

Winged, Black, Dripping Descents: The Monstrous Feminine Death in Early Greek Religion

Translations of the *Iliad* are from Murray/Wyatt, the *Odyssey* from Murray/Dimock and of Hesiod from Most; with some amendments.

1. Death of Sarpedon; Hom. *Il.* 16.453-457.

αὐτὰρ ἔπην δὴ τὸν γε λίπη ψυχὴ τε καὶ αἰὼν,
πέμπειν μιν Θάνατόν τε φέρειν καὶ νῆδυμον Ὑπνον,
εἰς ὃ κε δὴ Λυκίης εὐρείης δῆμον ἴκωνται,
ἔνθα ἔ παρχύσουσι κασίγνητοὶ τε ἔται τε
τύμβωι καὶ στήλῃι

But when his soul and life have left him, send Thanatos and sweet Hypnos to carry him away until they come to the land of wide Lycia; and there will his brothers and his kinspeople give him burial with mound and pillar; for this is the privilege of the dead.

2. Birth of Thanatos; Hes. *Th.* 211-212.

Νύχ δ' ἔτεκε στυγερὸν τε Μόρον καὶ Κῆρα μέλαιναν
καὶ Θάνατον, τέκε δ' Ὑπνον, ἔτικε δὲ φύλον Ὀνειρώων.

Night bore loathsome Doom and black Fate (*Ker*) and Death (*Thanatos*), and she bore Sleep (*Hypnos*), and she gave birth to the tribe of Dreams.

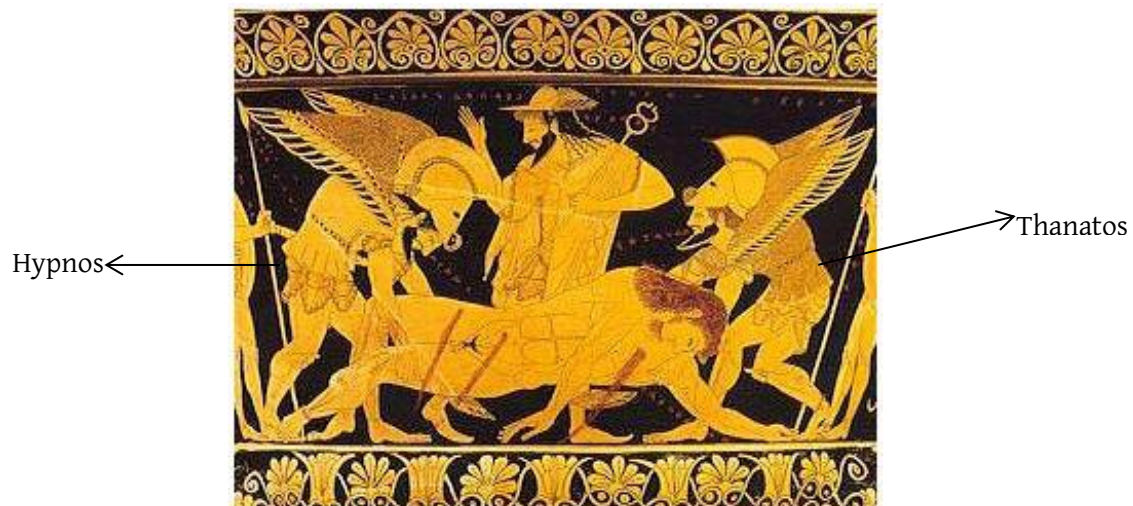
3. Houses of Sleep and Death; Hes. *Th.* 755-761.

ἡ μὲν ἐπιχθονίοισι φάος πολυδερκές ἔχουσα,
ἡ δ' Ὑπνον μετὰ χερσὶ, κασίγνητον Θανάτοιο.
Νύξ ὀλοή, νεφέλη κεκαλυμμένη ἠεροειδεῖ.
ἔνθα δὲ Νυκτὸς παῖδες ἐρεμνῆς οἰκί' ἔχουσιν,
Ὑπνος καὶ Θάνατος, δεινοὶ θεοὶ· οὐδέ ποτ' αὐτοὺς
Ἥλιος φαέθων ἐπιδέρκεται ἀκτίνεσσιν
οὐρανὸν εἰς ἀνίων οὐδ' οὐρανόθεν καταβαίνων.

The one holds much seeing light for those on earth, but the other holds Sleep (*Hypnos*) in her hands the brother of Death (*Thanatos*) – deadly Night, shrouded in murky cloud.

That is where the children of dark Night have their houses, Sleep (*Hypnos*) and Death (*Thanatos*), terrible gods; never does the bright Sun look upon them with his rays when he goes up into the sky nor when he comes back down from the sky.

4. Thanatos and Hypnos carrying the body of Sarpedon; Attik red-figure krater, c. 515BCE.



5. Ker on the battlefield. Hom. *Il.* 18.535-538.

ἐν δ' Ἐρις ἐν δὲ Κυδοιμὸς ὀμίλειον, ἐν δ' ὀλον Κῆρ,
ἄλλον ζῶον ἔχουσα νεούτατον, ἄλλον ἄουτον,
ἄλλον τεθνηῶτα κατὰ μόθον ἔλκε ποδῖιν·
εἶμα δ' ἔχ' ἀμφ' ὤμοισι δαφνοειδὲν αἵματι φωτῶν.

And among them Strife and Tumult joined, and destructive Ker, grasping one man alive, fresh-wounded, another without a wound, and another she dragged dead though the melee by the feet; and the raiment that she had about her shoulders was red with the blood of men.

6. Ker on the battlefield. Hes. *Sh.* 154-160.

ἐν δὲ Προΐωξις τε Παλίωξις τε τέτυκτο,
ἐν δ' Ὀμαδός τε Φόβος τ' Ἄνδροκτασίη τε δεδήει,
ἐν δ' Ἐρις, ἐν δὲ Κυδοιμὸς ἐθύνεον, ἐν δ' ὀλοὴ Κῆρ
ἄλλον ζῶον ἔχουσα νεούτατον, ἄλλον ἄουτον,
ἄλλον τεθνηῶτα κατὰ μόθον ἔλκε ποδοῖν.
εἶμα δ' ἔχ' ἄμφ' ὠμοῖσι δαφοινεὸν αἶματι φωτῶν,
δεινὸν δερκομένη καναχησί τε βεβρυχυῖα.

Upon it were wrought Pursuit and Rally; upon it burned
Tumult and Murder and Slaughter; upon it was Strife, upon it
rushed Battle-Din, upon it deadly Ker was dragging men by
the feet though the battle, holding one who was alive but
freshly wounded, another who was unwounded, another who
had died. Around her shoulders she wore a cloak, purple with
the blood of men, and she glared terribly and bellowed with a
clanging sound.

7. Ker on the battlefield. Hes. *Sh.* 248-257.

αἱ δὲ μετ' αὐτοῦς
Κῆρες κυάνεαι, λευκοὺς ἀραβεῦσαι ὀδόντας,
δεινωπαὶ βλοσυραὶ τε δαφοιναὶ τ' ἀπληταὶ τε
δηρὴν ἔχον περὶ πιπτόντων· πᾶσαι δ' ἄρ' ἴεντο
αἶμα μέλαν πιέειν· ὄν δὲ πρῶτον μεμάποιεν
κείμενον ἢ πίπτοντα νεούτατον, ἀμφὶ μὲν αὐτῶ
βάλλ' ὄνυχας μεγάλους, ψυχὴ δ' Αἰδόςδε κατην
Τάρταρον ἐς κρυόεθ'. αἱ δὲ φρένας εὐτ' ἀρέσαντο
αἶματος ἀνδρομέου, τὸν μὲν ρίπτασκον ὀπίσσω,
ἅψ δ' ὄμαδον καὶ μῶλον ἐθύνεον αὐτίς ἰοῦσαι.

Behind them, the dark Keres, gnashing their white teeth,
terrible-faced, grim, blood-red, dreadful, were engaged in
conflict around those who were falling. They were all eager to
drink black blood. Whomever they caught first, lying there or
falling freshly wounded, she clenched around him her great
claws, and his soul went down to Hades to chilling Tartarus.
When they had satisfied their spirits with human blood, they
would hurl him backwards, and going forward they would
rush once again into the battle din and melee.

8. Ker; Lucanian red-figure krater, c. 4th century BCE.



9a. Patroklos' ghost; Hom. *Il.* 3-77-79.

οὐ μὲν γὰρ ζωοὶ γε φίλων ἀπάνευθεν ἀταίρων
βουλάς ἐζόμενοι βουλευόμεν, ἀλλ' ἐμὲ μὲν κῆρ
ἀμφέχανε στυγερῆ, ἣ περ λάχε γιγνόμενον περ

Never more in life will we sit apart from our dear comrades
and take council together, but loathsome ker has gaped
around me, the fate that was appointed me even from my
birth.

'The verb that is used, *amphichainō*, indicates that when Ker opens her mouth to swallow you, she sends you back to the original abyss.'

Vernant, J.-P. (1991), 'Feminine Figures of Death in Greece', in F.I. Zeitlin (ed.), *Mortals and Immortals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 98.

'The *ker* swallowed Patroklos with the rare verb *amphichasko*, like the dragon-child who sucked at Klytaimnestra's breast in Aischylos (*Choephoroi* 545), mixing mother's milk with clots of blood, for the *ker*'s nature is mixed with life and death.'

Vermeule, E. (1979), *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 40.

'By ἀμφέχανε, 'yawned', 'gaped', he must mean that the Ker opened her mouth to seize him like some monstrous beast. Several times we hear that the Keres carry dying men away, κῆρες ἔβαν θανάτοιο φέρουσαι (II. 302; xiv. 207), just as on the Shield of Achilles they drag the corpse to and fro.'

Clarke, M. (1999), *Flesh and Spirit in the Songs of Homer: A Study of Words and Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 249.

10. Skylla; Hom. *Od.* 12.85-97

ἔνθα δ' ἐνὶ Σκύλλῃ ναίει δεινὸν λελακυῖα.
τῆς ἧ τοὶ φωνὴ μὲν ὅση σκύλακος νεογιλῆς
γίγνεται, αὐτῆ δ' αὐτὴ πέλωρ κακόν· οὐδέ κέ τις μιν
γηθήσειεν ἰδὼν, οὐδ' εἰ θεὸς ἀντιάσειεν.
τῆς ἧ τοὶ πόδες εἰσὶ δώδεκα πάντες ἄωροι,
ἕξ δέ τε οἱ δειραὶ περιμήκεες, ἐν δὲ ἑκάστη
σμερδαλέῃ κεφαλῇ, ἐν δὲ τρίστοιχοὶ ὀδόντες
πυκνοὶ καὶ θαμέες, πλείοι μέλανος θανάτοιο.
μέσση μὲν τε κατὰ σπέιους κώλοιο δέδυκεν,
ἕξω δ' ἐξίσχει κεφαλὰς δεινοῖο βερέθρου,
αὐτοῦ δ' ἰχθυάα, σκόπελον περιμαιώωσα,
δελφίνας τε κύνας τε, καὶ εἴ ποθι μείζον ἔλῃσι
κῆτος, ἃ μυρία βόσκει ἀγάστονος Ἀμφιτρίτη.

In it dwells Skylla, yelping terribly. Her voice to be sure is only as loud as the voice of a newborn whelp, but she herself is an evil monster, nor would anyone be glad at the sight of her, not even though it should be a god that met her. She has, you must know, twelve legs, all flexible, and six necks, exceedingly long, and on each one a frightful head, and in it three rows of teeth, thick and close, full of black death. Up to her middle she is hidden in the hollow cave, but she holds her head out beyond the dread chasm, and fishes there, eagerly searching around the rock for dolphins and sea dogs and whatever greater beast she may happen to catch, such creatures as deep-moaning Amphitrite rears in multitudes past counting.

Select Bibliography

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