of a brothel. English translations of terms for sexual laborers often impart anachronistic morality, so I have translated with the most neutral and concise English term that corresponds to the tone of the Latin *meretrix*.

- *aliis mulieribus vel concubinis; with other women or with concubines*: by specifying 'other women' and 'concubines' as distinct from one another, Hermes Trismegistus is again subtly disparaging each category. He suggests that the women born under the given conditions will be lying with 'other' women, emphasizing that two women are involved in the act; surprisingly he does not use language to highlight whether each woman takes an active or a passive role. He separates out 'concubines', marking them as separate from 'other women'. This further deprecates them in his eyes. Notably he does not use a word for sexual labor, such as *meretrix*; *concubina* literally means 'a woman one lies with', but the connotation is nearly always sexual.

- *coiens; coming together / uniting / having sex*: this participle could be masculine or feminine. *Coire* is the most common Latin euphemism for sexual intercourse of all kinds (Adams 1982 pp. 178–9); it is also the source of the English word 'coitus'.

## LIBER HERMETIS 96\*

if in fact Venus  $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{rising} \\ \text{eastern} \end{array} \right\rangle$  touches on dawn, the very same  
 $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{faults} \\ \text{vices} \end{array} \right\rangle$  it makes, in fact, [into] masculine  $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{immodesty} \\ \text{shamelessness} \end{array} \right\rangle$   
because of the manly  $\left( \begin{array}{c} \text{disruption} \\ \text{disturbance} \\ \text{troubling} \end{array} \right)$  of Venus. if however it is a  
woman's birth, she is a *crissatrix* or *fricatrix* and by *fricatrix* women  
she is  $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{loved} \\ \text{held dear} \end{array} \right\rangle$ .



Si vero Venus orientalis eoa contigerit, eadem quidem vitia facit,  
[in] masculinam vero impudicitiam propter virilem Veneris molestiam.  
Si autem mulieris fuerit nativitas, crissatrix sive fricatrix fit et a  
fricatricibus mulieribus diligitur.

\* Gundel p. 96 ll. 24–26 (also numbered 32, *Codex Harleianus* fol. 40 v. ll).

## NOTES

- *eoā contigerit*; *touches on dawn*: i.e. if Venus is the morning star, visible at dawn rather than dusk.
- *molestiam*; *disturbance/disruption/troubling*: any kind of annoyance or disruption. The verbal quality of the term adds a hint of agency to the planet Venus, conflating it with the goddess Venus.
- *crissatrix*: an otherwise unknown term that seems to derive from the verb *crisare*, which Adams states refers to 'the motions of the female in intercourse', i.e. the passive partner (Adams 1982 p. 136). The ending of the term, *-trix*, denotes that this individual is a woman exercising agency over the action of the verb. The combination of a passive activity with a suffix of agency further muddles the boundaries between active and passive roles that we see below with *fricatix*. Brooten (1996 p. 132) translates *crissatrix* as 'thruster', to contrast with 'rubber' (*fricatix*).
- *fricatix*: typically taken to be a Latin translation of the term *tribas*, which has a root meaning associated with rubbing. Adams' *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* omits the terms *fricatix* and *crissatrix* from its study (Boehringer 2021 p. 255 n. 216). *Fricatrix* derives from *fricare*, 'to rub', and Boehringer (2021 p. 256) translates it as 'woman who has sex with women'. Notably, neither *crissatrix* nor *fricatix* gives any strong sense whether the woman takes an active or a passive role; the *crissatrix* or *fricatix* has intercourse with women labeled in the same way as herself. In this passage, the disparaging quality is that two women are sexually involved with one another, rather than a concern with distinct roles (Boehringer 2021 p. 257). This concept is further highlighted by the addition of *mulieribus*, 'women', when *fricatix* is already a distinctly feminine word.



*Emily Dwyer*

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