

Who decides your time to die? Fate and Doom in early Greek literature

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

1. *kerostasia* of Hektor and Achilleus. Hom. *Il.* 22.208-213

ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ τὸ τέταρτον ἐπὶ κρουνοὺς ἀφίκοντο,
καὶ τότε δὴ χρύσεια πατὴρ ἐτίταινε τάλαντα,
ἐν δ' ἐτίθει δύο κῆρε τανηλεγέος θανάτοιο,
τὴν μὲν Ἀχιλλῆος, τὴν δ' Ἑκτορος ἵπποδάμοιο,
ἔλκε δὲ μέσσα λαβῶν· ῥέπε δ' Ἑκτορος αἴσιμον
ἦμαρ,
ᾧχετο δ' εἰς Αἴδαο, λίπεν δέ εἰ Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων.

But when for the fourth time they had come to the springs, then it was that the father lifted up his golden scales, and set in them two *keres* of grievous death, one for Achilleus, and one for horse-taming Hektor; then he grasped the balance by the middle and raised it; and down sank the day of doom of Hektor and went away to Haides; and Phoebus Apollo left him.

2. *kerostasia* of Trojans and Achaeans. Hom. *Il.* 8.69-74.

καὶ τότε δὴ χρύσεια πατὴρ ἐτίταινε τάλαντα·
ἐν δ' ἐτίθει δύο κῆρε τανηλεγέος θανάτοιο
Τρώων θ' ἵπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,
ἔλκε δὲ μέσσα λαβῶν· ῥέπε δ' αἴσιμον ἦμαρ Ἀχαιῶν.
αἱ μὲν Ἀχαιῶν κῆρες ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ
ἐξέσθην, Τρώων δὲ πρὸς οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἄερθεν·

...then it was that the Father lifted up his golden scales, and set in them two fates of grievous death, one for the horse-taming Trojans, and one for the bronze-clad Achaeans; then he grasped the balance by the middle and raised it, and down sank the day of doom of the Achaeans. So the Achaeans' fates settled down on to the bounteous earth and those of the Trojans were raised aloft toward wide heaven.

3. Thetis petitions Zeus on behalf of Achilleus Hom. *Il.* 1.520-527.

ἦοὺς δὴ καὶ μᾶλλον ὑπερμενέα Κρονίωνα
ὄψεαι, αἳ κ' ἐθέλησθα, βοῶπις πόντια Ἥρη,
ὀλλύντ' Ἀργείων πουλὺν στρατὸν αἰχμητῶν·
οὐ γὰρ πρὶν πολέμου ἀποπαύσεται ὄβριμος Ἑκτωρ,
πρὶν ὄρθαι παρὰ ναῦφι ποδώκεα Πηλεΐωνα,
ἦματι τῷ ὅτ' ἂν οἱ μὲν ἐπὶ πρύμνησι μάχωνται
στείνει ἐν αἰνοτάτῳ περὶ Πατρόκλοιο θανόντος,
ὥς γὰρ θέσφατόν ἐστι.

As it is [Hera] constantly reproaches me among the immortal gods, and says that I aid the Trojans in the fighting. But now go back again, in case Hera notices something: and I will take thought to bring these things to pass. Come now, I will bow my head to you, so that you may be certain, for this from me is the surest token among the immortals; no word of mine may be recalled, nor is false, nor unfulfilled, once I bow my head to it.

4. Zeus' prophesy. Hom. *Il.* 8. 470-477.

ἦ δὲ καὶ αὐτῶς μ' αἰεὶ ἐν ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι
νεικεῖ, καὶ τέ μέ φησι μάχῃ Τρώεσσιν ἀρήγειν.
ἀλλὰ σὺ μὲν νῦν αὐτίς ἀπόστιχε μή τι νοήσῃ
Ἥρη· ἐμοὶ δὲ κε ταῦτα μελήσεται ὄφρα τελέσω·

At dawn you will see, if you wish, ox-eyed queenly Hera, the most mighty son of Kronos wreaking more destruction on the great army of Argive spearmen; for

<p>εἰ δ' ἄγε τοι κεφαλὴ κατανεύσομαι ὄφρα πεποιίθης· τοῦτο γὰρ ἐξ ἐμέθεν γε μετ' ἀθανάτοισι μέγιστον τέκμων· οὐ γὰρ ἐμὸν παλινάγρετον οὐδ' ἀπατηλὸν οὐδ' ἀτελεύτητον ὅ τί κεν κεφαλὴ κατανεύσω.</p>	<p>mighty Hektor will not refrain from battle until the swift-footed son of Peleus has been stirred to action beside his ships on the day when at the sterns of the ships they will be fighting in most dreadful straits over the dead Patroklos; for so it is ordained.</p>
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5. Hektor's address to the Trojans. Hom. *Il.* 8.526-527.

<p>εὐχομαι ἐλπόμενος Δί τ' ἄλλοισίν τε θεοῖσιν ἐξελάαν ἐνθένδε κύνας κηρессиφορήτους, οὓς κῆρες φορέουσι μελαινάων ἐπὶ νηῶν.</p>	<p>I pray in high hope to Zeus and the other gods to drive out from here these dogs borne by the fates, whom the fates brought on their black ships.</p>
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6. Ker on the battlefield. Hom. *Il.* 18.535-538.

<p>ἐν δ' Ἔρις ἐν δὲ Κυδοιμὸς ὀμίλειον, ἐν δ' ὄλον Κῆρ, ἄλλον ζῶν ἔχουσα νεούτατον, ἄλλον ἄουτον, ἄλλον τεθνηῶτα κατὰ μόθον ἔλκε ποδιῖν· εἶμα δ' ἔχ' ἀμφ' ὤμοισι δαφοινεὸν αἵματι φωτῶν.</p>	<p>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.</p>
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7. Ker on the battlefield. Hes. *Sh.* 154-160.

<p>ἐν δὲ Προίωξις τε Παλίωξις τε τέτυκτο, ἐν δ' Ὀμαδός τε Φόβος τ' Ἄνδροκτασίη τε δεδήει, ἐν δ' Ἔρις, ἐν δὲ Κυδοιμὸς ἐθύνεον, ἐν δ' ὀλοῆ Κῆρ ἄλλον ζῶν ἔχουσα νεούτατον, ἄλλον ἄουτον, ἄλλον τεθνηῶτα κατὰ μόθον ἔλκε ποδοῖιν. εἶμα δ' ἔχ' ἀμφ' ὤμοισι δαφοινεὸν αἵματι φωτῶν, δεινὸν δερκομένη καναχησί τε βεβρυχηῖα.</p>	<p>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.</p>
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8. Ker on the battlefield. Hes. *Sh.* 248-257.

<p>αἱ δὲ μετ' αὐτοῦς Κῆρες κυάνεαι, λευκοὺς ἀραβεῦσαι ὀδόντας, δεινωπαὶ βλοσυραὶ τε δαφοναὶ τ' ἀπληταὶ τε δηριν ἔχον περὶ πιπτόντων· πᾶσαι δ' ἄρ' ἴεντο αἶμα μέλαν πίειν· ὃν δὲ πρῶτον μεμάποιεν κείμενον ἢ πίπτοντα νεούτατον, ἀμφὶ μὲν αὐτῶ βάλλ' ὄνυχας μεγάλους, ψυχὴ δ' Αἰδόςδε κατηεν Τάρταρον ἐς κρυόενθ'. αἱ δὲ φρένας εὐτ' ἀρέσαντο αἵματος ἀνδρομέου, τὸν μὲν ρίπτασκον ὀπίσσω, ἅψ δ' Ὀμαδὸν καὶ μῶλον ἐθύνεον αὐτίς ἰοῦσαι.</p>	<p>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.</p>
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9. Patroklos' ghost; Hom. *Il.* 3-77-79.

οὐ μὲν γὰρ ζῶοι γε φίλων ἀπάνευθεν ἀταίρων
βουλάς ἐζόμενοι βουλευόμεν, ἀλλ' ἐμὲ μὲν κῆρ
ἀμφέχανε στυγερή, ἣ περ λάχε γιγνόμενόν 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 ἦ τοι φωνὴ μὲν ὅση σκύλακος νεογιλῆς
γίγνεται, αὐτὴ δ' αὖτε πέλωρ κακόν· οὐδέ κέ τις μιν
γηθήσειεν ἰδὼν, οὐδ' εἰ θεὸς ἀντιάσειεν.
τῆς ἦ τοι πόδες εἰσὶ δώδεκα πάντες ἄωροι,
ἔξ δέ τέ οἱ δειραὶ περιμήκεες, ἐν δὲ ἑκάστη
σμερδαλέη κεφαλὴ, ἐν δὲ τριστοιχοὶ ὀδόντες
πυκνοὶ καὶ θαμέες, πλεῖοι μέλανος θανάτοιο.
μέσση μὲν τε κατὰ σπείους κοίλοιο δέδυκεν,
ἔξω δ' ἐξίσχει κεφαλὰς δεινοῖο βερέθρου,
αὐτοῦ δ' ἰχθυάα, σκόπελον περιμαιμώωσα,
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.

10a. Birth of (Titanic) Moirai in Hesiod; *Th.* 217-22. *Trans. Most, with amendments.*

καὶ Μοίρας καὶ Κῆρας ἐγείνατο νηλεποίνους,
Κλωθῶ τε Λάχεσιν τε καὶ Ἀτροπον, αἵ τε βροτιῶσι
γεινομένοισι διδοῦσιν ἔχειν ἐγαθόν τε κακόν τε,
αἵ τ' ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε παραιβασίας ἐφέπουσιν,

And she bore Fates and pitilessly punishing Dooms, Klotho and Lachesis and Atropos, who give to mortals when they are born both good and evil to have, and who

οὐδε. Ποτε λη.γουσι θεαὶ δεινοῖο χόλοιο, πρίν γ' ἀπὸ τῶ δῶωσι κακὴν ὄπιν, ὅσις ἀμάρτη	hold fast to the transgressions of both men and gods; and the goddesses never cease from their terrible wrath until they give evil punishment to whoever commits a crime.
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10b. Birth of (Ouranic) Moirai in Hesiod; *Th.* 904-906. *Trans. Most.*

Μοίρας θ', ἧς πλείστην τιμὴν πο.ρε μητίετα Ζεὺς, Κλωθῶ τε Λάχεσιν τε καὶ Ἀτροπον, αἵ τε διδοῦσι θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποισιν ἔχειν ἀγαθόν τε κακόν τε.	And the Fates, upon whom the counsellor Zeus bestowed the greatest honour, Klotho and Lachesis and Atropos, who give to mortal human beings both good and evil.
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11. The Descent of Peirithous to Hades. *Hes. fr.* 216.1-4 (Most).

..... ὀλ]έσαι με βίηφι τε δουρί μακρῶι, ἀλλά με Μοῖρ' ὀλο]ῆ καὶ Λητοῦς ὤλεσε[ς υἱός. ἀλλ' ἄγε δὴ μοι ταῦα δι]αμπερέως ἀγό[ρρασον·]νδε κατήλυθες [εἰς Ἄϊδαο]to destroy me by force and a long spear But <u>deadly Fate</u>] and Leto's son destroyed [me. But now come and] tell [me this] through and through] you have descended [into Hades
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