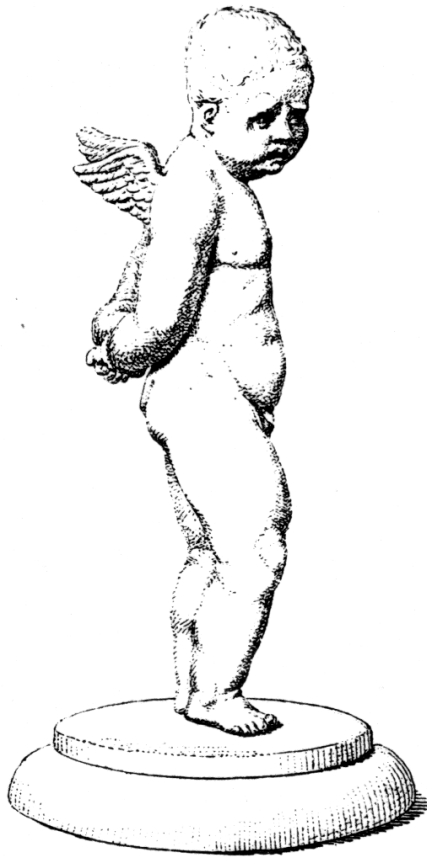


Junkyard of the Classics

Junkyard of the Classics



Ellipsis Marx



Invisible Books

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Introduction

Over the last twenty years I wrote a few books under the impression I would be a classical philologist if I grew up. But even though I earned an Ivy League Classics Ph.D., cranked out scholarly books and articles, and otherwise played by the rules, I have been carefully excluded, for two decades, from jobs and academic publication — my works are not even accorded a mention in the bibliographies of “respectable” scholars.

The reason is quite simple: I have written candidly, clearly, and though I say it myself who shouldn’t, *entertainingly* on the subjects of sex and witchcraft in the ancient world.

This ostracism has proved to be a blessing. Had my work been accepted, I would likely have spent the rest of my days splashing happily in the shallow backwater Philology has become. I’d have jostled with other scholars about halfway-daring ideas, and taught well-attended silly survey courses to dazed undergrads.

But, rebuffed by the the exclusive gentleman’s club that is classical philology, I went on to study the classical heritage in full, from its roots in Egypt to its final development in Aquinas and Ibn Arabi. I examined first-hand the grand hermetic adventure that was the classics, from which philologists have been quietly dissociating themselves ever since the Renaissance. I would never have learned Hebrew or Egyptian had I been concerned with herding every dust-bunny that’s collected under the *Aeneid*. “Seek knowlege even unto China,” said the Prophet.

If my fellow scholars had followed my lead, (only without the bloodhounds, torches and lynching rope) Classics might not be a rapidly vanishing field today. Which is quite a pity, since a real background in classics is an unsurpassable preparation for anything — except perhaps a career as a classicist.

Be it so. As for me, driven from the scholarly microcosm into the wider world, I was not tempted to write more than is here contained on the strictly Greco-Roman classics. This is a book of odds and ends, a scrap-heap of minor finds and amusing detours. Though none of it is existentially important, I feel I have usefully filled in a few gaps in our knowlege of the ancient world. I have, so to speak, darned the socks of antiquity.

So I offer here the wreckage left from my official career as a philologist, now happily purged of the *scholarly apparatus* that sat on the body of my work about as handsomely and helpfully as a hernia truss on a statue of Apollo. No loss: that material was only intelligible to the sort of people who no longer have a claim to my consideration.

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The valuable content of my books is given here in full, and the conclusions presented supercede those offered in previous editions of the material by the publishers *Spring* and *Autonopedia*.

Catullus

Catullus

Back in 1991 I published the complete poetical works of Catullus. I then believed less cautiously in the value of all the Classical authors, and of this author in particular.

Catullus, born about 80 BC, died before he was thirty, and never had a chance to revise his manuscripts, nor did he mean for most of the poems to be published. I am keeping here the best of poems. The unpolished ones and the less successful treatments of individual themes may be omitted.

Catullus had several great achievements. The one which makes him seem most “modern” was his use of an extremely personal and private voice — an innovation in Roman poetry.

His love lyrics to Lesbia, on the other hand, are reminiscent of nineteenth-century decadent poetry (Poe, Baudelaire, Dowson), and will strike most readers as “real poetry.”

Then there are the miniature epics, in which Catullus competes with the Alexandrian Greeks in reworking mythological subjects. Here Catullus brings a barbarous vitality to the material. In his hands the over-elaboration of Alexandrian poetry becomes intoxicating rather than stupefying.

But most memorable, and not least brilliant, are the insult poems; still funny after 2,000 years. Personally, I have always rated a good laugh over a great truth, or I would have, had I thought there was some important difference.

I was nearly thrown out of grad school for translating these — lost my funding for a year till I demonstrated sufficient contrition. It is refreshing to note that at least some people still take poetry seriously!

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The Colonia Bridge

Colonia, I know you want to have a festival procession along that long bridge of yours. You're all set to go bounding over it —
but the bridge shakes in apprehension on its bandylegged trestles
patched and propped with odd lumber scraps.
It's afraid of falling back-flat into deep swamp.

I personally hope your bridge'll be so good to you it could even stand up to the priests of Mars
hopping and howling the war-dance all across it.
— In return for these good wishes of mine, I'd like, as a favor, a good laugh.

Could it be arranged for one of my fellow citizens to slip from the bridge, sail over the side and head-first under the mud
at the deepest point in that whole semi-liquid lake where the rotting marsh achieves its richest shade of oily blue-black?

The guy's a jerk. He's about as knowing as a two-year-old asleep in his father's rocking arms.

Now he's married a young girl, a glory of innocent freshness, a flower,
a girl as daintysoft as a baby goat,
a girl deserving more painstaking protection than the rich dark grapes perfecting on the vine.

Yet he lets her play where she pleases, he doesn't care, doesn't bestir himself

any more than an axe-hacked hunk of log half sunk in a greenmantled standing pool.

The numbskull sees, hears nothing, doesn't know what, or if, he is.
So shake him out of that dullness, pitch him off, O bridge;
have him leave his former sluggish life behind in that thick slime
as a mule might lose its iron shoe in sucking mud.

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Camerius' Friend

Camerius, if it isn't too much trouble, I'd really like to know where you're hiding out these days.

I looked for you at the racetrack, the bookstores, Jupiter's temple, Pompey's theater —

I stopped all the girls, demanded your whereabouts — they denied any knowledge, faces calm with innocence.

I wasn't satisfied. "You tramps," I pressed, "where's Camerius? I know you know!"

One of them opened her blouse and said:

"Here he is, hiding between my tits!"

Camerius, old buddy, being your friend is a labor of Hercules

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The Door

Catullus:

Door, ever a pleasure to old Balbus, when the house was his,
Door, that was always nice to his sweet son Caecilius, now just
married. Door, Jove bless your every hinge!

Everyone had a good word for the way you opened to Balbus
— tho' the word is you aren't guarding his son very well.

Since the old man was laid to rest and the young heir got himself
married,

you've really let things slide.

Come on, out with it, what's the story behind your change of heart?
why'd you betray your old loyalty?

Door:

As I wish to please Caecilius, who owns me now, I did nothing wrong
— whatever people say!

But whenever folks are angry, they slam the door!

Whatever's wrong, it's the door's fault!

Catullus:

Could you be a little more explicit?

Door:

Can I? No one wants the trouble of learning about things they're
already sure they know.

Catullus:

I'm honestly interested. Don't worry, just tell.

Door:

Well, for a start, that “virgin bride” of Caecilius's was already married
once.

Not that her first husband ever touched her — his weak little prick
dangled like a rotten carrot. It never raised its head belt high.

But they say his father broke into the bedroom (a disgrace to the
whole unhappy house),

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either because his wicked brains were stewed with lust, or because his
helpless son couldn't plough his own field
and they had to find a prick that packed enough punch to
relieve the girl of her virginity.

Catullus:

A loyal, staunch, upstanding father — who'd piss in his own son's
lap.

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Aemilius

So help me all the gods, I really don't think it makes much difference
if you sniff Aemilius's mouth or his ass.

As far as cleanliness goes, they're quite the same.

If anything, his ass is neater, and nicer,
since it has no teeth, whereas his mouth —

well, they're more like tusks

stuck in gums like split wrinkled rawhide,

and when he smiles —

did you ever see, on a summer's day,

the parted cunt lips of a pissing mule?

Aemilius has fucked plenty of girls, he thinks he's really sharp —

though at first glance I took him for a not very valuable slave,

the sort one employs to drive a donkey that turns a mill

And if any girl could touch him, wouldn't she be the kind

who'd rim a sick executioner?

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Ipsitilla

O please, my sweet Ipsitilla, dear delightsome child, let me come visit you at noon?

You will? And one other thing — be sure no one else is there. Be sure you're at home, leave the door unlocked, get ready

for nine uninterrupted fucks. In fact, why not now? I just had lunch, I'm lolling here, gorged,

practically punching a hole through my toga.

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Flavius

What about your new playmate, Flavius? Unless she's a total dog I don't see how you can help telling.

On the other hand, who knows what kind of hot little whore turns you on?

One thing's for sure, you're not alone at night. So says the cologne you've started using,

and the crumpled blankets on your flattened mattress.

So says your trembling bed, in a squeak, lurching across the floor.

Keeping mum can't mask the facts. Look at the bags under your eyes — you're all fucked out!

So come on, tell me who it is.

I want to glorify your exploits
in elegant, heavenly verse.

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The next group of poems are addressed to Catullus' great love, Lesbia, and to his rivals for her affections.

Lesbia was an older woman, sister of a gangster and a consul's wife, whom Cicero once referred to as a "two-bit Lady Macbeth" (in Latin, a quadrantia Clytemnestra).

Her actual name was Clodia. In a peculiar deference to convention, Catullus spared her reputation by giving her a literary code-name. The name Lesbia refers, of course, to Sappho of Lesbos. To ancient ears the adjective "Lesbian" suggested poetry — which was considered wondrous; not homosexuality — which was considered ordinary.

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Time

The time to live, the time to love, is now. What our parents think about it means nothing to us.

It can't wait. Every morning the sun returns to life —
our light is brief as a day, our night is an endless sleep.

Give me a hundred kisses, a thousand, ten thousand, into the millions, into infinity,

I've got to lose count, lose myself, lose my distrust.

Give me a hundred kisses, a thousand, ten thousand,
if I haven't lost count I know there aren't enough.

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The Sparrow

The Sparrow was, for the ancients, the animal emblem of romantic love. In Greek myth, sparrows drew the chariot of Venus.

Sparrow, my girl's favorite pet, she keeps you in her lap, amused at
you,

lets you attack her fingertip, provokes your sharp little nip.
She's the shining center, the glowing focus
of my life. It pleases her to toy with you,
sweet thing, the play-bites distract her from every sharper pain.

Maybe I could shake this grim feeling I have
if I could play with you as she does — just forget myself and play.

Yakov Rabinovich

The Stars

You want to know how many kisses would be enough for me, Lesbia?
The number of sand grains between the tombs of Libya's ancient
lords and the temples where Egypt worships Jove in the shape of a ram.
The number of stars that watch the furtive
love affairs of humankind
while the night is passing over them in silence.
That's how many would satisfy your crazed Catullus,
What can't be counted can't be an unlucky number.

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Death of a Sparrow

Venus and Cupid, Spirits of Love,
lament; Desires and Passions, mourn;
and all you warmhearted men-about-town,
weep now, for my girlfriend's sparrow is dead,
her darling bird, more precious to her
than sight. It was sweet, and it knew her
as well as she knew her own mother.

It used to stay right in her lap, hopping
about, here and there, chirping only for its mistress.
Now it goes the black path they say none travel back.

Damn you Orcus, ugly shadow!
You swallow every beautiful thing,
you stole my lovely, delightful bird.
A crime! Poor little sparrow!
My girl's in tears,
her eyes are red and faintly swollen.

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Tavern of Fuckers

There's a low dive nine shops down from the temple of Castor and Pollux
where a crowd hangs out who think they own the only dicks extant.
That they're the only ones allowed to screw girls,
that everyone else is a nerd.

Dimwits! Don't you know I've got enough schlong to gag two hundred like you?
Think about it. And afterward I'd scribble your tavernfront
with how I rate you as cocksuckers.

The girl who slipped from my arms
— I loved her. No one will ever love a girl that much —
my hard-conquered lady now resorts to this dump.
All you splendid young aristocrats love her, and, I'm sorry to say,
so do all the grubby little streetcorner sultans who conduct their
amours in alleyways.

But especially you, Egnatius, with your elegantly-cut, long fop's hair,
you son of Celtiberia, land famous only for its rabbits,
who, like your barbarian ancestors, believe a thick beard makes you
lovely,
yes, and teeth that shine from being rinsed in your own piss.

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Egnatius

Egnatius always has a smile, his teeth are sparkling white.
If he's at court to help in a friend's defense,
when the lawyer's making the jury sob,
he grins.

At a funeral, when the groans of the mourners rise with the crackling
of the pyre,
and the widowed mother cries for her lost, only and devoted son—
Egnatius grins.

Whatever the place, whatever the case,
he's got his lips working, the fellow is smirking.
It isn't very nice.
No, and it isn't refined or elegant or smart. It's *sick*.

Therefore, I feel I should warn you:
were you a slick Sabine or a witty Tiburian,
a thrifty Umbrian or a paunchy Etruscan gourmand,
a Lanuvian whose dark skin sets off his smile, a Transpadane like my
ancestors,
or *anyone* who cleans his teeth decently — I still wouldn't wish this
continual grinning.
There's nothing so awkward as misplaced mirth.

Now, you're a Celtiberian. It's a well documented fact that in the
regions of Celtiberia
the custom is to brush the teeth and rub the pink gums with one's
own morning urine.

Thus, we can only conclude that the shine of your teeth
is an accurate indication of how much piss you've drunk.

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Rufus

You really shouldn't be surprised, Rufus, that no woman lets you lie
on her soft thighs,
not even if you corrupt her with new clothes or clear delightful gems.
An unpleasant breath of rumor wafts about you like an odor —
to the effect that a wild goat lives in the valley of your armpit.

Everyone's a little apprehensive.
A very ugly beast, the goat is,
no fashionable girl would sleep with one.
Therefore, you should either kill that implacable enemy of noses,
or stop wondering why ladies run away.

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Rufa

Rufa, the carrot-haired girl from Bologna,
gives blow jobs to her little brother,
red-headed Rufus. You know who she is,
Menenius wife, the one you always see
in the paupers' graveyard, grabbing snacks
from food offerings set on the pyres.
Whenever she chases a loaf rolling out
of the blaze, the unshaven slave who tends
those flames runs over and gives her a whack.

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The Flower

Furius and Aurelius, you'd follow your Catullus anywhere:
to where the utmost shores of India re-echo the river Ocean
thrashing its way around the disk of Earth,
to Hyrcania, to silken Arabia, to Scythia's frozen fields,
to the archer Parthian's home, to where the seven mouths of Nile
shoot silty color into the Mediterranean,
or up the skyish Alps to look out over Gaul, the Rhine, the terrifying
sea, and Britain out on the world's rim
(now they're mere memoranda of Caesar's conquering).
My friends, ready to adventure so far off with me, taking chances on
the gods' good will,
I only ask you to ferry back a message, not very long or very nice, to
my girl:
that I hope she's getting on well with her lovers she takes on three
hundred at a time,
loving not one, but all the same milking their dicks on an
assembly-line basis,
not caring about my love — like she used to — my love cut down
(her fault),
like a flower at the edge of a field razed by the passing plough.

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The next two poems are directed at Catullus' rivals for the affections of a fourteen year old boy named Juventius.

Furius

Furius owns neither slave nor strongbox, he couldn't host so much as a spider or a bedbug, his hearth doesn't house a living coal.

But he certainly has a father, and a stepmother whose teeth could crunch through flint.

You get on just fine, Furius, with your dad and his dried stick of a wife.

No wonder — indigestion's no problem, you've nothing to fear from fire,

your roof's not about to cave in, theft is impossible, your death would make no inheritors — you're exempt from every peril.

Isn't it great? Sun, cold and hunger have given you bodies drier than horn.

You're free from sweat, saliva, mucus, phlegm —
and as if that were insufficiently spic-and-span,
your ass is clean as a salt-shaker.

You don't crap ten times in a year,

and when you do, it's harder than a bean or a pebble.

You could crush it in your hands and never stain a finger!

Don't belittle your blessings, Furius, enjoy what you have.

And quit pestering me for that loan — you're already fortunate enough.

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You Know You Love It

I fuck your asses, I feed you my dick,
Aurelius (you love it) and cocksucking Furius.

You said that I lack modesty, basing your charge on a few little verses
about a boy?

Of course a god-fearing poet has to lead an upright life — that's no
reason his poems shouldn't live it up

— poems which are witty, elegant compositions, even if they are a bit
unbuttoned,

even if they do scratch you where it always itches, even if they do get
people steamed up —

I don't mean just schoolboys, no, even big hairy studs, real animals,
guys who need both hands to lift their dicks.

You thought I was naughty for writing the poem about wanting a
million kisses?

Well fuck you.

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Ariadne

They say Mount Pelion's topmost pines
once swam the great sea's fluent waves
when the chosen, toughest young men of Greece,
hoping they could steal the golden fleece,
dared go the ocean in a quick ship,
raking the darkblue waterplains with firtree oars.

For them the goddess who holds the Acropolis
hilltopping high Athens
herself invented that waterchariot
zooming on the lightest breeze. She assembled
the piney woodwork of the curving keel.
The speed of that first ship was education
to Amphitrite — then still a naive
young brine-goddess.
Pallas built that yacht whose beakish prow
ploughed up the plains of windy sea —
the waters wrenched by oarage foamed white and spit glitter.
Suddenly nymphs of the waves raised their faces
clear of the twinkling flood,
surprised by *this* seamonster.
Then and only then did mortals see by daylight
the daughters of Nereus all naked, standing
up to their breasts in the whirling silver.

Then, they say, Peleus ignited
with love for Thetis, who, for her part,
didn't scorn a mortal marriage. Even her father
judged they should join.

Heroes, born in that most desirable time of all the ages,
my chants will summon up all of you
often, and especially you, uniquely greatedened
by the blaze of your wedding torches, allfortunate Peleus.
Jupiter'd wanted Thetis for himself, but the father of the gods
yielded her to you, defender of Thessaly.
Thetis accepted you, Tethys and Oceanus,
who include the whole disk of earth in a fluid embrace,
let you lead their granddaughter away.

The wanted time came, all Thessaly crowded
the house, the palace was choked with partying

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joyfaced people holding out gifts. The town of Cierum
was derelict, they evacuated the vale of Tempe,
the homes of Crannon, Larissa's walls,
everyone came to pack Pharsalus.

No farming got done, no curved rakes lopped
the ground clear of lowtrailing vines, no bull
pulled gouging plough downfield,
tearing up the soil in clods.

No pruning hook thinned treeshade,
ploughshares left lying roughened with rust.

But the glorious chambers of Peleus' residence
silver-flashed and gold-glared. Every door opened
on a vista of room after rich room receding
into magnificent distance. Throne chairs
glittered white ivory, goblets splashed reflected light
across altarly tables. Glistening
with royal treasure, the whole house joyed. Amid the seats,
the sacred marriage-couch of the goddess,
shaped and smoothed from Indian tusk,
draped with fabric saturate in richest red
then tapestried over with joltingly skillful
images of heroes.

You could see Ariadne on the shore of Naxos,
in the tideline's watery noise,
staring out after Theseus, who falls away
into a vanish, ferried out of sight
by no slow boat. She stands there, madness
building up inside her, not believing
she's really seeing this — she's just then waking
up from her cheating sleep, and starting
to comprehend that she's been ditched,
left sorrowsick on the blank unpeopled sand.

The young man of memory conveniently weak
fled, his oars beating back the waves, his meaningless
promises blown in the storm, words in the wind.

The daughter of royal Minos, standing in the seaweed,
looks out after him with sad sweet eyes,
staring, rigid, looking like that famous
statue of the Bacchante stunned by the god.

The seabreeze doffs her gauzy turban,

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her dress falls delicate down from shoulder;
frees her firm little breasts,
then everything slips from her body, and the waves roll up to touch.

Poor girl, Venus made you crazy with nonstop tortures of love
ever since Theseus left the sweep of his home shores
and came to a harsh king's Crete.

A godsent plague had made Athens agree
to pay for having killed a Cretan prince.
They sent a yearly gift of boys and girls
to be Minotaur's dinner. Athens' walls narrowed
on the people so sadly harassed.
Then Theseus chanced his own adventurous body
so his friends wouldn't have a monster's belch
for a funeral oration. He pushed off in a light boat
on a gentle wind, came to tyrant Minos's castle.

Fourteen-years-old, perfumey and warm
from her mother's lap, the royal daughter saw him
and her eyebeams lit. Before she could look down
or turn away, Love seared into her
like a branding iron. The damned, the holy
Thief of Hearts, who mingles our anxieties
with joy, made her moan under her breath
and shiver for the yellowhaired stranger.
And she paled like the gleam on gold
when she learned he'd come courting glory or death
from her brother the monster.

Silent prayers and promises rose from her lips to the gods like incense
— sweet and useless. Nothing could stop
the hero's and the Minotaur's collision.
And the Minotaur fell, like a widebranching oak
or a pitchsweating pine atop Mount Taurus,
twisted back and ripped out in the whoosh
of a stormwind spinning insane;
all its wooden roots yanked from the ground,
it crashes headlong, busting up forest
and snapping off boughs far around. Thus Theseus
decked that bullbrowed psychopath, beat
that huge brutal body down, goring only
air with its horns. The hero turned back,
big with glory, through the Labyrinth's
mixed-up paths unerrored on the trail of thread he'd left.

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Then Ariadne shipped with him to Naxos's wave-sprayed shore,
but he did a quick dissolve as soon as sleep put out her lights.
Many times in heart's madness she emptied her chest
in clear loud calls and cries. She climbed
the steep rough mountains to plunge her gaze
over the open sea's flowing tremendous desert,
then she ran down and right out into it,
holding up her fine soft skirts. The slapping waves
softly burst brine against her knees. Wetfaced with tears,
gasping out cold sobs, she told it:

“You took me away from my father, my house,
the altars of my gods, just so you could lose me
on the first empty shore? I believed your fawning voice,
I doomed my brother by helping you.

“Did a lioness in labor drop you in the desert?
Did the sea spit you up? Did you swim up into existence
from a pool of quicksand? This is how you pay back
the rescue of your life?

“At least you could have taken me with you,
I'd have been a happy slave to wash your feet,
only to make up your purplequilted bed.

“Now you're out in mid-ocean, I'm on the beachhead of nowhere.
I wish you'd never come to Crete, bringing the bull
terrible tribute. I'm oceaned off from everyone.
If I could leave now, *would* I go home —
to be the guest of honor at my brother's funeral?
Maybe follow my lover, now bending his ship's tough oars
against the ocean to get away from me?

“Furies, snakehaired punishers of men,
bring my pain to him!”

She said. Jove heard. The universe nodded assent,
disheveling sea, lurching earth, flickering all the stars.
Then Theseus forgot the glad flag he promised his father.

Before yielding Theseus to negotiate winds
on the godbuilt ship, his royal father said:

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“My son, whom I meet for the first time only now when I’m already old,

do I have to risk never seeing you again, do you have to try this adventure?

My luck and your courage have joined to rob me of you —
my eyes are still hungry for the sight of your face.

I cannot gladly let you go, I’ll rub dirt and dust in my hair for a mourning

and hang black sails on the boat that takes you from me.

“Athena help you butcher the bull! Remember when you see the home hills,

show you’re safe. Raise white sails.”

But Theseus’s promise left him like a blown cloud quits a mountain-top.

His father looked, saw dark sails, jumped the cliff of despair.

Brave Theseus was home for the funeral, the daughter of Minos avenged.

But even then Bacchus was coming with Silenus and the pack of satyrs,

Bacchus came for you, Ariadne, in love with you!

Running insane, the bacchantes turned heads and howled,
waved wands and bloody limbs of cows torn up alive.

Some held in baskets the cult’s secret emblems — which the uninitiate would love to hear about —

they thumped their drums, blew hoarse buzzing trumpets,
raised a delicate jingle of brassy chimes,
while barbarian flutes shrilled sweet horrible tunes . . .

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Berenice

Catullus' Latin translation of a lost poem by Callimachus.

The king asked angrily: "Who dares to rob
the gods and mock the monarch?" Terror held
the court in awed if awkward quietude.
"Who snitched the lock of hair my royal wife
Berenice deposited in Venus's shrine
— a thankful offering for my return
from devastating all Assyria?"
Then Conon spoke, the court astrologer:

Conon, who'd considered every light throughout the whole tremendous
heavens,

what hour each is reborn in the blue, what time it dies from sight,
when the sun's white blasts of heat will muffle under eclipse,
why the stars move in obedience to Time, how gentle love called the
moon down from her skyish ride
to set upon Endymion, the sleepy shepherd boy,

— that heavenly scholar, Conon, spoke, and thus appeased the king:

"That lock of hair, once Berenice's, now hangs among the stars,
placed there by the gods!"

Meanwhile the sad if stellar bangs lamented in the heavens:

"I am those curls Berenice vowed the gods, as she outstretched her
smooth arms in prayer;

when the king, enhanced by marrying her, went off to devastate
Assyria,

still spattered with the traces of that bloody bedtime scuffle
in which he carried off the queen's virginity.

"Do brides really dread the wedding night, do they really want to
cheat their parents out of grandsons?

So they irrigate the bedsheets with their phoney tears,
so help me all the gods, their groans are faked.

"I learned that from the queen's unending complaints
— how she grudged entrusting her man to battle!
Does she claim it wasn't the empty bed she feared —
she only wept because he was her cousin?"

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“I suppose, Berenice, it was only family feeling that made you so grief-weak you couldn’t walk or speak?

“From the vantage-point of your own head I’ve seen your courage, from earliest girlhood. I remember (if you don’t) how you slew the man you were engaged to, so you could marry this king.

The tragic speeches you made the day he left! By Jupiter, how often you wiped your eyes!

What god was it transformed your supposed coldness? What other god than Love?

“The king left. To ensure his return, you sacrificed a bull and vowed my fuzzy self to the gods. When he came back, having added Asia Minor, as far as the Euphrates, to Egypt, she kept her word and I became a tuft twice removed — first to the temple, then wafted to the skies —

“Against my will, O queen! I swear it by your head! A curse upon me if I lie. But who can stand up to metal?

The greatest mountain the sun rises over, Athos itself, yielded to steel when Xerxes cut a ship canal through the isthmus and sent his barbarian fleet swimming through the slopes.

When such give way to forged tools, what hope for me who am mere filament?

Jupiter! May the whole race of Chalybes perish, that Black Sea tribe, to whom it first occurred

to disembowel their mother earth and scrape the ore from her ribs of rock,

to shape the cruel metals!

“My sisters wept for me, cut off from them forever, then Emathion, son of the Dawn, appeared, in the form of an ostrich, raising a wind at each nod of his stubby wings

— the servant of Venus — he flew me up the night sky, and placed me in Aphrodite’s holy lap.

(By luck the Love goddess was vacationing in Egypt at the time.)

She, lest the crown of Ariadne shine in the sky without competition, she made me gleam there too, soggy with tears, kidnapped from the head of blonde Berenice,

a new constellation among the old, I float over by the great bear; Callisto, between the lights of Virgo and bad-tempered Leo.

I sink nightly down the skies, leading stupid Boötes — better known as the little bear — who can hardly find his way

to the ocean to set. He always gets there late.

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“Though at night I get to hear the footsteps of gods above me, day sinks me in the gray sea again.

Nemesis, let me speak this out unpunished — I don’t lack reverence for the starry company

I’m forced to keep — but all the same

no coward fear will make me hide the truth, though all the stars should sing together *O, come off it, girl!*

Nothing will prevent me from opening my honest heart like a book, that all may read —

all this superlunary stuff doesn’t divert me. It’s torture to be exiled, forever, I presume,

from the dearest head of all, where I fed deliciously on pleasantly fragrant moisturizing shampoos, mild cleansers and rich conditioners imparting body, bounce and luster!

“You girls, whom the long-awaited wedding day has joined, by torchlight, to your true soulmates,

don’t unbutton, setting forth your sweet little titties, before you offer up in my honor an alabaster box full of choicest haircare products,

you chaste obedient maidens! But girls who sleep around —

let dirt drink in their spilt gifts— I reject them!

I don’t need any favors from unworthy hearts.

But, pure new brides, may harmony always modulate the measure of your wedded lives.

“You, my queen, when you stare at the stars and light lamps in honor of Venus —

don’t let me dry out up here in the breezy ether,

pour out offerings of pure pomade for my frazzled sake.

— I wish the stars would fall! I want to be hair again! Let Aquarius glare by Orion in my place.”

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Attis

Catullus spent a year in Bythynia (Modern Turkey), the center of Cybele's worship, and the details he gives of her cult, such as the description of its music, are vividly authentic.

A fastmoving cruiser shot over deep seas
carrying Attis from Greece to Asia Minor.
He landed, ran through the Trojan groves
into the forest-shadow-world of the goddess.

Angry madness revved his head like an engine —
it didn't seem real when he struck down with sharp flint
and lopped what hung between his things.
His whole body weakened, feeling
the last of his manhood drain hot down his legs,
bloodspattering the ground.

Then he-she grabbed the light tambourine that thumps out a
summons

to your sacred rites, Cybele, Great Mother!
Battering the tight bullhide with soft fingertips,
it, Attis, shivered, started singing to the others:

“You eunuchs, you priestesses of Cybele,
to the high groves — go! you straying cattle,
Cybele's, the Lady of Mount Dyndymus' herd.
Like exiles you couldn't wait to leave,
you followed my lead over violent sea,
you unsexed yourselves,
like me, you made yourselves women
and showed your hatred of women's love.
Dance! Our mistress laughs to see us crazed!
To Cybele, run, run, to the groves of the goddess,
where cymbal screams in a metal voice, drum bellows back,
where heavy Phrygian flute buzzes through its curving pipes,
where ivy-crowned Maenads dance,
slavering, snapping in convulsions,
electrifying the holy mysteries with loud shrill howls.
“Go mad!” sang Attis, the unwoman.

Their tongues flickered out as they yowled the cry of Bacchus,
the smooth drum hollow thudding replied,
rattling cymbals clattered shrill,

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the whole chorus ran up Mount Ida, gasping,
chaos on a hundred feet. Attis with his drum
in the lead, like an untamed bullock running away from the yoke,
and the Gallae, the sacred eunuchs, ran after.

When they reached the home of Cybele, exhausted,
they fell asleep, nor even thought of food.
Stupor shut their eyes in sinking weakness,
their madness gentled into peace.
When goldfaced sun turned on its beaming eye,
scanning bright white sky, hard ground, rough sea,
scattering night, sleep ran away
from waking Attis. (The Grace Pasithea,
bride of Sleep, eagerly lifted the drowse-god
into her trembling lap.)

Calm and sensitive, without the speeding madness now,
Attis begins to consider what she's done.
Her clear mind sees where she is, and without what,
she runs hysterical back to the shore,
eyes dropping tears into sea.

“My country, where I was born, country that gave me life,
I left you like a runaway slave — to come to Ida's
snowy forests of wild animals. I wander among their lairs.

“Where's home, where can I look for it?
The moment my madness goes
I find only forest. I lost my country,
possessions, friends, family. I lost the forum,
the wrestling matches, the racetrack, the gym.
My soul keeps asking for all I lost, looking for all that's gone.

“I had that noblest beauty — which is male.
As man, as adolescent and as boy
I was the star of the gymnasium,
muscles gleaming with oil, glorious, stared at,
garlands were hung on my house, would-be male lovers spent their
nights in my doorway
— in the morning I had to step over their sleeping bodies.
Am I now the serving girl of the goddess, one of Cybele's slaves?
A maenad, a neuter, a piece of what I was?
Will I have to live on cold snowy Ida,

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pass my life under Phrygia's tall pillars,
living with deer and wild boar?

“Now I regret, now I feel my wound.”

As these words passed Attis' red lips, the goddess heard —
Cybele unyoked her chariot's lions, flickered her whip along the sides
of the left cow-killing beast:

“Go after him, teach him the madness, make him rave again — with
fear!

Hunt him back to my grove — he thinks he can leave!
Roar, make the whole place tremble resonant,
go, heavy tail slamming against your own flanks,
red mane slapping thickmuscled neck!”

Menacing Cybele spoke and loosed it,
the eager beast ran roaring off, crushing underbrush,
came to the wet whitefoaming shore, saw feeble Attis by the ocean-plain
and charged. She ran crazily back into the woods, a serving girl
for the rest of her life.

Goddess, great goddess Cybele, Lady of Mount Dyndymus,
may all your madness remain far from me —
inspire others, drive others mad.

Priapaeia

The Priapeia

Priapus, child of Venus and Bacchus, represents a universal idea, the phallic fertility god. This is usually represented in archaic societies as some sort of sacred pole. The figure survives in our world in secularized vestige, as the scarecrow and the garden gnome, its meaning relegated to the religious unconscious.

Under the name Priapus this archetype was anciently worshipped on the Hellespontic coast of what is now Turkey and was then Greece, and there particularly at Lampsacus (modern Lapseki). The people of Lampsacus honored Priapus as their founder and stamped his image on their coinage.

Priapus travelled east in Alexander's train, winning hearts for Hellenism. Alexandria became his metropolitan see, where he was celebrated with poetry and public worship. From there he travelled to Rome where, by Augustus' time, no garden was elegant without him.

Our richest vein of Priapic poetry comes from late Republican and early Imperial Rome (roughly 40 B.C. to 40 A.D.). The authors of that time, impatient with the crudity of Rome's own literature, imitated the Hellenistic poetry written in Alexandria, two or three hundred years previously, by Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes and Theocritus. Odes to Priapus were part of this Alexandrian inheritance.

Catullus is credited with several *priapeia* (poems about Priapus), of which only a few lines now survive. To him were also (wrongly) attributed a few intact but second-rate priapic poems. (The missing poems 18-20 in the standard editions of Catullus). When scholars realized that these verses weren't really Catullus', they transferred them to the Vergilian apocrypha — that is, these priapic poems were ascribed, without much conviction, to Vergil. And so the three little pricks were laid at the Mantuan's door like hideous changeling children.

Though it is entirely credible that Vergil relaxed between *Georgics* by scratching the wax with poems to Priapus, these poems are far too crude to be truly Vergilian.

The great surviving *priapeia* are those by Horace and Tibullus. These have been translated often enough, and were never suppressed from the works of these writers. There was also a whole book of Priapic poems, the *Carmina Ludicra* or "Jokey Poems." This was a translation into Latin, by Aemilius Macer, of an Alexandrian priapic poem anthology. It has been translated into English a few times recently, rather weakly I'm sorry to say.

While Vergil's and Horace's poems were virtually anthropological works, describing the placement and veneration of Priapus in parks and

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gardens, Macer's book made the god a spokesman for a certain exuberant aspect of male sexuality: Macer (or his source) pioneers the *psychological* Priapus.

This idea was refined by Tibullus who made Priapus the patron of Boy-Love. In the next generation, Petronius elevated Priapus to the level of a *Zeitgeist*. His novel, the *Satyricon*, the epic narration of a hero's struggle with impotence. This homosexual anti-epic, begins with the line, "Sing, Muse, of the wrath of Priapus . . ." — mocking the Iliad's opening "Sing, Muse, the wrath of Achilles . . ."

In the 1980's, the age of the Women's movement, which so often sought to shame men, and the Men's movement, which so often succeeded in doing so, Priapus, fat as a teapot and with no less pronounced a spout, was a welcome intrusion. Thus I made the following never-published translation.

Priapus is of course a symbol of male sexual megalomania, but he is so in the spirit of Chaplin's *Great Dictator*. His ambiance is that of the Music Hall, not the political rally. Optimistic as a hard-on, silly as a dick, very sure of pleasing and very sure to please, Priapus is emphatically, tumescently, *himself*, the most incarnate and credible of gods.

The priapic poem of Tibullus is worth offering to the public here because it has never been translated into English, and has very rarely been printed in Latin. The poem is so gleefully obscene that no Classics scholar will yet concede that it was actually written by any author, though the style, date and quality are obviously Tibullus'.

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Tibullus' Priapic Poem

What's going on? What are the gods angry about *now*?

A pale boy lay glowing, warm and secret in my lap, around us the night blacked out its soundless course.

Love herself rested. My soft old penis went senile, forgetting altogether the manly way it used to poke up its head.

Help, Priapus! You, stiffly standing guard under the tree's mane of leaves, with your magic red dong at attention, the vine-crown on your crimson head.

Didn't I give you simple-hearted worship, circling your hair with chains of just-opened flowers?

Well-hung one! Didn't I shout away old Crow and quick Jackdaw before they could pickaxe their horny bills into your sacred head?

Unspeakable crotch-deserter! This is goodbye. So long, Priap, I don't owe you a thing.

I hope you lie rotting in the field, rough and scaly with dirt, wild dogs and pigs involved in mud will scratch their smeared sides against your wood

And as for *you* —

Bad penis! Shame on you!

This is terrible. The gods are using you to punish me. Holy immortals, your law is good but cruel.

Some complaining's allowed. Poor prick! No skinny-limbed little boy will spread for you, a boy who (for all his youth) knows just how to tilt his ass and wriggle it delightfully back while the bed shakes underneath.

No merry girl will press you in her hands as if to warm you, or squeeze you against her smooth white thigh.

But here comes a gal Romulus used to call honey; I see she still has both her teeth

The doorway to her guts hangs open in the black secrecy and midnight of her groin,

enlivened by some stray and snowy hairs. A spider web spans the long-deserted entrance —

and she's waiting for you! To glom your smooth head down the depths of her trench, and not just once.

You don't feel so good? Fine! Lie there, soft as a worm, she won't care, she'll just keep stuffing you up, maybe three or four times!

Your snootiness will do you lots of good when you're dunking your well-traveled head in her slurping muck.

Still sleepy? Had enough of doing nothing?

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I'll let you off this once — but when that gold-pale boy comes back,
when you sense his footsteps, I want swelling flesh to shoot you up
dick-rigid with joy,
the whole groin's payload aloft, plunging, hard, till giggling Venus
squirt me soft.

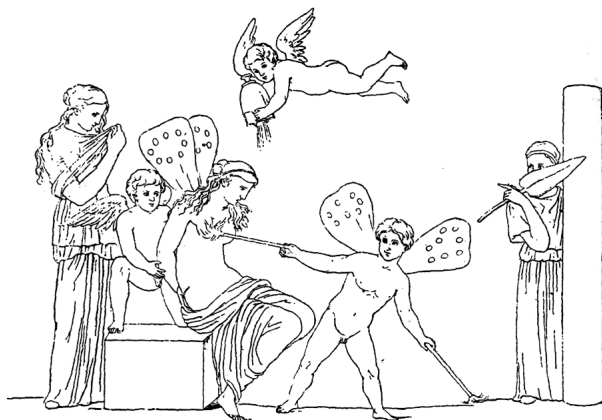
Cerberus

a triple homage to Sextus Propertius



dedicated to
Meryl Gross

A Psychic Geography of Masochism



The Masochist as Initiate

Among those who have explored S&M, there is a persistent sense that there is more at stake than intense orgasm and obsessive pleasures. The correspondences with ritual are manifold and persuasive, from the often hieratically stiff choreography of the action to the use of masks. Anthropological parallels between the voluntary suffering of the masochist and that of the initiate are only too well known. Even the fashions favored by the S&M crowd imitate sincerely (if a bit crudely) the “aboriginal.” But the connection has so far been glimpsed only “through a glass darkly.”

The map to the S&M labyrinth emerges only if we understand that it resembles in detail a very particular kind of ritual, an initiation — and *initiation is always a symbolic death*. From the Winnebago Indian Medicine Lodge Rite, where the initiate is “shot” with a gun and “dies” before returning to life, to the Turkish dervish sect of the Bektashi, who recite from a symbolic gallows, “I die before my death for the love of those who show the truth, in the convent of a saint I become a sacrifice,” death is always the content of initiation’s symbols. The second-century A.D. Latin author Apuleius informs us that his initiation into the Isis cult was “like a voluntary death . . . where the initiate treads the very threshold of Proserpine.” In his *On the Soul*, the first-century A.D. Greek encyclopaedist Plutarch notes that the words “to die,” *teleutan*, and “to be initiated,” *teleisthai*, correspond in sound and meaning. The funereal black clothing of the S&M scene, its fascination with the whip and the rest of the executioner’s tools, and of course the central role of pain, all these

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proclaim that S&M is a symbolic *Dance of Death*. Numerous ancient statues and frescos show Aphrodite holding the sandal she uses to *spank Eros*, and this sandal is cited in the *Greek Magical Papyri* as a *symbolon*, a token of initiation. (The rueful little cupid that forms the frontispiece of this book is a punished Eros). The famous whipping scene in the Villa of the Mysteries painting at Pompei puts the S&M content of a Dionysus initiation beyond serious dispute.

The gagged silence of the masochist, the pallor appropriate to the sufferer, his incapacity for movement, the remote location “far from help” where the drama is played out, all these would be recognized by a person from an archaic society as standard initiatory trappings. The initiate, as one symbolically dead, is one removed from society, from the living — though to the jungle depths or a desolate mountaintop instead of a suburban dungeonet. The initiate is made silent and ghostly — though through a vow of silence and whitening of the face rather than by donning a leather hood. The initiate experiences symbolic death agonies — these tend to be circumcision, knocking out of an an incisor, or loss of a digit, though simple flogging is also common.

The prime difference is that the literal initiate suffers these things as a means of entering upon transformation and renewal of his entire existential condition, rather than as a way of refreshing a tired sex-life and staving off depression. On the cold crags, in the brutal peace of the wilderness, the primitive and pre-classical Greeks initiated their young men into warrior societies, a custom for which Greek myth gives an attenuated record in the stories of young heros (*e.g.* Achilles, Jason, Asklepios) being trained in the mountains by centaurs. Similarly the *Yamabushi* (“one who lies in the mountains”) of medieval Japan acquired his shamanic powers on mountaintops haunted by ghosts and spirits. The modern myth of the masochist “kidnapped” by the sadist to a remote chateau preserves these otherworld associations with an additional French and Arthurian touch. The purely physical risk is here the least interesting factor. The carrying off of the masochist brings him to *a mode of life that is utterly other, the life of spirits*, and this supplies meaning and power to the scene.

In the dazed resignation of the morning after, the masochist gathers his clothing, too spent to even inspect his new bruises, and little interested in them. Before the inevitable depression sets in — the price of life lived with desacralized intensity — he is drunk with a mood of romantic alienation, self-pity and vague religious longing. The deserted playroom is for him the wild, the shore, the crags, the no-go zone inhabited by wolves and centaurs, what the Roman poet Propertius called “landscapes of abandonment.”

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The Masochist as Ghost

Much of what is encountered on the journey into S&M sacrifices its opacity as soon as we understand it as a trip into the Land of the Dead. All mythologies describe this as a realm where everything is inverted; as *The Book of Job* expresses it, “the reversed and backward kingdom where night is day.” This is a looking-glass world where the mistress presents the positive to the slave’s every negative: her pleasure is his pain, she is clothed and he is naked, she speaks and he is silent. By a slow accumulation of parallels, the slave becomes the reverse and mimic of the mistress. Once both are moving in perfect synch, when the reflection is flawless, a sharp and sudden pain may bring the slave “through the looking-glass.”

In the Egyptian Book of the Dead, a late and elaborate final efflorescence of Nile-side piety, one of the most often iterated charms to stave off the laws of Hell is “I shall not walk upside down, I shall not eat excrement.” This underlines in a very striking way the topsy-turvy character of the underworld. Here again, the experience of the masochist is of a piece with that of the dead. The sensations of weightlessness and even of leaping or flying that accompany the endorphin rush are already an adequate translation of “walking upside down.” The experience of the “witches’ cradle” or flesh-hook suspension makes this point with added clarity.

The labyrinth was well known to the ancients as an emblem of the state where all directions, even up and down, are lost. It was commonly used to represent the underworld journey. To quote again from Plutarch’s *On the Soul*, “Initiation and death both begin with weary runnings about in circles, journeys through darkness over uncertain roads and down blind alleys.” More modern and more common than the mazes that fascinated the ancients, but equally apt as an emblem of the dead realm, are mirrors. Borges, who wrote with such insight of both mirrors and mazes, speaks in his poem *Los Espejos* of the horror of the reflected world, uninhabitable yet inhabited, repeating our reality with a sleepless and sexual obsessiveness, a place where everything happens and nothing is remembered.

For one who has learned to walk upside down, it is not difficult to understand this “mirror writing.” The silent and spaceless depths of the mirrored infinity are at the same time a glimpse of the dead realm and a reflection of the masochist mind, endlessly empty and just as endlessly ready to absorb whatever it is shown.

Yet his corpselike passivity conceals a richness of interior experience that can scarcely be imagined. Within his silence and immobility he experiences a world whose center is neither pain nor pleasure, but rather

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the prolonged and overexcited anticipation of both. The classical writers on initiation speak over and over of “joy mixed with dread,” “excitement, confusion and hope.” An empty, expectant eternity in which all sensations echo, and strong ones overwhelm. Such is the condition of one who has given up all control. And thus the ongoing existential condition of the accomplished masochist (in Propertius’ words),

. . . to live without plans, caution or expectation — to be carried at random by whatever happens, without all will or control.

He is a holy wanderer who believes in no god, a quest knight for whom the grail has become irrelevant.

The binding and blindfolding which are standard initiatory procedure are a further assimilation of the slave’s condition to that of the dead. He enters the night of non-being, his personality becomes a gap. Slaves often report a sense that their head has vanished or become weightless, that the entire body seems disincorporated, except for the violated genitals and the punished buttocks. “I am nothing but a hole for you to use,” the slave may say.

A hole to be used he certainly is, though far from nothing but. As he descends to the world of the dead, as this “journey to the center of the earth” continues, his experience of sex becomes ever more acute, because he is entering the belly of being, the source of all fertility. He sinks, and is all but dissolved into this underearth, sightless and sparkling with the germinal modes of being, the seeds of plantlife and the “growth” of minerals in their now almost pulsing ore-veins. His genitals fiercely tingle, resonant with the terrible fertility of the buried. While the personality and body-sense are lost, the genital region seems to literally seethe with being.



Mastery of Fire

Fire-play, such as the shaman’s ability to walk on hot coals, is universally recognized in archaic societies as a spiritual show of force, an indication that one has gone beyond the mortal condition. The hot wax play of our

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time is strikingly paralleled by a number of cultic usages from antiquity, none of which is more strikingly *à propos* than this one taken from the Isis cult. It is enacted as the central scene in novel *The Golden Ass* (written by Apuleius, a priest of Isis). In the central episode of the book, Psyche *spills hot oil* on Eros in bed. This is paralleled by a number of late antique carved gems, reproduced here, that show Eros and Psyche, interchangeably shackling one another, tying one another to pillars, and scorching one another with fire-brands. A particularly powerful one shows Eros holding a butterfly, the symbol of Psyche, over a torch.

The Hunger of the Dead

“It’s difficult to eat shit without having visions,” Allen Ginsberg wrote in a burst of poetic intuition. The classically degrading licking of the buttocks, a hardy perennial of all S&M, is a very sufficient actualization of the second half of our Egyptian verse, “I shall not eat excrement.” The spell was of course meant to prevent the reversal of the normal order in the dead realm, where the mouth may be forced to accept, without demur, dung in place of food. After all, what is buried is not fed but fertilized. We might understand the Egyptian verse in less nightmarish terms as, “I shall not taste my own corruption.” The masochist however has wishes most opposite to those of the departed Egyptian: not to maintain life in the world of the dead, but to experience the raptures of annihilation in the world of the living. Thus the masochist’s post, on his knees, lapping his mistress’ anus, an act whose archetypal power was also appropriated by participants in the witches’ Sabbath, and the initiates of the Knights Templar, both of whom made use of the “infernal kiss.” The eating of excrement is secretly famous in Indian *Aghori* initiations, as is the ingestion of human flesh from the burning ghats. There the living-dead status of the feaster is well attested, even boasted. But there is more.

“All food comes to us from the world of the dead,” declare the Hippocratic writings. The underworld, great granary to every buried seed, is rich in fantasies of being devoured and of monstrous feasting. The dead are at once guarantors of fertility and monsters of appetite. For this reason the Greeks populated their underworld with never-satisfied ones, (“hungry ghosts” in the Buddhist term), like Tantalus, eternally grasping for the unattainable apple. Likewise, the Masochist pays for his overemphasized pleasures with endless yearning, a hunger for sensation and degradation which is finally as insatiable as the grave.

The risk in approaching the world of the unseen is universally acknowledged. Dante suggests he was on the verge of suicide in the

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opening of the *Commedia*. The walking of the razor-thin *Cinvat* bridge in Iranian myth is the most concise example, but universally the approach to the otherworld is seen as perilous. This ambivalence of the sacred is to be understood as the implicit dread that the approach to the holy will rob one of the ability to return to the mundane, the everyday, if you will, the “vanilla” world. In the event, a very well-founded fear.

S&M has similar connotations of danger, and attempts by the kinky community to allay popular disquiet, to be seen as having made a “normal lifestyle choice,” are on one level misguided. Fear is the ambiance, even the lifeblood of S&M. It is this which makes the journey a quest, and not merely tourism. And the unacknowledged secret of the masochist’s gloomy pride is death. Few there are who will ever pursue the implications of masochism even so far as castration, but the ultimate extension of the masochistic dream is to die, to be devoured, to be incorporated. To have the expiring contractions of the genitals coax an orgasm from the mistress and in a dying convulsion to become fully one with her pleasure: this is the subterranean and electric current that makes masochist limbs twitch with ecstasy. As the Catechism of the Roman Church puts it: “Love seeks to be definitive and irrevocable.”

The Case of Propertius.

Propertius, an early first-century A.D. Roman erotic poet, was in many ways the heir of Catullus. He emulated Catullus' highly personal, even neurotic, voice, and the masochism that was an element in Catullus' relationship with Lesbia provided the pattern for Propertius' affair with Cynthia.

Propertius, bard of the bent, has been censored even more dilligently than Catullus: the poet-classicist A. E. Houseman actually rewrote the problematic parts of Propertius, and his bowdlerized edition has pretty much replaced the original for classicists. Decent Shropshire lad!

The content of Propertius' work was not a point wasted on Rome's foremost specialist on sexual play, the poet Ovid: he characterized Propertius poems as "white hot." Nor did Propertius himself show any shyness about his masochism: he calls his love-life an "untreatable medical condition."

The characteristic features of masochism provide the contours of Propertius' world. There is the exceptional importance of fantasy in a sexual scenario; the focus on neither pain nor pleasure as such, but on a prolonged *anticipation* of both; an exhibitionistic desire to be shamed and exposed, a manipulative provocation of others to provide the desired ill-treatment; the subversive use the of punishment as a secret path to pleasure. This checklist may be verified by even a meagre and random sampling of Propertius' poems.

But Propertius is far more than a case history. His poetic genius made his sexual perversion a path to the transcendent; he appropriated the symbols of initiation which, as a classical pagan, he found ready to hand.

The initiate's isolation can be glimpsed even in the way Propertius exulted in the fact his love was, to ordinary persons, incomprehensible: his pride in his otherness. He represented this separateness with a certain kind of nature image — scenes of splendid desolation and aloof sublimity which remind one forcibly of those favored by the alienated lovers of the nineteenth century: think of the alpine peaks and ruined cathedrals of Caspar David Friedrich.

Propertius keeps finding himself in *deserta loca*, "landscapes of abandonment." These settings fascinated Propertius' hero Catullus: Attis castrated and alone on the shore of Asia Minor, or Ariadne "on the beachhead of nowhere." I need hardly remind the reader that Attis and Ariadne are the heros of initiation myths and mystery religions, the cults of Cybele and Dionysus respectively. The Gethsamene-like solitude of the scenes Propertius favored is part of a religious *passion*.

Ellipsis Marx

Propertius' frank enjoyment of pain also has overtones of sacrality. His sufferings are tokens of the self's annihilation. The honorable wounds of bedtime scuffles, along with the daily abasements, belittlings and humiliations of his relationship with Cynthia, amounted to a kind of initiatory ordeal — they had an existential meaning: they alone made him feel *real*. As he candidly declares, he will accept any diminution of his own status, become no more than Cynthia's *imago*, her shadow, her echo, her *ghost*, because doing so gives him *a kind of immortality*. Her love brings him across the river Styx.

There in the world of the dead, whatever I still am,
I will always be called a ghost that belongs to you.

In one poem Propertius says he would gladly be dead if only she'd pity him, or better still, actively abuse him. Let her at least dance beside his pyre and trample his bones! — an image which calls to mind the dancing Kali of the burning ghats.

Elsewhere Propertius says, "Venus seized me, roasted me in her cruel cauldron." The equation of passionate and physical fire — already implicit in the Latin word *ardor* — is absolute.

Propertius was a helpless devotee of the archetype of the powerful woman, the kind who could

use her will to leash in untamed men

The theme of bad, powerful women recurs obsessively — Cleopatra, Scylla, Tarpeia — the names are a rosary of overheated submissive cravings. These far outshine the fulsome hymns he was required to write to his patron and emperor. Augustus was a tyrant, but unlike Cynthia, a very uninspiring one. One of the most poignant lines in Propertius' last book is this tribute to the defeated Cleopatra:

her shattered scepter swept along on the waves of Ionia's sea

Propertius, focusing on this trivial and melancholy detail evokes a mood of dreamy regret at the loss to the world of this imperious woman, and so effectively overshadows the whole poem that is its context, an officially commissioned glory-song on Augustus and the battle of Actium.

Thus the symbolism of of the mistress ceaselessly re-surfaces in Propertius' verse. In one poem he says:

Cynthia was the first, and she shall be the last.

Junkyard of the Classics

This may be taken literally — *au pied de la lettre* — she is for him the Alpha and Omega of a personal religion of sex.

But Propertius desired more than mere eternity: the masochistic fantasy of enslavement, of being owned reached in him a febrile apotheosis in dreams of total incorporation and personal extinction. Thus he imagined the ghost of Cynthia saying:

Other women may have you now, but soon you're mine
alone.

Sexual craving, an immortal force, shall make our bodies
jog together even after death
in an awful and inanimate copulation
till the dry grind of bone on bone at last confounds us into
one common heap of dust."

Selected Poems of Propertius

Mental Illness

Cynthia was the first – she made me her moping prisoner with a single indifferent glance.

I'd never before been infected by love or gotten sick with desire —

Love slapped my smirk and taught my confident eyes to stare
submissively groundwards,

Love, like a wrestler, threw me down, set his foot on my head to show
he'd beaten me completely,

nasty Love trained me to despise nice girls

and to live without plans, caution or expectation — to be carried at
random by whatever happens, without all will or control.

This isn't "a phase" — it's mental illness — it's gone on a whole year
without easing up

even though it angers all the gods — at me — and ruins my life, I'm
forced, I have no choice.

Still, Milanion won the fierce man-hating heart of the huntress
Atalanta

because he never backed away from any labor or pain: love-crazed, he
would wander looking for her, checking every cave in her native Arcadia
in case she was hiding out there.

Instead of her, he met huge, shaggy, fanged wild animals,

fought two centaurs who were trying to rape her, and though he won,
he got such a crack from the one centaur's club

he lay for days groaning on the bare Arcadian rock.

It took the sight of his agony to overtake the affections of the girl
who outran all her would-be lovers:

just begging her, working for her, deserving her

– that didn't get him far.

With me, Love becomes stupid, he doesn't think up plans,
can't even remember what worked in the past.

Witches, you who claim to pull the moon down to earth,
who fuss over ugly offerings made on altars of underworld gods —
see if your power's great enough to turn *my* Cynthia's thoughts to me,
make her go pale as I am now, all sick from loving her.

Ellipsis Marx

Do that and I'll believe you when you say your chantings can whirl the stars backwards down the night sky, that you can send rivers gushing in reverse all the way back to their source!

My friends, who call down (too late!) to me who've fallen so far and lie here now so weak — find me, my friends, a medicine to heal my mind diseased —

I'm brave enough for the scalpel, sear out the sick with red-hot iron —
if only I could once more feel and speak my anger like a free man —
I've been her slave so long I can't remember how
— then take me to earth's furthest verge, beyond all inhabited regions,
take me somewhere no woman can ever track me down —

But it's safe for you to keep living here, you shallow happy people, who've found your little likeness of a lovmate, your sweet peer and equal, who the gods brought you just 'cause you asked — live sappily ever after!

The Venus who rules over my kind keeps my nights busy with misery, every hour empty and full of longing.

Keep back — it could be infectious, stay where you are, mind your own business, stick to your steady reliable kind of love —

don't read any further — but, if caution bores you and you're already skimming obliviously ahead,

I promise this warning will come back to you in total recall,
bitterly vivid, loud and clear as pain.

Junkyard of the Classics

Ariadne

Like exhausted Ariadne as she lay asleep on Crete's deserted shores
while the ship of Theseus — who swore he'd be her lover — withdrew
further off and ever smaller on the sea;

or like Andromeda, daughter of Ethiopian king Cephys, rescued by
Perseus,

like Andromeda laid out by the onset of the first sleep she'd known
since she was chained to the rough rocks, waiting to be eaten by the
dragon of the sea;

or like a Thracian bacchante, who's danced in assiduous ecstasy all
the way down into Thessaly,

when she collapses on the grassy banks of the Apidanus;

— that's how Cynthia seemed, breathing soft and even, head laid on
her folded hands,

when I dragged my drunken footsteps home, much of Bacchus still in
me,

the night near gone, my slaves waving spent torches to keep them lit.

I tried to draw close to her, carefully sustaining my weight on the bed
so as not to press on her

— I hadn't got entirely witless with drink. But even though doubly
inflamed and driven

by Love and Bacchus, both hard demanding gods,

to gently slip my arm beneath her and tilt her head towards me, to
steal a few belated kisses,

still, I didn't dare disturb my mistress' rest, afraid of her scolding, the
cruelty I've learned to expect;

so I just stood there, unable to turn away, staring, hypnotized, like
Argus — all eyes —

like Argus when Juno set him guard over Inachus' daughter Io,

Jove's girlfriend-turned-heifer now marveling at the odd feel of
having horns.

I was taking the garland from my forehead

and putting it, Cynthia, over your temples;

I delighted in curling 'round my fingers your locks that had slipped
down;

now I was setting apples in the hollow of your palms,

but all these gifts I lavished on your ungrateful slumber

kept rolling down the slopes of your clothing,

and whenever you moved a little or caught your breath

I was startled — like a fool when he hears his fortune told —

Ellipsis Marx

afraid some creature of dream brought you surreal terrors,
afraid someone in your sleep made you, unwilling, his.

Meanwhile, the descending moon shone in through successive windows,
advancing in haste, yet slow to withdraw its radiant gaze, reluctant to
miss a bit of this,

finally its gentle rays shone full on your closed eyes, woke you.
One elbow propped on the pillow, you sat up and said:

“So you finally decided to give *my* bed a try? You must have gotten
thrown out of whoever else’s house, and that only after insults failed to
give you the hint!

Where was it you used up the whole night that should have been
mine, coming back exhausted when the stars are already vanishing?

Scumbag! *You* should spend evenings like mine, and know what kind
of misery you’re always putting me through.

“I tried to cheat sleep out of the hours till you came, now at the loom,
now blearily reading poems composed on Orpheus’ lyre,

now whispering to myself how you’d abandoned me, how I’m always
left waiting while you romance someone new;
finally sleep pushed me down with his sweet soft wing — I was crying,
crying,

crying over you.”

Junkyard of the Classics

Battle

I loved trading punches with you last night at the hour when lamps are lit,
sweet on my ears were your screams and curses, dear to me your insanity

when, raging with wine, you overturned the table and pitched full glasses at me with adorable mad hands.

I really want you to yank my hair — attack it!

Score my face with your beautiful nails,

tell me how you'll put out torches in my eyesockets,

tear my clothes, make me stand bare for you to punish.

These and these alone are sure signs of true love;

no woman's feelings be so deeply hurt unless she cared.

The woman whose lips are spitting insults at you

grovels and writhes with passion at great Venus' feet.

Whether she's walking stately with full entourage, or whether she plunges off by herself

running through the streets like a crazed bacchante;

whether she's unbalanced and trembling (as often) from nightmares, or from jealousy —

sometimes just a *picture* of another girl's enough.

I'm the astrologer to read the night sky that is her mind.

I've learned these details form the constellation that is Love.

If she doesn't care enough to have screaming fights, she doesn't care about you much at all.

A woman who's even-tempered, calm — that is, dull — is what I wish for my enemies.

I want my friends to see teethmarks on my neck, I want bruises for proof she's been with me, is mine,

what I want out of love is pain, and if I can't have that,

at least I want to learn that *she's* in pain.

If I can't have my tears, then I want yours.

When you look at me in that certain kind of way, glaring from under your eyebrows,

when your fingers tell me in sign-language something really unprintable, then I pity those whose dreams aren't punctuated by gasps.

I always want to be pale with fear before an angry woman.

Paris enjoyed the sweetest of passions — how I envy the man — able to take his pleasure with Helen in earshot of armor's crash!

Ellipsis Marx

While the Greeks advanced and Hector stood firm, he soldiered
nobly on between Helen's legs—
like Paris, I make love while I make war.

I'm always off to battle — with you or with my rivals.
I don't *want* a truce.
So be glad there's no woman as beautiful as you — you'd surely grieve
if there were —
be arrogant! you're entitled!
But as for *you*, who try to snare my girl, I wish you eternal in-laws!
And if she lets you steal a night with her, it isn't that she likes you,
she's only mad at me.

Junkyard of the Classics

Ghosts

So ghosts really do exist! Death isn't the end of it all, it seems some pallid shadow escapes, defeating the pyre –

for I just saw Cynthia, buried in a quiet spot far from the noisy highway,

I saw Cynthia leaning over me.

I'd only now returned from the funeral and sadly had the whole cold bed to myself

(unhappy king of a frigid new domain),

an uneasy sleep of erotic dreams descended on me tentatively.

Her hair was the same as when they carried her away,

her eyes too, but the fire'd scorched her dress on one side.

The heat had dulled and cracked the beryl she always wore on her finger.

Her lips had shriveled back a little from the touch of Lethe water,

but awareness still breathed through her and sent forth a voice

— though the fingers of her flame-desiccated hand made a grating sound.

“You bastard! not much hope you'll be nicer to another girl — look at you, fast asleep and me just this minute buried!

Have you already forgotten our stolen gaudy nights in the after-hours taverns?

My windowsill worn smooth from all the times I lowered myself by a rope, hand over hand, into your arms?

How many times did we worship Venus at the crossroads, body hot against body, paving-stones warming under your back?

But the loyalty was somewhat less than a tacit understanding — or maybe the south wind, that neither hears nor cares, just blew your lies away!

“No one screamed my name when my eyes began to close —

If you'd called out to me, I might have wheedled at least one further day of life —

and no one hired a watcher to sit by my corpse all night with a rattle to scare off soul-stealing demons.

That cheap undertaker propped my head up with a piece of broken roof-tile that made a gash in my scalp.

But the worst is: no one saw *you* doubled over with grief, or soaking your toga with hot real tears.

Ellipsis Marx

If it was too much trouble to follow the mourners beyond the gate,
you could at least have ordered them to slow down a bit!

Couldn't you have even expressed the conventional wish that the
winds should fan my pyre
to release my soul quickly from its corpse?

Ingrate! and why didn't you sprinkle some incense on my bier to
sweeten the flames?

Would it have strained your finances to pluck a few wild hyacinths
and toss them on?

To shatter a jar of common wine at the graveside to honor my
demise?

"I want to sear that slave Lygdamus, heat a knife and torture out the
truth—

when he gave me that cup of greenish wine I should have known it
was a trap!

— or maybe it was the housekeeper, Nomas? Say she already ditched
the secret fatal flavoring she slipped in my food,
a heated shard of crockery sizzling into her skin will make her damn
her own guilty hands!

She used to be displayed in front of a brothel, and not that long ago,
for nights of pleasure, cheap.

But now she'll scarcely honor the humble ground with the trailing
golden hem of her gown!

"Yet for all that, she still makes sure, as she hands out unfair
wool-baskets for the evening's spinning,

that an extra-heavy one goes to any maid so loose-tongued as to
comment on how pretty I was.

And she made sure old Petala felt her wrists roped tight to the filthy
whipping post

for hanging wreaths on my gravestone, and Lalaga
was tied upright, her long braids bound to an overhanging beam,
and beaten — because she asked a favor with the phrase *Cynthia*
always used to let me. . .

And this same Nomas, as soon as I was dead, you allowed to take that
gold portrait bust of me

and use it for her dowry, why you practically melted it down for
money in the flames of my pyre!

"But, much as you deserve it, Propertius, I'm not going to keep
harassing you.

Long was my rule in the realm of your poems.

Junkyard of the Classics

I swear by the song the Fates chant, which brings events into irrevocable being,

— so may the three-headed hell-hound bark softly in my hearing —
I was always true to you. If I lie may vipers slip
hissing through my tomb and nap curled around my bones!

“The proof is: there are two abodes assigned along that nasty river;
large as the crowd of shadows is, they’ve only two possible directions
to row.

This way the wave leads to the husband-killing adulteress
Clytemnestra, and the Cretan queen Pasiphae, who hid naked
in a hollow wooden cow to see what it was like to get crammed by a
bull;

but to where I am, the other half flies in a yacht festooned with
flowers,

here holy breezes stroke the roses of Elysium
in a harmony of harps, to the round bronze cymbals
of Cybele, among the turbaned Lydian mystics
plucking lyres as they dance: these are the initiates.
There’s Andromeda, who almost ended up fishbait;
Hypermetra, who alone out of fifty sisters,
didn’t gut her husband on the group-wedding night
(she actually did love the man she’d just married).

These heroic blameless wives don’t mind retelling the famous
moments of their lives.

Andromeda describes how, served up for the sea monster, her wrists
were bruised by chains her own mother’d locked on,

— it felt cold, that wet rock, beneath her innocent fingers.

Hypermetra modestly asserts it was only lack of courage
that kept her from daring to go along with her sisters in their
supposedly noble deed.

Thus we continue, though dead, to hallow with our tears the loves we
knew in life.

And me, I keep quiet — about all your vicious betrayals!

“Now I’m giving you some instructions, that is, if you still feel
anything for me,

if that bitch Choris’ love-potions don’t control you utterly:

see to it my nurse Parthenia, shaky with age, doesn’t want for
anything

(she never made you bribe her to get in to see me, though she surely
had the chance),

and my dear maid Felicity — my “perfect felicity” — free her. I don’t
want her handing

Ellipsis Marx

another mistress the mirror. And any of your poems
that gained an easy dactyl from my name – burn them, a sacrifice to
me!

Why should you get a free ride from my reputation?

And pull that ivy off my tomb! I don't want its twisty tendrils eating
into my tender skeleton as it swells its berries. Ah, my sweet grave,
where the orchard-bordered river Anio stretches sleepily out among
the fields

in a landscape sacred to Hercules, through whose magic power the
air's so pure that ivory never discolors there.

I want you to honor me by setting up a column, inscribing 'round its
middle these brief but well-earned verses –

and carve them large enough so a messenger running from Rome can
read them as he gallops past:

*Here, in the soil of Tivoli, lies magnificent Cynthia,
adding, River Anio, new glory to your banks.*

“Don't dismiss this dream that comes through the gate of holy
visions!

Such dreams are truthful, sacred and weighty!

By night we ghosts are wafted off to wander, night frees the shut-in
shades, and once the bolt shoots back

even Cerberus roves. But the eternal law of daylight commands us
return to Lethe lagoon.

A careful Charon counts the whole boatload, back we go.

Other women may have you now, but soon you're mine alone.

Sexual craving, an immortal force, shall make our bodies jog together
even after death

in an awful and inanimate copulation

till the dry grind of bone on bone at last confounds us into one
common heap of dust.”

When she'd run through every complaint in this indictment,
she vanished and my arms hugged nothingness.

Junkyard of the Classics

The Rout

Listen and learn of last night's rout, what sent folk running past the aqueducts and though the new park all the way down Esquiline hill:

About twenty miles southeast from Rome on the Appian Way is the town Lanuvium,
with an ancient shrine to Juno the Defender, watched over since forever by a giant snake.

It's well worth stopping by once a year to see the rite. There's a black chasm in the sacred hillside, jagged as if it had been torn open, and into it goes an offering made in honor of the hungry serpent, down such a path as even pure guiltless virgins should hesitate to travel.

The monster twists and hisses from the depths of the earth to ask for its yearly provisions

and the young girls sent in to perform this rite go terror-white,
the baskets shake in their arms
as they trust unprotected fingers to that scaly mouth.

He snaps up the morsels they hold out to him. If the maidens are chaste,

they return to their parents' hugs and the farmers shout *A year of good crops!*

Cynthia rode off to see this, in a carriage drawn by newly-groomed ponies,

to honor Juno — she said — but Venus is more whom she had in mind.

Tell me, I implore, O Appian Way, for you were witness to her triumphal progress,

how she drove, wheels a blur of rattling speed, down your paving stones;

disclose the squalid brawls she caused in the small-town taverns en route,

(I didn't even have to be along for her to humiliate me!).

What a noble sight she must have been, leaning forward like a racing charioteer and flicking the reins to speed her horses on to the next rough bar!

I'm not even going to mention her girl-faced friend, that high-living young heir who rides in a carriage with a silk awning

like a wealthy woman who fears the sun might give her freckles.

Did he bring along his Molossian lapdogs — who wear bracelets for collars?

Ellipsis Marx

— he'll have to sell himself into slavery for a piece of moldy bread by the time that manhood he's so ashamed of can't be hidden no matter how close the razor scrapes.

In view of all these outrages to my bed and my affections,
I thought I'd pack my gear and try fighting on another front.
There's a certain Phyllis who lives near Diana's temple on Aventine hill,
no delight when she's sober, but if she drinks, she shines, whatever the setting.
The other is Teia from Tarpeian grove — a cheerful unaffected girl —
and once she's drunk — one man's not enough.
I decided to invite them and charm away the night refreshing my love-life with a few new adventures.

There was a single banqueting couch for the three of us in my secluded garden.

As for the seating arrangement: I lay between the two of them.

Lygdamus wielded the ladle, filling the summer glassware with the Grecian refinement of a fine Lesbian wine.

The flutist came from the Nile's banks; Phyllis danced with castanets and so neatly, with so natural a grace, we couldn't help showering her with roses.

But though the lamps were full, the light kept flickering. The table fell over, back flat and legs in the air.

And me, try as I might to roll the seven sacred to Venus with my lucky dice — the ominous snake-eyes kept glaring up at me.

The girls sang for a deaf man, showed their breasts to one blind.

In my mind I was alone, waiting at the gates of Lanuvium.

Suddenly *our* outer gates screeched on rust-hoarse hinges,
we heard a faint bustle — something flying up the path —
and there on the threshold was Cynthia! The dining-room doors slammed flat to the wall on either side of her

like dreadful big wings. Her hair wasn't in its usual careful array,
but beautifully insane — it really looked great.

My fingers went weak and let the cup drop; my lips,
though steeped in wine enough to slur my words, went white with terror.

Her eyes flashed out dire sparkles, she was raging in that infinite way only women can.

The sight of a besieged city's fall could not have been more awesome.

Cynthia leapt, talons out, for Phyllis' face — a terrified Teia, to get the neighbors, screamed *Fire!*

Junkyard of the Classics

Lamps appeared in the dark street's loud confusion, yawning bleary citizens doddered out of their houses

as my girls, with hair pulled and clothes torn, ran down the road to the first open tavern and dove in.

Cynthia exulted in her spoils — the rags ripped from their dresses — and gashed my face with a sidelong swipe of her hand.

She sunk a set of bleeding toothprints in my neck and especially tried for my eyes “that like to look at other women.”

Then, when she'd smacked me till her arms were tired, she dragged out Lygdamus (he'd hid under the banqueting couch). The prostrating slave grabbed my knees and in that pose of worship begged me to save him, as though I were a god.

What could I do, Lygdamus? I was just as much her prisoner of war as you.

Hands up, I made unconditional surrender.

She pointed to her feet, then barely let me kiss them, and said:

“If you wish me to pardon your confessed offence, accept my judgement and obey it's stipulations!

“You're not to put on your best clothes and stroll in the shade of Pompey's colonnade,

nor in the forum when they spread sand in the streets to make them look neat for a holiday.

In fine, you're never again to swivel your head for sneaky backward glances

in the theatre, to see what pretty girls are in the back row, or on the street, when the curtain parts on a woman's covered litter — no loitering! And above all Lygdamus, your slave and your corrupter, is to have his ankles manacled and be sold on the auction block.”

She laid down the law. I accepted. She laughed, proud of the power I gave up to her.

Then she sprayed perfume on any place the strange girls might have touched, scrubbed the threshold with springwater,

and ordered the oil and wicks in all the lamps to be changed;

she fumigated my head three times with smoldering sulfur and changed every sheet on the bed. After all this solemn exorcism, I said “amen” — and we made peace — all over the bed.

The Rotting Goddess

To Hecate

Pre-Christian, pre-Olympian, pre-Titanic Hecate
world-tree planted in Asia Minor,
gate-guard of the worlds,
keyholder to the three realms,
gross seated Mother, lions at your sides,
fostering nurse of all that's young,
female heap of big fat attributes,
cruel, non-rational mistress
of slain corn-kings, sacrificed children,
castrated temple-males;

you glid into Greece after Troy's fall,
Hecate-Enodia riding down from Thessaly,
leading the angry horde of ghosts,
planted yourself at the crossroads;
your torch began to smoke, then flared up,
making night noon —
world-tree Hecate, your roots reached Hell's
downmost altitude to suck the power
of the buried dead. Eater of filth,
goddess of darkness, grimly silently
munching corpses, Hecate,
regeared with incense of goat-fat, baboon-shit,
garlic; honored with gutted puppies
and rubbish rites;

Hecate, in your oakleaf crown shaking reptile dreadlocks,
around you hellhounds yowling sharp and shrill,
so meadows tremble, river-nymphs scream,
their waters rush backwards up the stream-bed
and dive affrighted down their own fountains;

with the witches I dance around you,
naked, snake-necklaced,
hair in the wind, gashing blood from arms:
sex-crazed hags with false teeth and hair,
young girls, gloriously pornographic,
stir the cauldron of ugly oddities,
throw in magic salads gathered in the graveyard—
a brew with power to draw babes screaming

into existence, or hurl them howling hence.
The witches lay hold of you, Hecate, World-tree,
shake, make tremble on your branches
the planets suspended
like rare and fragile fruit.

Introduction

Strange to say, witchcraft in antiquity is a subject which has never been seriously studied. The books on witchcraft all begin with the middle ages, and blandly assume that the witches of Rome were not materially different from their sisters in Salem. Studies of magic in antiquity, of which there are more than a few, do not recognize witchcraft for a practice with precisely defined means and goals.

Now, while it is true that every witch uses magic, not every magician is a witch. As long as the definition and limits of witchcraft remain unfathomed, analysis remains superficial and is generally made tributary to discussion of such ill-posed and insoluble questions as “the difference between magic and religion.”

The textual commentaries and studies of specific classical authors who depict witches confine themselves, without exception, to literary analysis, offering no more than citations of this or that motif in other writers, without meaningful examination.

Hecate has similarly been slighted as a subject, and, I would offer, for the same general reasons. The medievalists who write on witchcraft or its goddess are, as a rule, neither interested nor versed in the ancient world, while classicists typically have little taste for anything smacking of Christendom. Thus the triple goddess finds herself in a scholarly no-man’s-land.

It would be neither gracious nor feasible to give here the enormous negative bibliography of books and monographs that fail to note what I have; the facts are easily enough confirmed by any consultation of works that profess to address my theme. It is perhaps worth noting that the books on the topic which have appeared since this volume was first published (in 1998) have scrupulously avoided any mention of my work — a reticence which cannot be commended.

Here you will find (still) for the first time a complete and comprehensive study of Hecate and the witches for the 1200 year period from Homer to the *Greek Magical Papyri* (800 B.C.-400 A.D.), citing all substantial classical references and offering cross-cultural parallels to support my inferences.

I shall show the slow stages by which Hecate was demonized and the mythology of the evil witch arose, and how, hundreds of years *later*, the actual practice of witchcraft developed, realizing the troubled dreams of the poets. I shall stand at the moonlit crossroads of the the mind and make the so far reluctant spirits chirp to us the secrets of their source and mysteries of their being.

Part One

Hecate

She is a Tree of Life

“*She is a tree of life . . .*” — Proverbs 3:18

Hecate’s powers date “from the very beginning,” Hesiod informs us, in his seventh-century B.C. poem *The Theogony*, and we may perhaps take him literally. Even though the detailed features of Hecate are lost in the “dark backward and abysm of time,” much may be responsibly inferred from her geography, which alone suggests pre-Olympian, Pre-Titanic and even primaeval origin.

An impressive quantity of coins, statues, reliefs and dedications, along with the literary record, place Hecate’s origin in Carian Asia Minor (southeastern Turkey), with an important sanctuary at Lagina. In Caria Hecate enjoyed considerable dignity and political importance — she was protectress of the city of Stratonicea, together with Zeus, and was prominently worshipped alongside various other deities including Gaia. Hecate’s veneration elsewhere in the vicinity included initiatory cults on Aegina and Samothrace.

Through classical times her influence spread only westward, affecting some Aegean islands *en route*. Though there is almost no trace of her cult in the Peloponessus (southern Greece), she was intensely popular in Athens and Boeotia. Thus it comes about that she is the subject of the lovely, if somewhat colorless, hymn in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, and has a small part in the contemporary Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. A temple to Hecate stood outside the Eleusis sanctuary at the end of the Sacred Road.

Asia Minor (Turkey), Hecate’s oldest known address, hosted the most impressively developed of the Near Eastern neolithic cultures, one with archaeologically and iconographically demonstrable links to the paleolithic. This is attested by the famous discovery of a neolithic metropolis at Çatal Hüyük in Turkey — only 200 miles from Hecate’s great temple at Lagina. It is tempting to imagine that Hecate could be traced back to such a giddy antiquity as Çatal Hüyük records, all the way to 3000 B.C.!

The Indo-European Hittites moved into Asia Minor in the third millenium, just as the neolithic was ending, and the Phrygians in turn established their kingdom there by about 800 B.C. This succession of conquests makes it unlikely that Hecate is a goddess who comes down to us unchanged from the furthest past. But even if we assume Hecate was a late Phrygian import, she may plausibly be supposed to have inherited some very ancient traits of the fertility goddesses who figure so prominently in every period of Asia Minor’s archaeology, of whom Cybele and Artemis of Ephesus are well known examples.

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How may we bring detail to these vague associations? No clarity emerges from Hecate's marginal role in mystery religion — tantalizing as it is, the evidence we have of Hecate in the Eleusis cult and of her role in the Magic and Orphism in late antiquity is too scanty to help. Hecate's name has defied etymology. But the record of Hecate's depiction rises from the ocean of the unknowable like an island on the horizon.

The earliest Hecate image of all is a small sixth-century B.C. terra-cotta figure of an enthroned goddess, that we can identify as Hecate only because her name is inscribed on it. There are some other early images of Hecates on vases — a generic, Artemis-like figure, securely identifiable only where her name accompanies her image.

Around 430 B.C. the cult of Hecate was officially established at Athens, and the great sculptor Alcamenes, student of Phidias, created an



Hecate as she appears in the *Hymn to Demeter*, holding torches and helping Hermes lead Persephone up out of Hades while Demeter, far right, looks on. A red-figure vase from the fifth century A.D.

image of Hecate that would become iconic. He represented her, for the first time, *in triple form*. Though Alcamenes' sculpture did not survive, there are literally hundreds of later copies and imitations of it.

The Hecate images based on Alcamenes' creation show three identical goddesses ranged around a pillar, either staring out, standing archaically stiff amid the flutings of their robe-folds, or striding in a circle like disquieted caryatids. The only distinguishing marks among the triads are the articles they hold — torch, libation bowl, fruit — and the dogs at their feet. Not until the Roman period do the figures become distinct in

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figure and dress. For the moment we need only concern ourselves with the unprecedented tripling.



Classical Hecate: a Roman copy, reproducing a Hecate which is probably fairly close to the way Alcámenes represented her.

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The clue is the central column, an ever present element, rather thinner in the earliest examples but gradually taking on girth until, by Roman times, it has more the appearance of a pillar than a pole.

The earliest *hekataion* (image of Hecate) was a probably a post or pole hung with three wooden masks, set up at the crossroads. Why not four masks, it may be asked. Well, the common terms for the crossroads, in Greek (*triados*) as in Latin (*trivium*), literally mean “intersection of *three* roads.” The idea here is very archaic, and not strictly numerical. The common Indo-European culture from which both the Greek and the Latin descend, viewed the number three as symbolic of “many” or “all.” It was the most magical and all-inclusive number. The crossroads and Hecate were visualized as triple to indicate the ability to lead *everywhere*.

The first century A.D. Roman poet Ovid writes:

Look at Hecate, standing guard at the crossroads,
one face looking in each direction.

The first-century B.C. Roman encyclopedist Varro confirms that a Hecate image was a common feature of intersections in Greek towns. Plutarch,



Three views of another Roman copy. Cruder in execution, the greater prominence of the pillar is worth noting. The *berm* (representation of Hermes as a sacred fertility pole) alongside Hecate, visible on the right of the far left figure and the left of the far-right figure, is worth noting.

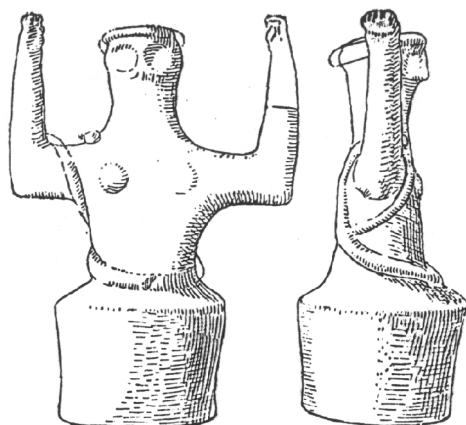
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the first-century A.D. Greek historian, tells us that the purpose of these images was to provide magic protection to travelers.



Roman copy of a Hecate from about the second century B.C., judging by the greater movement shown in the figures. Even though they are already dancing around a column, column-tops are set on the heads to show to identify them even more clearly with it.

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“Tubular idol” from Crete, front and side view, probably from about 1600 B.C.

A scholiast (ancient commentator) on Aristophanes’ play *Lysistrata* supplies the further fact that a *hekataion* is an image of Hecate *carved out of wood*.

Putting together all our clues, (pole, placement at intersection, facing in all directions, made of wood) a post hung with masks seems a secure conjecture for the archaic *hekataion*’s form.

Finally, as Phidias is famous for giving idealised human form to the gods, it is plausible that his student Alcamenes would similarly have transformed Hecate from a mask-rack to full and triple figures.

At this point we are equipped to proceed from the exoteric, historical and archaeological details of Hecate to the genuine mysteries of her being.

Artemis is the first goddess with whom Hecate was associated, and the one with whom she came to be most frequently and characteristically syncretized. Artemis herself was, like her brother Apollo, originally from Asia Minor, where she was a fertility goddess. This is visibly clear from her famous Ephesian cult image — the goddess with the many breasts.

At some point before the Greek literary record began, Artemis and Apollo were naturalized as Greek deities, and were rapidly cleaned up to suit Greek religious tastes. Artemis was relieved of her inconvenient and perpetual maternity to become a virgin huntress, a fit sister for the young god Apollo.

Hecate was also originally a great mother (as I shall demonstrate below), and was similarly being adapted to Greek religion. A certain amount of confusion arose between Hecate and Artemis before their Greek identities were fully defined. Thus in fifth century B.C., the Greek

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playwright Aeschylus has the chorus in *The Suppliants* pray that *Artemis-Hecate* may grant the women easy childbirth!

That Hecate was originally a Great Mother in Asia Minor is abundantly attested by epithets, inscriptions and images there; the Greeks frequently compared her to Cybele the *Magna Mater*, and Hesiod, in *The Theogony*, says of Hecate:

... as for those whose business is in waves of the the grey and dangerous sea,
who pray to Hecate and the loud-crashing Earth-Shaker Poseidon,
easily the glorious goddess Hecate gives them a great catch,
and easily she takes it away as soon as they see it, if she so wills.

Along with Hermes, she blesses the barns and makes the cattle increase,
and wide herds of goats and flocks of fleecy sheep too, if she wills,
she increases from a few, or makes many less.

So then, albeit her mother's only child, without brothers to enforce her rights,
she is honored amongst all the deathless gods. And the son of Kronus, Zeus, has made her , since she was born,
a fostering nurse to all young creatures whose eyes see the light of all-seeing Dawn.

So, from the very beginning, she is a nurse of the young, and these are her honors.

Strong testimony, this. But even stronger attestation of Hecate's role as fertility goddess comes from the central pole of the *hekataion*.



Cretan seals from about the sixteenth century B.C. Left, the “Mother of the Mountains.” The same idea appears to the right in a design that replaces the goddess with a pillar.

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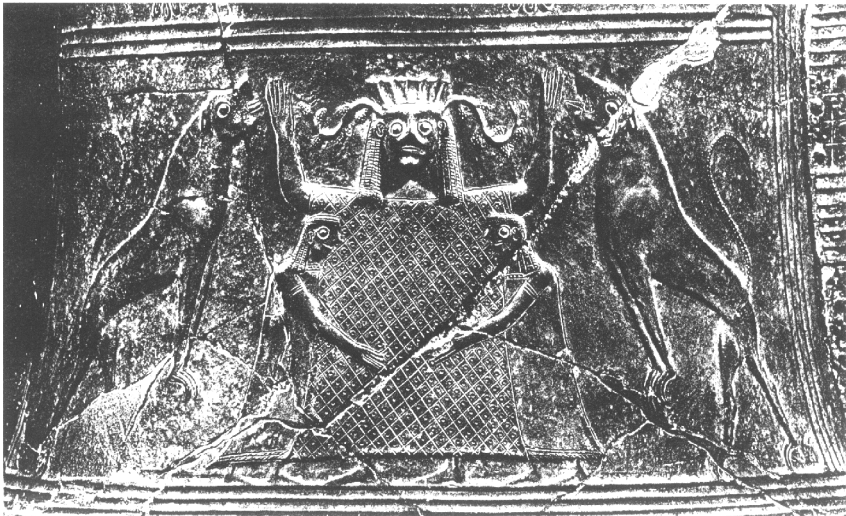
To understand this we may look at the parallel provided by the *Asherah* or sacred pole fetish of the Hebrew fertility goddess Ashtoreth, which the Bible informs us was “made of wood” and “cut into shape by man;” scholars believe it must have been a kind of post or stake.

We possess ceramic equivalents of the *Asherah* pole in the many hundreds of terra-cotta figures excavated in Israel alone (similar idols are found throughout the Nile-to-Oxus region) that show a female form with protruding breasts, who is from the waist down a straight cylindrical column with a flared base.

The pillar form of the Egyptian goddess of fertility Hathor is familiar to all visitors of the great museums. Crete had a version as well in the “tubular idols,” while many Mycenaean gems show, between two lions, interchangeably, a goddess or a pillar.

The pillar at the center of the *bekataion* is not then just a decorative or compositional feature, but may plausibly be taken as an emblem of the goddess herself — the masks or maidens around it are personified extensions of the underlying reality (like the persons of the Christian Trinity.)

But the pillar itself may be further clarified. It operates on the same archetypal level as a symbolic tree. The association of a tree with life and growth is universal, from the tree of immortality in the center of Eden to the Norse world-tree Yggdrasil. The *Svipdagsmal* (part of the thirteenth-century Old Norse *Poetic Edda*) says of Yggdrasil:

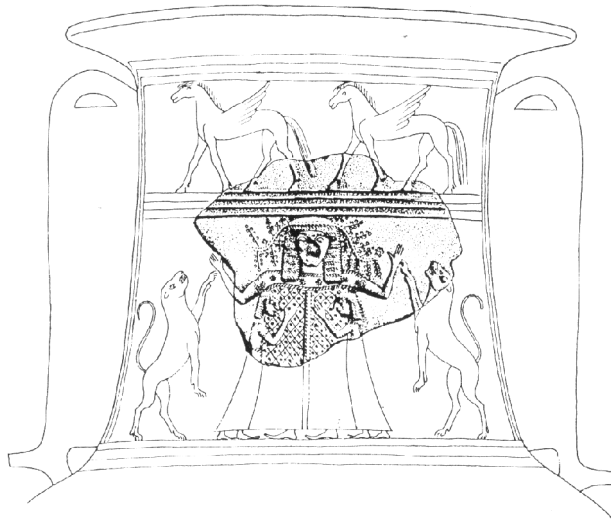


A sixth-century B.C. vase from Boeotia (Hesiod’s home) showing Hecate, flanked by lions, with a crown of branches, blessing and protecting two young women.

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Another sixth-century B.C. Hecate, this one from Tenos, an island midway between Greece and Hecate's home in Asia Minor.



A reconstruction of the Tenos Hecate.

“Tell me this, then, Fjolsvid,” Svipdag said, “What issues from the seed of this mighty tree that neither axe nor fire will fell?”

“Women in childbirth cook the fruit,” said the giant, “Then the hidden child is delivered safely. That's why people esteem it.”

The sacred-pole deities I have just mentioned are typically represented as trees as well. The worship of Ashtoreth, interchangeably as a pole-fetish or as a holy tree, is copiously attested in the Bible, where the prophets

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A vase from the same period showing a figure who may well be Hecate, judging by the flanking lions, and the animals that suggest dominion over sea (fish), land (lions, bull) and air (birds).

denounce the practice with monotonous zeal. Similarly, the sycamore tree was equated with Hathor by the Egyptians.

We are not then surprised to see that Hecate appears crowned with oak leaves in the surviving fragments of the fifth-century B.C. Greek playwright Sophocles' *The Witches*, as well as in the *Argonautika*, an epic poem by the third-century B.C. Greek Apollonius of Rhodes.

It may well be Hecate who, with a crown of branches offers maternal blessing to two maidens who embrace her from either side on a sixth-century B.C. stamped vase from Boeotia (shown above) — the time and home of Hesiod whose hymn to Hecate we have just seen.

The pair of lions flanking the figure help secure the identification of this image with Hecate. Lions are shown beside Hecate in first century B.C. on coins and in a temple-frieze from her homeland. Hundreds of years later, in the second to fourth centuries A.D. *Greek Magical Papyri*, Hecate is still described as accompanied by lions. The lions represent the goddess as nurturer of animal life, and there are a constant in depictions of fertility goddesses (see the figure of the Mycenaean pillar goddess from the sixteenth-century B.C., above).

To say that Hecate is a fertility goddess often represented by a pole or a tree is no more than to say she is a typical near-eastern fertility goddess, absolutely conventional in form. She is a local Turkish cognate of Ashtoreth, Hathor and the Mycenaean goddesses we know from seals and figurines.

It is my contention that Hecate is not only a fertility goddess, a “tree of life.” She is also an example of the archetype which historians of religion call the “world-tree.” This I deduce from another well-attested

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feature of her being — her access to many worlds. In his Hecate hymn in *The Theogony*, Hesiod says:

Zeus gave her splendid gifts:
a share of the fruitful earth and barren sea
he gave her a share of starry heaven too,
there she is honored exceedingly by the deathless gods.

Thus, Hecate participates in the three realms of the Homeric dispensation: those ruled by Zeus, Poseidon and Hades. The hymn continues:

To this day, whenever any man on earth
offers rich sacrifices and prays for favor,
the custom is to call upon Hecate.
Great honor comes full easily to him
whose prayers the goddess receives favorably,
and she bestows wealth upon him too,
for power surely is with her.

Clearly Hecate, who facilitates prayer, is an intermediary between the world of gods and that of men. This role is corroborated by her appearance as a messenger spirit in a poem by the fifth-century B.C. poet Pindar; hundreds of years later she still has the same role, when she appears as the catalyst of Medea's prayer to Youth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

All ritual trees and posts used in religious ceremonies partake, to some extent, in the character of the Universal Tree which marks the center of the world (e.g., the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, the Germanic *Welt-Asche*) whose roots are in hell, whose branches touch heaven — the bridge which makes possible communication between the worlds. In her classic treatment of Haitian Voodoo, *Divine Horsemen*, Maya Deren says of the *poteau mitain* ("center pole") in the midst of the *humfo* (voodoo temple):

And if one or another tree is particularly consecrated to this *loa* (spirit) or that, it is not because the *loa* is the spirit of the tree, it is, rather, in the sense of that tree as a preferred avenue of divine approach. The stylized tree, its branches and roots symmetrically extended to both sides of an horizon, is signalled, over and over in the vevers (stylized patterns sacred to individual *loa*). As a center-post — *poteau-mitain* — this same vertical avenue, axis of the metaphysical cosmos, is built into the very center of the *peristyle*, the ceremonial enclosure. Around this *poteau-mitain* revolve the ritual movements and the dance; at its base the offerings are placed; and through it the *loa* enter the peristyle.

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Of the sacrificial stake (*yupa*) of Vedic India, the *Satapatha Brahmana* (one of the commentaries on the Vedas written between 900 and 500 A.D.) says:

With your summit you hold up the heavens, with your
branches
you fill the air, with your foot you steady the earth.

To return to Hecate: Her world-tree like communication with all the realms, which explains her role as a facilitator of prayers, is a point very explicitly made by Sophocles in this fragment of his play *The Witches*:

O Lord Helios!
O sacred flame of the torch wayfaring Hecate holds by
her,
the torch she carries when she ranges in the realm of
Olympus
and when she returns to the earth, site of the crossroads,
the crossroads, her sacred place;
Hecate, crowned with oak and woven coils of fierce
serpents . . .

Six hundred years later, the first-century A.D. Roman epic poet Lucan describes a more demonic Hecate who still has access to all realms. His character, the arch-witch Erictho, says

Persephone, who is the third and lowest aspect
of Hecate, the goddess we witches revere,
Hecate, through whom I can silently converse with the
dead . . .

and

You, Hecate, rotting goddess,
with your pallid decaying body, you who have to wear a mask
when you visit the gods in heaven,
obey me or I shall show you to them as you are,
you who look like hell.

Relevant here is Hecate's depiction as gate-guardian, holder of the keys that open the realms. Her earliest inscription (sixth-century B.C.) calls her protectress of entrances, and *hekataia* would commonly be placed, *mezuzah*-like, at the doors of palace and private home alike. Thus Hecate opens the adamantine gates of Death in a poem by the third-century B.C. Greek poet Theocritus, and the entrance to hell is described by the first-century A.D. Roman poet Vergil as Hecate's grove. There Aeneas enters

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the world of the dead, invoking Hecate in her role of bridge between the realms,

calling aloud on Hecate, powerful in Heaven and Hell.

At the end of antiquity, in the *Greek Magical Papyri*, Hecate is decried over and over as holder of the key of Tartaros, the deepest pit of Hell.

At this point we are equipped to understand some of the attributes of the classical Hecate images I have so far left undiscussed. The long torch she carries when she helps Demeter search for Persephone in the seventh-century B.C. *Hymn to Demeter*, and that we have just seen in the fragment of Sophocles' *The Witches*, probably indicates her role as guide on all journeyes, great or small. The libation bowl and ewer would stand for her facilitating prayer at sacrifices, where the pouring of libations was a basic component; the fruit witnesses her fertility function.

As regards Hecate's antiquity, geography, etymology, genealogy and role in esoteric religion, I have merely brought, albeit for the first time, the research of other scholars into one convenient account. The understanding of her depiction as sacred pole, tree of life and world axis is entirely new and constitutes a complete departure from traditional scholarly interpretation.

I will call on one more outside witness: the sacred-pole fertility god of Dahomey, Legba.

According to Dahomean myth, Legba was born to Mawu and Lisa, the twin rulers of the sky, after all the realms had been apportioned. In compensation, Legba was made Mawu and Lisa's representative on all the planes of being. Legba is then, like Hecate, a world-axis type, bridging the realms. He thus becomes an intermediary for all communication with the gods. The mythological explanation is that Mawu and Lisa gave to each god a language that was appropriate to his realm. Legba interprets these different and mutually incomprehensible languages so that god may speak to and god, and gods make talk with man. In the classic study *Dahomey, An Ancient African Kingdom*, the Herskovitses relate

Therefore if any of the children of Mawu-Lisa, on earth or elsewhere, wish to address their parents or each other, they must transmit their messages through Legba, for they can no longer communicate directly. Thus Legba is everywhere; he is found even before the houses of the *vodu* (spirits, deities) themselves, and this is because all living creatures must address themselves to him before they can be understood by the gods.

which calls to mind Hesiod's

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To this day, whenever any man on earth
offers rich sacrifices and prays for favor,
the custom is to call upon Hecate.

Brought to Haiti by the slaves, Legba there retains his role, and is the first god saluted in all ceremonies as the one who makes communication between the realms possible. A ritual song of greeting to Legba quoted in Metraux's *Voodoo in Haiti* runs

Atibon-Legba, remove the barrier for me, *agoé!*
Papa Legba remove the barrier
So I may pass through.
When I come back I will salute the *loa*.
Voodoo Legba, remove the barrier for me
So that I may come back;
When I come back, I will thank the *loa*. *Abobo*.

Syncretism with Catholic Saints is standard in Afro-Caribbean religion, and Legba is identified with St. Peter — who holds the keys of Heaven and Hell — an association copiously paralleled for Hecate who is called “key-bearer” in the *Greek Magical Papyri*.

Legba is also a protection-granting fertility god, represented in front of each Dahomean house (*à la* the Greek *hekataion*) by a small earth mound in which is planted a phallic rod of wood or iron. The custom obtains in Haiti as well.

In Dahomey, Legba is the principal god sacrificed to in childbirth and receives signal honor in marriage rites; so too in Haiti, where his childbirth invocation includes (according to the Herkovitses) the phrase:

Open the road for me . . . do not let any evil spirit bar my
path.

This recalls Hecate's birth-helper role mentioned in reference to the archaic Artemis.

Finally, the pole which represents the cosmic axis, set up in the center of the Voodoo temple, the *poteau mitain* (“center pole”), is also called the *poteau Legba* (“Legba pole.”) Similarly, the pole that stands for Hecate is a *hekataion*.

Queen of Heaven, Queen of Hell



Seal from about the third century A.D., showing Hecate with daggers, whips, short torches and snakes. She maintains her triple form and central pillar.

In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Vergil calls Hecate “powerful in heaven and hell alike” — a striking formulation, and a deeply problematic one.

The Hecates of Greek literature are likewise both heavenly and hellish. Hesiod sang of a Hecate who was a fostering all-mother. It was an innocent, nymph-like Hecate who helped search for kidnapped Persephone in the *Hymn to Demeter*. But it was Hecate the queen of hell and mistress of the witches that appeared in Sophocles and Euripides. Yet while Athenian audiences shuddered at these horrific Hecates, they also heard her hymned by Aeschylus’ as a benign birth-helper, and Phidias’ pupil Alcamenes placed her beautiful triple shape at the entrance of the Acropolis. Vergil’s line summarizes the contradiction in Hecate, but offers no solution.

In her native Asia Minor, Hecate was venerated alongside the goddess Roma, and later worshipped alongside the deified Caesar — so surely she had to be, like Caesar’s wife, “above suspicion.” But then how can the poet Horace, in the same period, describe wicked witches invoking Hecate in a cemetery on Rome’s Esquiline hill to further their awful magic?

Almost all the statues of Hecate we have are from the fourth to first centuries B.C., almost all are from Athens and nearby Attica. But despite this agreement in time and place, they come in two contradictory varieties. In the one case the three figures are ranged around their pillar holding torches long enough to reach the ground. They may also carry

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ewers and libation bowls and fruit. Dogs sit at their feet. The other series retains the dog but shows figures with short torches, whips, serpents and keys, Hellish indeed!

Classics scholars at the end of the twentieth century declared research at an impasse. They decided that the original nature of Hecate (described in the previous chapter), was forever unknowable. The contradictory holy-infernal later descriptions were incomprehensible. End of discussion.

But about a century ago Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff (1848-1931), the greatest classical philologist of all time, resolved the problem of Hecate's dual nature with a few brief and brilliant remarks. (Wilamowitz, by the by, if he is known to non-specialists, is known only because of his withering review of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, which made a very hurt Nietzsche abandon the field of classical philology.)

Wilamowitz pointed out that, until the fifth century B.C., no one had anything but good to say of Hecate. But then, said Wilamowitz, judging by the literary and archaeological record, Hecate was, during the fifth century, gradually conflated with the goddess Enodia from Thessaly (northern Greece).

To develop Wilamowitz' insight, we have to look at Enodia in detail. Unfortunately we know little beyond her name. She makes her first appearance in literature with *Helen* by the fifth-century B.C. playwright Euripides. When Menelaus sees the real Helen in Egypt, he can't believe his eyes. The play has,

Menelaus: O Hecate, torch bearing night-wanderer, send your visions kindly!

Helen: You see in me no ghost, no nocturnal servant of Enodia.

Enodia's homeland was Thessaly, where her cult was centered in the city of Pherai. This region was well settled in the neolithic, just like Asia Minor, and thus fertility goddesses were particularly prominent there as well.

The Euripides passage makes it clear that Enodia has a retinue of ghosts, and this suggests a similar host, the *witende Heer*, which attends the fertility goddesses (Holda, Berchte, Herodias, Dame Abonde &c.) of European folklore. The Brothers Grimm made a classic study of this folklore motif in chapter thirteen of their *Teutonic Mythology*.

Our richest source of testimony for Enodia is the coinage from her city, Pherai, which happily survives for the entire fifth and fourth centuries B.C. This shows a goddess in a myrtle crown, one or two torches in hand, riding a horse. In all, an image that goes well with the idea that she is a goddess who leads a horde of ghosts across the night. Also her name, Enodia, "traveler", would be a good fit.

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Whatever Enodia originally was in Thessaly, she appears in Greek literature as just another name for Hecate. Hecate has completely absorbed her. This was easy because Hecate was a fertility goddess with special access to all realms. Enodia was a fertility goddess too, with a special close relationship with roads and travel. Enodia is also the queen of the ghosts, and this is a normal aspect of fertility goddesses. They are identified with the earth, which not only brings forth life but is the home of the buried dead. Hecate undoubtedly already had some of Enodia's spooky associations before she met Enodia, though they do not seem to have been very prominent. When Hecate absorbed Enodia her dark side was emphasized. The placement of Hecate's image at the crossroads must have catalyzed the development of a scarier Hecate.

The crossroads is a site with universal spooky implications. To the religious imagination it can appear not as a random juncture of paths but as a place where roads purposefully converge: in Egyptian such an intersection is basic to the concept of "city." The glyph for city, *neywet*, shows a crossroads. This may help explain the wierd feeling associated with a desolate crossroads far from any town — it's like a city center without a city, roads converging on nowhere, or perhaps on the invisible?

A good parallel comes from ancient Japan, where rituals of possession by *Marebito* (gods, god-men, ancestral spirits, souls of the dead), which are the origin of the *No* plays, were performed at the crossroads.

Once the location of the *bekataion* was understood as dark Enodia's sacred site, Hecate drew dark nourishment from the haunted Thessalian plains. Planted in Enodia's home city, Pherai, Hecate went from a tree of life to something approaching a gallows. Thus we have descriptions such as this from Euripides' play *Ion*:

Daughter of Demeter, Enodia, hear,
propitious regent of each public way
Amid the brightness of the day
Nor less when night's dark hour engenders fear . . .

and this from Virgil's *Aeneid*:

Hecate, whose name is shrieked at night at the crossroads of
cities.

and, by the end of antiquity, the *Greek Magical Papyri* say:

Come, Hecate, goddess
of the crossroads, who with your fire-breathing phantoms
have been allotted dread roads and harsh enchantments . . .

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Once she takes on the fatal name Enodia, the torch which Hecate has carried for at least two hundred years, since the *Hymn to Demeter* in the seventh century B.C., the torch which was probably always hers and is her identifying emblem in art, begins to sputter and smoke, casting lurid light. This becomes the “gleam of countless torches” that accompanies her earthquaking manifestation in the third-century B.C. Greek poet Apollonius of Rhodes. The first-century A.D. Roman philosopher Seneca wrote a play, *Medea*, in which the title character cries: “My prayers are heard: thrice has bold Hecate bayed loud, and has raised her accursed fire with its baleful light.”

An instructive parallel is provided by the Dahomean trickster and fertility god Legba. He is represented by a phallic sacred pole placed in front of every dwelling, very much like the *hekataion* of classical Athens. He is not, in Dahomey, particularly associated with the crossroads, which are under the control of the spirit *Aizua*. Legba is deficient in funereal associations in Dahomey, in fact, there a man's relation to his Legba ends with his death, whereupon the Legba-fetish which stood guard before his compound is desacralized and shattered.

When he was brought to Haiti by the slaves, Legba began to be placed at the crossroads. He thus acquired the epithet *Mait' Carrefour* (Lord of the Crossroads) and became a god involved in sorcery — without however forfeiting his other associations. His ambivalent nature and the way it was gained mirrors Hecate's great mother and witch mistress status. The fusions with Enodia brought spooky overtones to the sacred-pole goddess Hecate ; she was particularly susceptible to these through her connection with the crossroads.

Seemingly we have solved the problem of the double Hecate, but in so doing we have raised a new and more troubling question. Enodia *was* a fertility goddess with more pronounced underworld associations than Hecate, but the record of her veneration in Thessaly suggests a character in no way *demonic*. Nor can everything be attributed to the crossroads — Hermes is, after all, a god of the crossroads and a frequent visitor to the world of the dead without forfeiting thereby his bright Homeric character. (Indeed, we might also ask, what was it that happened to Legba between Dahomey and Haiti, that made him take on the traits of a god of sorcery? The crossroads alone would not have been enough.)

We know when Hecate and Enodia fused, and that the result was immediately pronounced infernal by the Greeks, despite the the fact that their positive features were preserved alongside and intact — but why? It would seem to argue a profound ambivalence in the Graeco-Roman soul towards something Hecate and Enodia represent. A troubling conundrum, asking of us most delicate further reflection.

Underneath the Moon

“Everything that exists beyond the moon is eternal.”

— Cicero, *The Republic*

Back in the nineteenth century, classics scholars relentlessly interpreted all of Hecate’s attributes as lunar. Researchers of the present day, though no longer moonstruck, have made no move towards questioning this opinion. But, in fact, Hecate is never identified or even associated with the moon until the Roman period.

Much of the confusion arises from a general failure among classicists to appreciate the very central place of the moon in the Roman religious world. The moon was for the Romans what Eleusis was for the Greeks: the the most potent symbol of the everlasting cycles of nature and existence. For the Roman, the waxing, waning, ever self-renewing moon made a promise that all that dies may return to life in season.

The reason Luna’s prominent place in Roman religion is so unacknowledged is embarrassingly simple. The Romans learned literature, and indeed literacy, from the Greeks. Accordingly, their intellectual career began as a slavish imitation of Greek models. To some extent, it always remained that.

The Romans expressed their own religious world using Greek mythology, and to such an extent that the world of Roman mythology is almost completely lost. It’s quite understandable when we think back to the beginnings of American literature. What American poet of the nineteenth century would have wanted to write a poem about Johnny Appleseed or Paul Bunyan when he could take as his topic King Arthur or Achilles?

So, books like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the first-century A.D. bible of classical mythology, give the modern reader a rather skewed view of Roman religion. Greek mythology is retold by Roman poets, with here and there a Latin name (Jove for Zeus, Juno for Hera, and so on), but that’s about the extent of the Roman content. The Roman authors are not, as a rule, presenting a mythology they shared with the Greeks, but one which they adopted from them. In fact, the respective pantheons and myths of Greece and Rome have as much, and as little, in common as the Greek and Latin languages. The student of Roman mythology has little more to go on than the odd incongruous Roman religious detail thrown into a Greek story. In Latin literature, Greek myth replaced Roman myth even more thoroughly than Christian mythology did the native Celtic and Germanic traditions of Europe.

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While the moon stood at the very center of Roman mythology, it was, for the Greeks, a very peripheral figure. The Greeks gave the moon only the minor myths of Selene and Endymion. Thus the literary Romans, determined to be Greek, had no way of talking about the moon. Nevertheless, the truth of their moon-worship keeps peering out from behind the Grecian clouds.

The first-century B.C. Roman scholar and polymath Varro, at the beginning of his work on agriculture, places the moon among the twelve gods. The first-century A.D. poet Virgil begins his epic poem about agriculture, the *Georgics*, with an invocation to the moon and stars:

O moon and stars, the sky's most radiant lights,
who guide the year smoothly through in it's cycle . . .

— it is only after the moon and her sparkling retinue have been saluted that he addresses the gods Dionysus and Demeter, whom the Greeks considered the deities of agriculture. In the same spirit, the poet Horace, Virgil's friend, writes:

. . . you sing the praises due to the children of Latona, the sun
and the moon, the orb of night, who as her light increases
ripens the crops and speeds along months.

As the first-century A.D. orator Cicero puts it in his book *The Gods*:

. . . the moon . . . advances pregnancies and ripens them into
births . . .

In fact, the Romans believed the moon affected all earthly developments: wind, rain and tides, human and animal life, even the “growth” of minerals, and earthquakes. But her influence is most strong upon the vegetable kingdom. The second-century A.D. historian Suetonius says, in a surviving fragment of his book *Nature* :

The moon is a great magnet for vapor and for all substances
characterized by moisture. When the moon grows, so do all fruits,
and as it wanes, they shrink too.

There is much specific advice from all the Roman writers on agriculture (of whom there are quite a few!) as to when it is best to plant or harvest the various plants. And all the information is given with reference to the lunar cycle. The Greeks gave no such role to the moon. One example will suffice. The seventh-century B.C. Greek poet Hesiod, in his poetic handbook on farming, *Works and Days*, reckons the times for planting, harvesting and so on by weather signs, rainfall, bird and plant appearances — to the exclusion of the moon.

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The role of the moon in agriculture means something very special in the Roman context. The Romans considered agriculture the finest and most improving of human pursuits, it was the very essence of who they were. Cicero says in his book *Duties*:

But of all the occupations by which you can earn a living, none is better than agriculture, none more advantageous, none more delightful, none more becoming to a free man.

Every urban Roman's ambition was to someday have enough money to buy a farm and retire to the country. The most characteristic Roman building, the *villa*, is a farmhouse: it isn't designed for a city, but to be a walled compound out in the country. Acquiring territory that would become the empire was the great collective venture of Roman society, and the term the Romans used for their lands was the *ager Romanus*, which means "lands subjected to the Roman plough."

So if the Romans saw the moon as mistress of agriculture, this made her the very heart of their religious world. So powerful a fertility goddess as the Roman moon would, of course, tend to absorb late-arrived goddesses who shared symbolism with her. So it was with Isis. Introduced into Rome in the early first century A.D. and extremely popular, she is described in the *The Golden Ass*, a novel by the second-century A.D. North African Latin author Apuleius. The passage is worth citing in full as it illustrates many of the points I will soon make:

About midnight, when I'd slept for a few hours, I awakened with a start, and saw the moon shining as brightly as when she is full. Suddenly she was there, risen so fast it seemed she had literally leaped out of the sea. Then I thought to myself that now, at the secret midnight hour, was when the moon was at the height of her powers. All human affairs are governed by the moon, as are all animals, tame or wild. All living things are strengthened by her light and divine power, and so are inanimate and lifeless things. Every substance in the heavens, the earth and the seas is increased as she increases, and diminishes as she diminishes.

Weary from all my cruel misfortunes and personal disasters, I conceived the hope that I might yet be rescued by invocation and prayer to this powerful and beautiful goddess. So, shaking off my drowsiness, I arose smiling and, feeling a strong longing to purify myself, I went down to the shore and plunged my head seven times into the water (seven is a holy and divine number, as wise Pythagoras knew). Then awake, alert and glad (though weeping), I made this prayer to the powerful goddess:

"O blessed queen of heaven, should I call you Demeter, the original and motherly fosterer of all growing things in the

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earth, who, after finding your daughter Persephone, were so joyful that you replaced the original human diet of nuts and berries with something better? You made the barren ground of Eleusis to be ploughed and sown, and provided mankind with better and more delicate foods made from grain. Or shall I call you heavenly Venus, who, at the beginning of the world, joined together male and female in conjugal love for the eternal propagation of humankind? Or shall I call you sister of the god Apollo, the goddess who saves so many people by easing the pangs of childbirth, like a divine physician, the great Diana adored at Ephesus? Or shall I call you terrible Hecate? You terrify with doglike howlings, you with triple face, you who control the hordes of ghosts, who are able to make them appear or keep them hidden in the Earth! You are a goddess who wanders through many groves and sacred places, worshipped in many manners. You illuminate all the cities of the earth by night with your feminine, lunar light; you nourish all the seeds of the world with the warm moisture you create, you whose light changes depending on how the sun's light touches you; I call on you by whatsoever name or shape it is right to call upon you . . .

The goddess who answers this opulent invocation is Isis. She is described with the titles of many deities, but she clearly appears in the form of the moon. This is quite interesting. Isis never possessed lunar features in Egypt. (There *was* an Egyptian moon god, the minor deity Khons.) The specific powers Apuleius attributes to his lunar Isis are precisely those we have seen the Romans attributing to the moon for hundreds of years.

Isis was the major fertility goddess in Egypt. The Roman Apuleius expressed this by describing Isis in terms of the moon, the goddess whom the Romans considered the giver of all fertility. Exactly the same thing will happen with Hecate: because she is a fertility goddess, the Romans feel they are right to make her lunar. When Romans adopt foreign mythologies, they don't always completely replace their own beliefs. They create hybrids, foreign in form but Roman in content — at least when that content is as important to the Roman soul as the moon was.

But while every fertility goddess was compatible with Luna (as Apuleius' prayer makes clear), Hecate had something that guaranteed her complete and lasting synthesis with the Roman moon: the very superficial matter of Hecate's triple form. This was what swung Hecate decisively into a lunar orbit.

The Roman moon was a triple deity, long before she came in contact with Hecate. In fact, she was triple as far back as inscriptions and historical records take us, which is to the sixth century B.C. Hecate did not even begin to syncretize with the triple Roman moon goddess before the last

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quarter of the first century B.C., so she couldn't have influenced the Roman moon's depiction.

Before I start marshalling my evidence, I should stress that it's going to look a little patchy. This is because the Romans tended to write about Greek myths and practices, rather than their own, so there isn't that much there. I will piece together the facts from a coin, an inscription, a line from a poet, because there is no surviving text in which a Roman author describes his own religion systematically and in detail. The closest we have to such a deliberate account are the "refutations" of Roman paganism written by early Church fathers.

My method has, however, this advantage: I am using actual Roman evidence to describe Roman religion, instead of assuming, as most classicists do, that there is no important difference between Roman and Greek mythology and religious practice.

At this point we need to start using the name for the moon goddess that the Romans themselves used: Juno. Juno, whose maternal character is anciently and consistently attested, is the most logical representative for the moon as the Romans conceived it. Although we don't have any clear etymology for the name Juno, her constant epithet *Lucina* clearly refers to light (in Latin, *lux*). We may reasonably translate the name *Lucina* as "luminous." Ovid, in his book *The Calendar*, offers these suggestions as to how we should understand *Lucina*:

Ten times the moon had regrown her crescent horns,
then every husband became a father,
each wife a mother. The curse of infertility was gone
thanks to Juno, whom we call *Lucina* —
a name which suggests the sacred groves (*lucus*) of the
goddess,
and also the fact that you, Juno, are a source of light (*lux*).
Gracious Juno-*Lucina*, be compassionate to women with
child,
gently deliver the womb's ripe burden.

Ovid's suggestion that the name *Lucina* relates to the word for grove is of course wrong — the ancients had only the vaguest idea of how word etymology worked. For them, a pun was as good as a proof. But Ovid is quite correct in his second suggestion, that *Lucina* comes from the word for light.

Another and stronger piece of evidence for an always lunar Juno comes from the Roman calendar itself. The *Calends*, the appearance of new moon which marked the beginning of the Roman month, were always sacred to Juno. Juno was then equated with the moon by the Romans as far back as they could tell time and reckon dates.

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It remains to show that Juno was always triple. Juno bears three names in inscriptions from the cities of Latium (the oldest Roman region in Italy), particularly Lanuvium, where we find inscriptions to *Iunone seispiti matri reginae*, that is, “Juno: Defender, Mother, Queen.” To understand the meaning of these three titles, we need to use the discoveries of Georges Dumézil. His great works proved the survival of pan-Indo-European beliefs and attitudes among the peoples who descended from them, most notably in the tripartite division of society into Royal/Priestly, Warrior, and Agricultural classes. The Hindu Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaisya castes are the parade example of this.



Triple Juno from a first-century B.C. Roman coin.

In his book *Archaic Roman Religion* Dumézil interprets this inscription as testimony to Juno’s involvement in the Warrior (“Defender,”) Agricultural (“Mother”) and Royal/Priestly (“Queen”) segments of society.

Other evidence for a triple Juno comes from a first-century B.C. Roman coin (shown above) which has three female figures with linked arms, the one on the left holding a bow, that on the right a poppy. Behind them are cypress trees. There is also a horizontal bar behind them, and this is a visual convention to show that the figures are to be understood as inseparable. Such a bar is used, for example, in depictions of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. The image bears no name, but provides a remarkable parallel to the triple Juno of the Dumézilian inscriptions. We see bow-bearing Diana on the left for Juno the “Defender;” Proserpine, with her traditional poppy, on the right for the agricultural “Mother;” Juno Lucina,

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the essence of the whole conception, in the very center as befits the “Queen.”

This threefold Roman Juno attested to by the earliest Roman inscriptions and early Roman coins was triple, but not in the way that Hecate was. She was part of a trio of deities who were seen as being, at the same time, one and separate. She was a real trinity in the Christian sense. And the members of this trinity were, the Roman poets tell us, Juno, Diana and Proserpine.

Let us now turning to the other members of the Juno triad, Diana was a goddess originally from Latium, in central Italy (the place of the inscriptions), with a major sanctuary in the Alban hills close to Rome. In her shrine there, in a wood on the shore of a mountain lake, she was served by a priest known as *Rex Nemorensis*, “the woodland king.” This was a slave or fugitive who could be replaced as monarch of the forest by anyone who killed him. There is too little information to truly clarify these tantalizing details. Sir George Frazer wrote his *Golden Bough*, an encyclopedia of comparative anthropology, in a quixotic attempt to understand the *Rex Nemorensis*. The preface and conclusion of his book, which give his results, are still worth reading, both as a daring reconstruction of the rites, and for Frazer’s own deliciously lurid musings and tumescent prose.

Diana was understood by the Romans as their version of the Greek virgin huntress Artemis, and in the literary and artistic record the Latin deity is pretty much lost under the Greek overlay. But two essential details emerge. Diana, like Artemis, carries a bow, she’s an *armed* goddess, and second, she’s consistently listed as an aspect of a triple fertility goddess. This strongly supports the theory that she is the warrior aspect of a Dumézilian Indo-European triad. A good look at the Roman Diana is provided by this poem by Horace, who describes her as a forest goddess to whom the spoils of the hunt are sacrificed.

O maiden goddess, guardian of hill and grove,
you that, thrice invoked, hear the cries
of young mothers in childbirth pangs
and rescue them from death, goddess of the triple form,
I dedicate to you this pine tree towering over my home.
Here I shall gladly sacrifice to you
each year, a young boar just learning how to slash
with a sidelong thrust of the tusk.

The third part of the trinity is Persephone (Proserpine in the Roman spelling), the Greek goddess of agriculture whom the Romans used to represent their own agriculture goddess Ceres. Again, the replacement is so complete that all that remains which we can securely call Roman is her

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agricultural role, and her description as part of the Juno-trinity. The literary record for Roman Proserpine is so sparse that we cannot do better than to cite her appearance in a poem by the Roman poet Catullus, which gives us the the fullest description of the Juno trinity we possess:

Under Diana's protection, pure girls and virgin boys,
we sing of Diana, daughter of Leto, high powerful child of
universal Jove,
born beside an olive tree on Delos,
huntress, lady of the mountains,
lady of the moist fresh forest,
lady of secret valleys and loud fast rivers.
Diana whose name is Lucina, Lightbringer,
who every month restores the vanished moon,
Diana whose name is Juno Lucina,
who hears the pained prayers of birthing women.
Diana whose name is Trivia —
the crossroads her sacred place —
night goddess, queen of the underworld.
Threefold Diana, huntress, birth-helper,
and Luna shining with borrowed light.
Diana, in your monthly circle
measuring out the turning year,
filling the farmer's rough-walled barn
with fruit and produce, vegetables and grain.
Be you holy and exalted by whatever name will please you!
and now, as of old, with your good power,
protect the people of Romulus.

Catullus describes the trinity in terms of Diana (Juno's warrior aspect), Juno Lucina, and Proserpine (whom the poet here calls Trivia). Catullus has given us the same image we find on the coin.

Catullus' use of the name Trivia for Proserpine is, of course, a reference to Hecate (it's a Latin epithet made directly from the Greek word for crossroads, *triodos*). Catullus uses the associations of the name Trivia to emphasize the underworld aspect of Proserpine who, though primarily the goddess of the planted seeds, is also queen of all else that's buried.

The epithet Trivia is the first time that Hecate appears in Roman literature. From the start, Hecate is virtually submerged in the Latin and lunar triple deity. Of the Greek Hecate there survives at most an epithet or a descriptive detail, like an extinguished torch bobbing unhappily on the Luna-ruled waves. (This does not really contradict my earlier statements that Roman religion was nearly lost *to literature* under the inundation of Greek influence. The Roman cosmos resists and remains only in a case like that of the moon, which was at the very heart of their

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sacred world. And even here, the moon remains under the Greek alias, Hecate.)

The Greek Hecate herself never had lunar traits, nor was she understood in Greece as a corporate entity comprised of three separate goddesses. Her introduction to Rome brought about these profound changes.

One further metamorphosis awaited Hecate eclipsed by the moon: reformulation in philosophical terms. From the second to fourth centuries A.D., while Greek rationalism finally came to terms with Greek religiosity, popular systems of belief arose that offered syntheses of philosophy and mysticism. *The Chaldean Oracles* are a very sophisticated example of the trend, *The Greek Magical Papyri* a fairly vulgar one.

In the *Magical Papyri* Hecate has gone beyond being a fertility goddess, one who supervises the cycle of organic growth, decay and rebirth. Now she is not the producer of change but Change itself — which the Greeks considered the essence of what was wrong with the world of matter. Change entails decay, and growth itself is thus a kind of death-sentence. The entire conception is given in the *Magical Papyri* with impressive continuity. On the one hand Hecate is the mother of all growth:

. . . Hecate, Mistress
of night and underground realms, holy, black-clad,
you are the moon that waxes till it tugs
at the world revolving in space among the stars.
It is you who produced every physical thing,
you engendered everything on earth,
everything in the sea, and all the different races
of flying, nesting birds.
Mother of all, who gave birth to Cupid, you are Aphrodite,
and the lamp-bearer Selene, shining and aglow.

Another spell from the *Magical Papyri* states that Lunar Hecate, waxing and waning, provides the pattern of all becoming:

I call upon you who have all forms and many names, double-horned goddess, Moon, whose form no one knows except him who made the entire world, Jahweh, the one who shaped you into the twenty eight shapes you assume in the lunar month, which produced all the forms in the world. Through you every creature takes form, through you breath and life come to every animal and plant, so that they flourish, like you who grow from obscurity into light, like you who also finally wane and leave light for darkness.

Hecate is not only identified with Change, but with Chance. She is called “swift *Tyche* (random luck) of daimons and gods” and “Selene, only Ruler,

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the Fortune of daimons and gods.” The *Magical Papyri* go on to call her the random Chance which is stronger than Providence:

Hail, Holy Light, Ruler of Tartaros,
who strike with rays; hail, Holy Beam, who whirl
up out of darkness and subvert all things
with aimless plans. I'll call and may you hear
my holy words since awesome Destiny
is ever subject to you.

The association which went from Growth to Change to Chance ends with Doom:

. . . you're Justice and the Moira's (Fate's) threads:
Klotho and Lachesis and Atropos
(the goddesses who weave Fate into being) . . .

From the fates to the furies, (the spirits who bring death and punishment to the wicked,) the transition is easy:

Necessity
hard to escape are you; you're Destiny and
the fury Erinys, Torment, Justice and Destroyer,
you keep Cerberus in chains, with scales
of serpents are you dark, O you with hair
of serpents, serpent-girded, who drink blood . . .

But both Growth and Decay, Creation and Doom, are encompassed by the cosmic and complete lunar Hecate:

Beginning
and end are you, and you alone rule all,
for all things are from you, and in you do all things,
eternal one, come to their end.

A Howling at the Gate

The accounts of Hecate as the goddess of the witches, all literary, only begin in the fifth century B.C., 200 years after a completely un-demonic Hecate was introduced into the Olympian family and Greek literature by Hesiod. My task here shall be to demonstrate that the Hecate of the witches is not a suppressed aspect of the goddess, but the result of a long a methodical, albeit unconscious, demonization of her benign and ordinary traits.

The actual rites and practices associated with Hecate are reliably attested to only by inscriptions, and the tid-bits of social history one finds in the comic authors and antiquarians. We can trust this material because there is no motive for falsification. We can probably assume that whatever we have attested for in this manner is true for a few hundred years back as well: religion tends to be rather conservative, and typically preserves wording, dress and ritual even after the original meaning has long been forgotten.

Perhaps the best testimony to Hecate's original rites are the inscriptions from the Lagina temple in her Asia Minor homeland, dating from the fourth to second centuries B.C. These mention eunuch priests — a commonplace for the great goddesses of Asia Minor — and the mysterious office of “key-bearer,” apparently filled by a priestess who carried a key in some sacred procession. This constitutes virtually our entire fund of information on her native rites, but is happily paralleled by the earliest (sixth-century B.C.) inscription for Hecate's cult in Greece — on an altar in the temple of Apollo Delphinus at Miletus, where she shares with him the title “protector of entrances.”

In Greece Hecate was regarded as a universal door-warder and gate-guardian, and so stood before palaces, temples and all private homes. A character in Aristophanes' play *The Wasps* says:

You see, the oracles are coming true: I have heard it foretold that one day the Athenians would dispense justice in their own houses, that each citizen would have himself a little tribunal constructed on his porch, just like the Hecate-fetishes they have at every door.

The pole-like Hecate-fetish (*hekataion*, plural: *hekataia*) was regarded as conferring a general protection on all who dwelt within a house or passed through its doors. An ancient commentary on the Aristophanes' play says:

Hekataion: Hecate-fetish: the Athenians set her up everywhere as guardian and child-nurturer.

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This good influence seems to have extended to travel as well. Various sorts of fortune-telling were routinely offered by the priests at pagan temples: Hecate was consulted (through an oracular priest) before taking a trip. Aristophanes has a character in his play *Lysistrata* say:

Theagenes' wife is sure to come at any rate; she has actually been to consult Hecate.

Likewise, a safe return was an occasion for giving Hecate thanks. Among the many inscriptions included in *The Greek Anthology* (a sort of ancient *Norton Anthology* which continued to be re-edited and expanded from the first century B.C. to the tenth century A.D.), is this one to Hecate:

Hecate, goddess of travelers,
Antiphilus dedicates to you this hat
that protected his head all through his journey,
because you heard his supplication and blessed his path.
The gift is not great, but given with pious awe.
May greedy travelers think twice about snatching away my
offering:
It is not safe to steal even little gifts from a shrine.

However, Hecate's association with travel, exits and entrances had become demonic by the the third century B.C. A poem from this period by Theocritus depicts an amateur sorceress who invokes Hecate saying:

O Hecate, just as you can open the steel door of Death,
so you can move all else that is is unshakeable.
Listen, Thestylis, the dogs howl in town,
Hecate is surely appearing at the crossroads.

As late as second to fourth centuries A.D. *Greek Magical Papyri*, Hecate is conjured up on a night "in which the bar of Hell-gate is opened" and addressed by a magician who says: "I . . . possess your key. I opened the door of Hell, the door Cerberus guards . . ." Elsewhere in the *Magical Papyri* she is invoked in the name of her key and thrice-locked door and called ". . . you who've opened the gates of steel unbreakable," "gate-breaker," and quite simply "key."

Another of Hecate's standard roles seems to have been to receive remnants of household propitiatory and purification offerings, as well as the sweepings from ritual housecleaning, that were burned before the Hecate-fetish of the crossroads or the doorway. The potsherd on which the rubbish was burnt was carried away, thrown, and abandoned without looking back. The Greek playwright Aeschylus has a character in *The Libation Bearers* say:

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Or shall I pour this libation on the ground, for Earth
to drink,
without a word, without respect,
the way my father was slain and left to lie?
Shall I go home without a single backward glance,
just throw away the libation bowl, as if I were flinging
out, on the public road, for Hecate,
the dirt from a ritual housecleaning?

The purpose of the ritual housecleaning was the removal of earthy substances inimical to the veneration of the celestial Olympian deities. Hecate's custody of rubbish, dirt and uncleanness, a natural and minor specialty for an earth and fertility goddess, reappears in the *Magical Papyri* bizarrely emphasized. Her original positive, if undignified, relation to earthy substances has been perverted into a negative theophany. Now Hecate is called *Borborophorba*, "the Eater of Filth." She takes her dinner in the graveyard, a characterization which is unpleasantly developed in:

O nether and nocturnal and infernal
goddess of dark, grimly, silently
munching the dead,
Night, Darkness, broad Chaos, you're Necessity,
hard to escape are you: you're Moira and
Erinyes, Torment, Justice and Destroyer,
And you keep Cerberos in chains.
Serpent-scaled, you are dark, with hair
made of snakes, serpent-girdled, you drink blood,
you bring death and destruction, you feast
on hearts, flesh eater, you devour those untimely dead
and you make lamentations ring out . . .

By the epithets Necessity, Justice &c. it becomes clear that Hecate is equated not only with earth, but with all that earth implies: material existence, which carries an implicit death sentence for all that come into being. So profound is this Dirt Theophany that has extended to the cosmic limit of Greek philosophical pessimism!

According to the *Magical Papyri*, this rotten Hecate can be simply and respectfully regaled with cow-dung incense, but in special cases one prepares for her a perfume of goat-fat, baboon-excrement, garlic and the like — a concoction so noxious that it is an effective curse to accuse someone else of having prepared it! Strong smells, such as are associated with decay, now constitute the ambiance of earthy-dirty Hecate.

Another reflection of this developed dirt-sacrality is to be found in *The Sacred Disease*, a treatise on epilepsy by the fourth-century B.C. Greek physician Hippocrates. This states that Hecate is responsible for people defecating on themselves during a seizure. Since the other symptoms

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reflect the nature or associations of various gods (*e.g.*, if the patient foams at the mouth and kicks, that's due to the war god Ares), we must understand the stink of excrement as Hecate's calling card.

Ecstasy was also part of the piety associated with Hecate — as it was with all the agricultural great goddesses. The Roman goddess Ceres was a sender of madness, as were her ghostly attendants, the *Larvae*. Cybele, Hecate's sister goddess from Asia Minor, had rites so frenzied the Greeks never let her into their pantheon. Apuleius gives us a detailed description of Cybele's services, which included cross-dressing, shouting, dancing, wild music of drums and oboes, self-whipping and wounding, and a trance from which the priest returned with messages from the goddess.

Hecate appears in two fifth-century B.C. lists of powers associated with frenzy, both of which include Cybele. One is in the aforementioned *The Sacred Disease*. This list makes the onslaught of Hecate responsible for madness and for night-terrors that hurl one out of bed. The second passage, from *Hippolytus* by the fifth-century B.C. Greek playwright Euripides, is worth citing in full:

Maiden, you must be possessed,
made crazy by Pan
or by Hecate, or by the scary Corybantes
with Cybele the mountain mother!

Finally, Hecate is precisely invoked in the *Magical Papyri* as a sender of “painful frenzy.” Sending mental distress to harry and madden various recalcitrant love-objects is her primary task throughout these spells.

The witches, like Hecate, are steeped in ecstasy and madness. The Roman poets of the first-century A.D., Horace, Tibullus, Virgil, Ovid, and even the moral philosopher Seneca, are unanimous and detailed on this point. The witches' charms “set the heart ablaze” and “rend the head asunder;” they can “send a man shrieking across the countryside.” The witches themselves sport the dishevelled, snake-entwined hair of bacchantes — hair which can stand out like the bristles on a boar or a sea-urchin. And like the bacchantes, the witches tear apart live animals with their teeth. The parade example is Medea in Seneca's play of that name, “given to raving” and “staggering, stunned by ecstasy.” This Medea invokes Hecate in a manner suggesting the priests of Cybele:

. . . for you, with bared breast, will I, like a maenad,
smite my arms with the sacrificial knife.
Let my blood flow on the altars!
Accustom yourself, my hand, to draw the sword
and endure the sight of beloved blood.
Self-wounded have I poured forth the sacred stream
that flows through my veins . . .

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Hecate received a wide variety of offerings, bread, and sometimes eels or mullet, and often dog meat. The monthly presentation of food to her was called “Hecate’s Supper.”

An ancient commentary on the playwright Aristophanes’ *Plutus* says,

At the new moon, the first of the month, at evening, the rich sent a meal to Hecate as an offering to the goddess of the crossroads. The poor showed up ravenous, ate the things and claimed that Hecate had devoured them . . . there is a variant tradition that there was no theft involved, but instead deliberate charity. It was usual for wealthy persons to leave a loaf of wheat bread for Hecate and for the poor to take these, as beggars live on sacred offerings.

While dog-sacrifices are not recorded for the original Hecate in Asia Minor, they are abundantly documented for the Greek world — and not only for Hecate. The Greeks considered dog a perfectly ordinary and inexpensive meat. The dog was, like the pig, the customary animal for purification sacrifices, probably due to the frequency of such offerings and the cheapness of the animals. This prosaic rationale for sacrificing dogs to the goddess, and the relatively late association of the dog with Hecate in art and literature, in no way prepares us for the canine’s spectacular career in her company.

To be sure, the dog, which appears at the edge of settlements at nightfall, howling mournfully, has often been associated with the moon and death. Also, it frequently bays its warning before danger is visible to the human eye — leading to the reflection that it sees what humans cannot, that is, the spirit world. Thus the dog, unlike Telemachos, recognizes the disguised Athena in Homer’s *Odyssey*. The dog’s immemorial bad reputation as an eater of corpses, memorialized in the opening lines of the *Iliad*, and its predilection for garbage and excrement, further involves it in the earthy-dirty side of things.

Because the dog had spooky potential, when Hecate was demonized, the dog of her sacrifices was as well. Dog-howls greeted Hecate’s manifestation at the crossroads in the Theocritus’ poem cited above. Theocritus’ contemporary Apollonius of Rhodes also has Hecate appear to a fanfare of howls. In fact, in his epic poem, *The Argonautica*, Medea, the priestess of Hecate, dispatches “the Death-spirits, devourers of life, the swift hounds of Hades, who, hovering through all the air, swoop down on the living.”

The Roman poet Horace also has hell hounds appear when the witches begin their invocations in a cemetery on Rome’s Esquiline.

In the *Magical Papyri* we can observe traces of Hecate’s gradual assimilation to her pet. Regarding the company she keeps, she is called

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“dog-lover,” “queen of dogs,” and “leader of dog-packs.” She is invoked “while dogs howl and will not shut up,” has herself “a voice like a dog’s bark,” and is heard “howling like a dog.” Finally, Hecate’s doggishness extends to her person, for she is “the dog who can assume the shape of a maiden,” and simply “black dog.” The ultimate extension of this is the fusion of the dog with Hecate’s cosmic persona, which results in a howl that shakes the universe:

I offer you this spice, O child of Zeus,
Dart-shooter, Hecate called Artemis, Persephone,
shooter of deer, night-shining, triple-sounding
triple-voiced, triple-headed, Selene,
triple-pointed, triple-faced, triple-necked,
and goddess of the crossroads, you who hold
untiring fire in triple baskets,
you who frequent the crossroads
and rule the thrice-ten days of the lunar month
with your three forms and flames and dogs!
From tuneless throats you send
a dread sharp cry, O goddess,
you raise an awful sound with triple mouths.
Hearing your cry, all worldly things are shaken:
the nether gates and Lethe’s holy water
and primal chaos and the gleaming chasm
of Tartaros. At it every mortal thing
and every mortal man, the star-touching mountains,
valleys and every tree and roaring river
and even the restless sea, the lonely echo
and daimons through the world — all shudder at you,
O blessed one, when they hear your dread voice.

We have seen that the *actual veneration* of Hecate provided, at best, cosmetic details or distant inspiration for the much later Hecate of the witches. Earthy associations, the crossroads, ecstasy and hounds reappear in the witch literature in ways that disregard or demonize their original meaning. It’s exactly like the relation of actual Voodoo or Santeria — West African paganism syncretised with Roman Catholicism — to the “satanic cults” of tabloids and films.

Hecate was venerated in Greece from Hesiod’s time (the seventh-century B.C.), but it is another two hundred years before a demonic Hecate appears (in the fifth century B.C.) on the Greek stage in Sophocles’ play *The Witches*. The only witches we have record of appear in literary creations. Did they really exist?

The only real *evidence* of classical witchcraft, comes with the *Greek Magical Papyri*, which date from the second to fourth centuries A.D.

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Though the magic there looks a lot like the made-up magic we saw in the earlier, classical literature, it is only based on it — to the extent of actually quoting some of it!

Roman law shares our scepticism regarding the reality of demonic Hecate and the witches: it does not take the witch seriously as a category of criminal. Though poisoning and malefic magic were certainly actionable, the term “witch” never had more than a general and metaphoric status in the Latin language, *i.e.*, it was treated as a myth and figure of speech, just as we might apply the term “Bluebeard” to a class of murderer.

Indeed, we are driven to the novel conclusion that actual witchcraft finally developed *as a result* of the literary mythology. But whence this mythology? The ascertainable details of Hecate veneration didn’t produce it. The skewed and tenuous connection of the facts to the fancy suggests rather that the former were *picked over* for spicy details. But why? What *did* the Graeco-Roman world hear howling at the barred gate of its awareness, which it was at such pains to explain as the hounds of Hecate?

Part Two
The Witch

Descent of the Goddess

From the summits of heaven
 she looked into the pit,
she was a goddess on the summits of heaven
 but her heart was in hell.
O Inanna, on the summits,
 your heart in hell!

This lady left earth and heaven
 and went down into the pit.

— *Inanna's Journey to Hell*

The first of the Greek witches is Circe, who appears in *The Odyssey*. This Circe is not a witch or even a follower of Hecate; she is herself a goddess (the exact word is *theos*). A century later, Hesiod concurs. In his *Theogony*, Hesiod makes Circe the daughter of Perseis (a sea nymph) and Helios (a sun god). Impeccable credentials of immortal status.

The Homeric Circe's erotic power is no less certain. In *The Odyssey* she has enough confidence in it to attempt to seduce Odysseus even though he has just caught her attempting to turn him into a beast!

Circe pretty much disappears from classical literature, except as an allusion, after Homer, but her place as arch-sorceress is immediately taken over by her niece Medea. Yet Medea, despite a pure descent from gods and nymphs, is not a goddess but a hero. The fifth-century B.C. Greek poet Pindar describes her in his *Fourth Pythian Ode* as one able to utter immortal prophecies, but that's as godlike as she gets. And not only has Medea lost her aunt's immortality, she's famous, not for seducing, but for being lovestruck. Admittedly Aphrodite has to bring down a special love charm from heaven so Jason can make Medea love him. But the alteration we see from Circe to Medea, the change from from inspirer to victim of passion, is a trend that is not reversed by any of the succeeding witches.

Less than twenty lines survive of Sophocles' play *The Witches*, but these show a Medea by moonlight, howling as she harvests deadly magic herbs, a Hecate of the crossroads crowned with infernal serpents, and a Jason who melts wax love-dolls to madden Medea with passion. Medea has now descended so far towards mortal status that she is susceptible to the influence of a voodoo doll — surely a step down from Aphrodite's charm in the Pindar! A lower magic to prevail upon a lesser Medea.

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Though Sophocles' witch play is lost, we have a complete Medea from his artistic rival Euripides. This is the most fully and complexly *human* of all the Medeas and, from the point of view of the witch's morphology, we are clearly a step downwards from the heroic ambiance of Pindar, or even the high melodrama of Sophocles' creation. This is a Medea presented with entirely unheroic realism, and the sensuality that is basic to the witch has gone from Pindar's divinely contrived passion, and the potion-motivation of Sophocles' Grecian *gris-gris*, to something closer to the animal or the elemental than the human. This is the Medea who gets back at her ex by murdering all her children by him. This Medea is not merely ruled by her passions, she is tyrannized by them to insanity.

With the witches of the fourth to second centuries B.C. we begin to find oddly inconsistent accounts. One such is the Medea of Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, part innocent girl, part fierce and brutish woman. She is demurely described as a priestess of Hecate, but of a Hecate who later appears in ghastly nocturnal theophany, hell-hounds and all. Emblematic is Apollonius' description of Medea on her way to the temple of her goddess, which presents a curious mixture of the maidenly and the frightful. Surrounded by her girl attendants, she keeps tucked in her belt infernal concoctions, while her flashing glance, sign of descent from Helios, is shunned by the townspeople as though it were the evil eye.

The ambivalence is personified when a distinction is made between Medea and the other witches:

... for well she knew the way, having often before
wandered there among the graves
and among the tough roots, just like the witches.

— a distinction that will be maintained through further witch depictions: the witch is variously old and hideous or young and attractive. What may be the meaning of this schizophrenic depiction — the young witches who radiate the sensual splendor of a fertility goddess, and the crones who appear like a horrid gnostic emblem of the price of generated existence, age and death — I cannot here begin to surmise. It must suffice to note the bifurcation and monitor its progress.

Apollonius' complex Medea is less divine (and more infernal) than that of Euripides, while her subjection to love is so great that she served as model for the over-the-top, melodramatic and campy Dido of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Interestingly, Apollonius also shows us a Circe who has retreated from divinity.

This Circe helps Medea and Jason, but not with some supernatural action: she simply performs a purification ritual on their behalf. The great example of her magic power, the turning of men into animals related in the *Odyssey*, is presented so diffidently that without a previous knowledge of

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Homer one would never guess her entourage of animals are transformed men.

Apollonius shows us a Circe very humanly tormented by nightmares that suggest Medea's future crime and bloodguilt:

. . . the hideous remembrance of her dreams
entered Circe's mind as she pondered.
She longed to hear the voice of the maiden Medea,
to speak with her. As soon as Medea raised her eyes from
the ground
and met Circe's gaze, Circe had to tell her.
All those, like Circe and Medea, descendants of Helios,
were easy to recognize: their eyes flashed
and gleamed like polished gold when they caught the light.

So runs the description of Circe's interview with her niece Medea. For us, it is a picture with a special poignance, for we can perceive here, in the vestigial feature of the golden glance, the last sunseting gleam of the witches' vanishing divinity.

Theocritus, writing at the same time as Apollonius, gives us an account of contemporary witchcraft. He tells the story of Simaitha, a young woman in "modern" fourth-century B.C. Alexandria, who has turned to magic to recapture the affection of a man who has lost interest.

Describing her plight and search for a remedy she says:

Who didn't I approach? The house of what old woman
who knows how to sing charms did I leave unvisited?

and again, at the conclusion of the poem:

Now I shall bind him in love to me with my magic,
but if he still causes me to suffer,
then, so help me Fate, he shall be found knocking
at the gate of Death. For I tell thee, O Moon,
I have in my cabinet poisons evil enough,
that a woman from Assyria told me how to make.

Simaitha presents a further stage in the transition from goddess to mortal. While Euripides' and Apollonius' Medeas were fully human, they were still heroic figures. Simaitha is all too human; in fact, she is weak. The transition from inspirer of passion to passion's victim is also here; even her determination to make use of poison if all else fails is more a sign of passive frustration than of active rage. A final important point is the splitting of the witch figure into, on the one hand, the lovely girl Simaitha, and on the other, the old women who are the more practiced witches. We

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already saw this in Apollonius. In Roman literature the two complementary figures will be fully realized.

Witches, and indeed magic, are all but absent from early Roman literature; the first surviving Latin treatment of a scene of magic is Virgil's eighth *Bucolic*, from 39 B.C., a poem written in evident imitation of several of Theocritus' compositions, especially the Simaitha one cited above. Magic and witches emerge in Latin literature as a part of the wholesale Roman imitation of later Greek literature, and are from the outset very derivative productions.

Thus the heroic Dido of Virgil's *Aeneid*, or the Medea we see in the *Metamorphoses* by his contemporary Ovid, do not undermine our argument that the witch figure is steadily degenerating. Both Virgil and Ovid are consciously imitating elements of the epic style of Apollonius of Rhodes, and so they produce witches who are essentially the same sentimental-heroic type. Likewise we discount, and in fact omit from consideration, the play *Medea* by the first-century A.D. philosopher Seneca, which is a deliberate imitation of the Medeas of fifth-century B.C. Greek tragedy. We cannot be fairly expected to take as documents in the witches' ongoing morphology the figures produced by writers who are consciously imitating models up to 600 years old!

With the above exceptions, all the Latin witches take up the new style developed by Theocritus and push forward the tendencies he advanced. The first of these is the early first-century A.D. poet Horace's witch Canidia.

By now the witch's growing subjection to passion produces a monster of sexual appetite, and the "lewd hag," as Horace calls her, makes her appearance. Canidia, despite her years, is "every sailor's and peddler's girlfriend." Horace even calls Medea, whose impeccable Greek literary credentials prevented truly scurrilous treatment, "the slut from the Black Sea shore." That libertine behavior is now a standard feature of witch activity is revealed by Canidia's rhetorical query:

Shall I let you laugh safely at having divulged
the rites of witchery and its orgies
where Cupid is allowed free range?

The appetites of these abandoned harridans leap the boundaries of nature itself. Canidia's comrade in harms, Folia, is described as having "a man's sexual desires", *i.e.*, she is a lesbian.

Canidia and her friends are "hags." They no longer possess their own teeth or hair. The witch is becoming an ultra of undivine status, an overdue bill of mortality. The long descent from godhood is nearing its conclusion.

The mid first-century A.D. poet Lucan wrote a wonderfully bizarre historical epic about the Roman civil war. There, witch-sensuality, already

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developed into a dominant and sadistic type in Horace, disappears into cannibalism. Though he avoids all mention of sex, as befits a prim stoic poet, we find in his witch Erictho a sublimation of witchly eroticism. She culls corpse clippings with her mouth, explicitly as a violent extension of a kiss:

Often too when a kinsman is buried,
the dreadful witch hangs over the loved body:
while kissing it she mutilates the head.
She forces open the closed mouth
then, biting the tip of the motionless tongue,
she pours inarticulate sound into the cold lips
and sends a message of mysterious horror
down to the ghosts in hell.

As for mortality, Erictho is beyond that: she lives in a sepulchre which is nothing less than Hell's embassy — an officially recognized outpost of the land of the dead.

In his second-century A.D. Latin novel *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius creates the witch Meroe, a creature whose lust is so great it cannot be described in physiological terms alone — its range is geographical, as her runaway sex-slave Socrates recounts:

Then he answered: "Would you like to hear one or two, (or maybe more) of her acts? She forces the people of Thessaly to rage with love for her, and not only them, but even the far off Indians and Ethiopians. And that exercise of her will is just a trifle and taste of her witchly work . . .

Meroe's activities are characteristic of the other Thessalian witches we meet in the opening chapters of the novel. When the hero Lucius' friend Byrrhaena warns him against his hostess, she tells him:

. . . beware I say, beware of the evil arts and wicked allurements of the Pamphile that is the wife of Milo, whom you call your host, for she is considered the greatest magician and enchantress, mistress of every necromantic spell. By breathing certain words and charms over boughs and stones and other trivial things, she can throw down all the stars into the deep bottom of hell, and reduce them again to primaeval chaos. As soon as she sees any good-looking young man, she is immediately smitten with love for him, and then she can't take her eyes, or her affections, off him. She beguiles a young man's spirit with flattery and catches him in the snares of her limitless lust. Any man who won't give in to her filthy desires she immediately hates and turns into stones or sheep, or whatever beast she pleases, or else she just murders them.

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Now there is nothing to suggest any of Apuleius' witches are hags — which presents us with a problem — how do we explain the fact that the last great witches of antiquity revert to an earlier condition of youthful attractiveness? Certainly as regards inversion of sensuality, the movement is still clear and uninterrupted: the witch has, in this regard, gone from planet Venus to Black Hole.

We may understand the survival of the beautiful Apuleian witch alongside the Lucanic Hag as the ultimate development of the same ambivalence which produced a similar double witch-image in Theocritus and Apollonius of Rhodes. A substantiation of this is the fact that the tensions that produce on the one hand Erictho and on the other Meroe are to be observed *within* each as well. I have already noted the sensuality submerged in Erictho's cannibalism, it only remains to demonstrate the flesh-dread in Apuleius' seemingly pleasant production. It should suffice to recall that the witches in Apuleius imprison men for sexual use, routinely threaten them with castration, and enjoy urinating in their faces. It should also be borne in mind that the hero of this book is transformed into a donkey — an animal famous for its oversized male organ — and thereafter beaten through every adventure until, at last, he renounces sex forever at the behest of the powerful goddess Isis. The occasional lovely young witch we see in later literature is a refinement of the witch as emblem of body-hatred, not a remission of it.

A clear progression should now be apparent: Circe in Homer is a goddess and inspirer of passion. Medea is demoted to hero in Pindar and the dramatists, who make her the *victim* of passion. The witches of Apollonius and Theocritus are simply love-sick girls. The Roman witches who follow, where not deliberate imitations of earlier literary figures (*e.g.* Ovid's Medea), carry on the degenerative trend — the witches are now lust-crazed hags and living dead sex-cannibals.

Alongside the aging witch we find a paradoxical young and lovely one, but this is marginal to the overall trend, and the beautiful sorceresses are described as cruel and sadistic: they seem to be a deceptively attractive variant on the same degenerating image.

The process is not a piece of malice on the part of the poets, and apparently unconscious. Its persistence for a thousand year period, *never before remarked*, calls for some explanation. The easiest one, misogyny, is contradicted by the far from gynophobic character of the writers cited, which is even more significant when we bear in mind the really great temporal and geographic range of our sources.

More importantly, it is only at the end of her development, when the witch has been demoted to merely human status, that we find assertions that witchcraft is something basic to womankind: were misogyny the source and not a final result of the witch mythology, we would expect some borrowing during its first 800 years from the real if marginal Greek

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tradition of misogynistic literature. A feminist reading is too superficial to explain the millenia-long ambivalence towards the witch.

Nigra Sum Sed Formosa

I am black but comely. O daughters of Jerusalem
— *Song of Solomon*

The witches are masters of one single and sovereign science — the use of herbs. Herbs are the most important ingredient in all classical magic and indeed of classical (and modern) medicines.

There are some interesting confirmations of this from antiquity. An oblique one comes from the second-century A.D. Alexandrian scholar Dionysus Skytobrachion, who tried to explain away Hecate by making her a historical person. He described her as the founder of toxicology, and said that Circe and Medea were her her daughters! Though this is laughable as history, it is a valuable document of how the ancients viewed witches' work.

More direct and less exotic testimony comes from the first-century A.D. Roman encyclopaedist Pliny. In the twenty-fifth chapter of his *Natural History* he says explicitly that herbs are the primary tool used by witches. The relation of the witch (in Greek, *pharmakis*, literally “herbalist”) to herbs is a thing so far unnoticed by scholars, and far more meaningful than might at first appear.

From the eighth century B.C., when the poet Homer creates Circe with her “baleful herbs” (in Greek, *pharmaka lugra*), to the latest Roman conjure-women of the second century A.D., the witches use, almost exclusively, and always primarily, plants. Circe's herbs turn Odysseus men into animals — and it is only by using a counter-herb, *moly*, that Odysseus can resist her charms.

In the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, the disguised goddess of agriculture promises to protect the child Demophon from the charms of herb-gatherers, that is, witches. In Euripides' play *Medea*, that heroic sorceress promises king Aegaeus herbal medicines that will end his childlessness.

The poet Apollonius' description of Medea defines herbalizing as the most awesome and impressive of witch activities:

. . . and Medea took from the wooden box
a medicine which men call Promethean.
If a man should annoint his body with it,
having first appeased Hecate with nocturnal sacrifice,
that man could not be wounded
by the stroke of bronze weapon, nor need he flinch
from blazing fire. For the length of a day
he's invulnerable to both.
The Promethean plant first shot up from the soil

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when the eagle, feasting on bound Prometheus' liver
high on the craggy side of Mount Caucasus,
let the divine blood of the immortal victim drip.
Where the blood touched soil, a flower appeared,
a foot-high plant that looked like a two-stalked crocus,
but in the earth the root looked exactly like raw cut flesh.

The juice of the plant, dark as the sap of a mountain oak,
Medea had squeezed into a seashell and kept to make this spell.
This is how she gathered the magic plant:
first she bathed in seven ever-flowing streams,
then called seven times on Hecate,
fosterer of all that's young,
night wandering Hecate, queen of the dead.

Medea made this invocation in blackest night,
wearing black garments. Then she went for the plant,
and as she pulled it out of the ground
and hacked off the fleshlike root,
Prometheus, chained up on his rock,
felt it as though she had cut into his own skin.
He groaned and, in response, the whole earth shook
and a bellowing was heard from under the ground.

Herbs are assuredly the primary means of magic. Euripides' Medea uses magical herbs in the work of a midwife, and to kill. Like her, all the post-Homeric witches will use herbs exclusively to bring about love and fertility, or to cause death. (There are only two exceptions to this rule in the 1200 year record of classical witchcraft. One is Circe's use of herbs to transform men into animals, which will be explained below. The other is Apollonius' Medea, who makes an herbal invulnerability ointment for Jason.)

Apollonius' contemporary Theocritus, writing poems set in the modern world of hellenistic Alexandria, shows that herbs are used by the witches on the one hand as simple poisons, and on the other as love charms or aphrodisiacs. Simaitha, Theocritus' amateur witch, mentions the master love-herb Horsemad (in Greek, *Hippomanes*):

Horsemad is an herb that grows in Arcadia,
every filly or fast-running mare that eats it
gallops over the hills looking for a stallion.
May it do the same to the man who spurns me,
may I see him run from the gym to my door
raving with desire.

(Readers interested in acquiring a little Horsemad for their own use will have difficulty. *Hippomanes* was variously described in antiquity as a plant,

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the genital secretions of a rutting mare, or a caul-like thing on the head of a newborn foal, which the mother must eat in order to develop maternal instincts.)

Beyond love charms, Simaitha also intends to use herbs to poison the man she wants if he won't succumb. Sex and death: these are the cardinal concerns of all herbal witch work.

Before we go on to the Latin evidence, it will be worth observing, purely as an aside, that while herbs are the prime tool of *all* classical witchcraft, the Latins place an additional emphasis on *incantations*. In the oldest collection of Roman laws, the *Laws of the Twelve Tablets*, which go back to the fifth century B.C., it is forbidden to “sing harmful spells.”

The first-century A.D. poet Horace gives us in his *Epodes* the first mention ever of a *book* of spells. Horace's contemporary Ovid gives the same primacy to words in all his witch descriptions: “What *can't* song do?” he wonders aloud in his Medea story. (The Greeks never gave much thought to verbal spells either: the *Greek Magical Papyri* are no exception. They were written in Egypt and drew on the Egyptian tradition of magic.)

Turning now to herbs in the literature of the Roman period, we see the Latin word *venenum* (poison) in place of the Greek *pharmakon* (herb”). This represents the ultimate telescoping of the functions of herbal magic — to a single word which means primarily “poison” but also “love-charm.” Of a piece with this prejudicial term for herbs, is the fact that herbs are now gathered in graveyards. In the Horace's *Satire*, Priapus complains his scarecrow tactics are useless against witches who invade the paupers' graveyard to carry out their love spells:

. . . there's no way I can put an end to this business
or stop them from gathering bones and harmful herbs
in the graveyard as soon as the wandering moon
shows her lovely pale face . . .

The substances employed by the witch begin to become a list of very assorted loathesomes. In one of his *Epodes*, Horace describes the love spell of a witch named Canidia who

. . . orders her fellow witches to throw on the fire
wood from wild fig trees uprooted from tombs,
timber of the mournful cypress,
eggs and feathers of a night-roving screech-owl
smeared with the blood of a hideous toad,
herbs grown in Medea's hometown on the Black Sea,
herbs from poison-exporting Spain,
bones snatched from the jaws of a starving bitch
— all these go into the magic flames.

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Herbs retain their centrality. Further, for Horace, the aim of gathering these exotic noxiousities, closer in mood to Macbeth's moors than Circe's island, is always love-magic,

Ovid, who brings his giddy sense of excess to the trope, remains within the fertility-death framework of witches' work, and indeed more entirely than any of his predecessors, for his Medea is heating a cauldron that will bring about old king Pelias' *death and rebirth*. Here too seeds, flowers and roots figure prominently.

Lucan, a first-century A.D. Roman poet from the generation after Horace and Ovid, shows us the witch Erictho who, like Medea, brings about an equivocal rebirth: she temporarily restores a dead soldier to life. The most interesting thing about Lucan's witch is that, in a stunning anticipation of the crop-blighting hags of the middle ages, she is pointedly hostile to plants. Lucan says of Erictho:

Her tread blights the seeds of the fertile cornfield,
her breath makes poisonous the harmless air.

She walks like an anti-Aphrodite. According to Hesiod, flowers sprang up at every step the love goddess took, and warm, pleasant breezes always blew around her. Erictho is the negative of Aphrodite, and her inversion of the love goddess' imagery is something more than a coincidence. Indeed, it holds the key to understanding the archetype of the witch. But for the moment it suffices to note that positive or negative, the relation of the witch to herbs is always central and entirely constant. The deeper meaning of the trope will begin to appear when we view the herbs in their larger context, that is to say, their landscape.

Witches favor groves and hilltops for their work with a very remarkable consistency. Thus the eighth-century B.C. Homeric description of Circe's home goes:

Within the forest glades they found the house of Circe,
built of polished stone in a place of wide outlook . . .

Similarly Ovid in the first century A.D.:

. . . the herb-clad hills and palace of Circe,
daughter of the sun,
full of manifold beasts.

and his Medea has, if not a hill, at least a grove

She took her way to an ancient altar of Hecate,
hidden in the deep shades of a forest.

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which is important enough to be cited in Jason's oath to her:

He swore he would be true
by the sacred rites of the threefold goddess,
by whatever divinity might be in that grove . . .

Seneca, a mid-first-century A.D. Roman philosopher, wrote a play that described a Medea culling her herbs on all the major mountains from Spain to Persia. In his epic poem on the Roman civil war, Seneca's nephew Lucan assures us that, in his day, the witches of Thessaly still went to the heights a-herbing.

Back in the third century B.C., the time of Theocritus, writers who described witches began to favor urban settings. From here on the cemetery tended to replace the grove—probably for reasons of practical accessibility (though Horace was careful to choose a cemetery on the Esquiline *hill*). However, some of the witches of later classical literature remain obliquely faithful to tradition of witching on hilltops by performing their rites on *rooftops*

Waters are also a standard feature of witch topography. Circe's attendants in Homer are literally river nymphs:

. . . four maidens were her serving-women in the house.
Children were they of the springs and groves,
and of the sacred rivers that flow forth to the sea. . .

Ovid's Medea also herbalizes on river banks but, like hills, this feature seems to fade with time, outside of archaizing epic-style poetry.

The final feature we need here consider is the witches' retinue of wild animals, of which the best example is Homer's:

. . . and round about it were mountain wolves and lions,
whom Circe herself had bewitched;
for she gave them evil drugs.
Yet these beasts did not rush upon my men,
but pranced about them fawningly,
wagging their long tails.
And as when hounds fawn around their master
as he comes from a feast,
for he ever brings them tid-bits to soothe their temper,
so about them fawned the stout-clawed wolves and lions. . .

—a description which is of course the model for all succeeding Circes. In his magical novel, *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius describes the witch Pamphile, who can turn men into beasts. Indeed, the plot of the novel revolves around

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the fortunes of a hero who has been turned into a donkey by witchcraft. Wild animals also accompany Lucan's witches:

Every creature that has power to kill
and was born to do mischief,
dreads the Thessalian witches
and serves them as hired killers.
The fierce tiger and the angry lion, king of beasts,
lick their hands and fawn upon them . . .

It may be objected that I am doing no more than identifying certain literary motifs that are repeated in successive witch depictions — and have only shown that Circe is the template for all later witches. I can reply that only *some* of the motifs, and not the most likely ones, are reliably repeated over the centuries. Others, that have every apparent right to become standard, such as Circe's magic wand, appear only the one time in Homer. Is it more reasonable to expect that the witch would always have a wild beast, and a hill and a stream nearby? Yet this is so from Homer's Circe to Lucan's Erictho 900 years later. Further, the three features, hill, streams and beasts, all fit together as symbols typically associated with the archetype of the fertility goddess.

Many scholars have noted that Circe with her beasts strongly suggests the archetype of the *Potnia Theron*, the "Mistress of the Wild Animals." Artemis, in Homer's *Iliad*, is a good literary example of this. Visual examples may be seen in the illustrations on pages 83-86 of this book. The goddess, in her iconic representation, has an entourage of fierce animals.

The "Mother of the Mountains" seal from Knossos (shown on page 83) shows a "Mistress of the Wild Animals" standing on a hill. Not only the animals in this image, but the hill itself is a standard part of the symbolism of the fertility goddess: Cybele, the "mountain mother" offers a well-known instance of the image.

Let us return to the river-nymphs that we saw as Circe's attendants in Homer, and the rivers Medea haunts in Ovid's account. These, like the symbolic hill, are a classic part of the fertility goddess' iconography. The Greeks believed every spring was inhabited by a nymph — that is, a *fertility spirit*. The fertility and rebirth symbolism of water is too well known from the Bible to need further comment here.

It appears that the witch of literature, with her sacred landscape of plants, streams, animals and hills, and her focus on love and fertility magic, and even her special relation to the world of ghosts, recapitulates, in considerable and constant detail, the archetype of the fertility goddess. Of course, the figure of the witch does so on the unconscious level, and her content may *appear* to be a mere literary motif.

The topography of the witch, that magical landscape of an eternal Spring, appears to fade in literature as the pace of urbanization rapidly

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increases on the approach of the first century A.D. But, in fact, the hills, beasts, plants and waters survive their own disappearance! The moment they vanish from the narratives, they all re-emerge in the witches' lists of their powers *over* nature, which ordinarily culminate in "drawing down the moon;" in Greek, *kathairesis*. Thus Apollonius' Medea is credited with control of plants, rivers, the entire landscape — with a startling skyward extension:

The maiden Medea, nurtured in the palace of king Aeetes —
the goddess Hecate taught her to handle magic herbs
with exceeding skill. Every plant the soil feeds
or rivers water, she knows. By the power of her herbs,
she can nullify the never-tiring power of fire itself,
she can stay the course of rivers as they rush roaring on,
and check the stars in their circuit,
pause the swift course of the moon.

The witch-powers, that once suggested an *identification* with the earth, have now been inverted into an assault upon it. Ovid gives an even more exhuberantly detailed account:

O Night, faithful preserver of mysteries,
and you, bright stars whose golden beams,
together with the moon, follow the heat of day;
you, three-formed Hecate, who know our undertakings
and come to the aid of the spells and arts of magicians
with your potent herbs;
you breezes and winds,
you mountains and streams and pools,
all you gods of the groves, all you gods of the night —
be with me now. With your help, when I have willed it,
the streams have run back to their fountain-heads,
while the banks wondered:
I lay the swollen, and stir up calm seas by my spells;
I drive the clouds and bring on the clouds;
the winds I dispel and summon;
I break the jaws of serpents with my incantations;
living rocks and oaks I root from their own soil;
I move the forests, I bid the mountains shake,
the earth to rumble,
and the ghosts to come forth from their tombs.
Thee also, Moon, do I draw from the sky . . .
even the chariot of the Sun, my grandsire,
blanches at my song; the Dawn pales at my poisons.

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Here the entire landscape of the goddess is meticulously reproduced. (And so splendidly that Shakespeare borrowed it, with few changes, for Prospero's farewell to magic in *The Tempest*.)

It is interesting to note that, as the witch becomes more mortal (from Circe, who is a goddess in Homer, to the Roman crones), the witches' powers become more godlike. By late first century A.D., in Latin poetry, the image of the drawing down of the moon proclaims an outright superiority to the gods — the spiritual equivalent of a military *coup*.

I hope the reader will forgive another digression to examine in detail the extremely appealing subject of “drawing down the moon.” There is nothing in Greek or Roman mythology that could have provided a precedent for the witches' feat of pulling the moon out of the sky. The ancients themselves, who were not at all averse to rational explanations, sometimes interpreted “drawing down the moon” as a primitive way of accounting for lunar eclipse.

A far more intriguing idea is that the witches draw down the moon *in order to milk it*. The background to this idea is the notion (commonly held in Roman antiquity) that the moon drinks in mist which it later lets fall to the earth as dew. There are descriptions of moon-milking in Apuleius' novel and in Lucan's epic poem. In the latter, Erictho uses the lunar fluid to reanimate a corpse. Though Lucan doesn't explain the mechanics involved, I would guess that the operant concept is the moon's ability to be reborn from black nothingness.

In A. M. Tupet's useful book, *Magie dans la Poésie Latine*, there is an interesting account of modern-day North African folk-magic. There witches trap the moon by catching its reflection in a basin of water. The water appears to boil as the moon follows its image into the basin— for the moon is very cold. Once the water has absorbed the moon, it becomes a liquid useful in love spells.

The antiquity of the practice seems confirmed by an ancient commentary on *The Clouds*, a play by the fifth-century B.C. Greek Aristophanes. The commentator says that if you catch the reflection of the moon in a mirror and write on this with blood, the letters you inscribe on the polished surface should appear on the real moon as well. The commentator does not tell us the point of this sky-writing; perhaps no more is intended than a frightening display of magic power.

A “drawing down the moon” more precisely parallel to the one Tupet cites is given in a spell in the *Greek Magical Papyri*. Here the moon is fixed by the magician's special knowledge of her attributes, such as only an initiate into her religious mysteries would possess. These attributes make up an extensive list of adjectives, alternative names and mystic emblems of the deity — *e.g.*, sandal, key, wheel. The moon is then trapped in her reflection. The magician says:

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Look at yourself in this bowl of Nile water
that serves as a mirror,
and as you see yourself you're amazed —
blinded by your own light
— before you see clear again
you'll do what I force you to do . . .

More secret attributes are then are given, and very strange they are, ranging from “an old sieve” to “the well-penetrated vagina of a black sphinx.” The magician then threatens to disorder the entire cosmos (hide the sun at noon, send the ocean onto land, &c.) unless the moon goddess rage against the magician's intended victim.

And that is the whole dossier on “drawing down the moon.” The very fact that it is inconsistent suggests that it is not a definite religious practice, but an archetypal image, a part of the mythology of the witch, for which various rationalizations, poetic or scientific, were later offered.

Once “drawing down the moon” appears as a standard witchly accomplishment, which it does in the first century A.D., the witches' powers begin to extend, like Hecate's, over all three worlds, flickering the stars, bursting open the earth, reversing the rivers and tempesting the sea. The witches will, if we may use an audacious metaphor, *shake the world-tree* and make tremble all the realms. As the philosopher-playwright Seneca's Medea threatens: “I shall shake all that is!” And indeed this Medea attacks the gods and pulls down the sky. Lucan gives the witches powers no less cosmic:

Because of the witches, natural changes cease to operate:
daylight lingers and is delayed by the length of night;
outer space is disobedient to the laws of physics.
Listening to their spells, the planets stop in mid-orbit,
and Zeus, who keeps the cosmos spinning as it should,
is amazed at the sudden standstill.
At one time the witches may drench the world with rain,
veil the hot sun with clouds,
and make the heavens thunder without Zeus' permission;
also, by their spells, they disperse the sky's canopy of
watery vapor
and tear away the dishevelled tresses of the storm clouds.

Or else, though the winds are still, the witches make the
seas rise high;
or again they may forbid the ocean to be affected by
storms,
and keep it silent while the South wind blusters,
and the sails that speed a vessel belly out with the breeze.

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The witches can arrest water falls halfway down
a steep cliff-face, they make the running rivers forsake
their downward channels and flow backwards upstream.
They make the Nile fail to rise in summer,
they make the Meander straighten its course,
they make slow rivers speed and rapid ones go stagnant-still;

they flatten landscapes, the mountains
lower their tops and level their ridges
so Mount Olympus looks up at the clouds above it.
They make Siberian snows thaw
without any sun, in winter's cold.
When the tide is driven in by the moon,
the spells of witches drive it back and keep the shore dry.

They destabilize the earth, make it wobble on its axis,
so it's night at noonday, and up in the sky
you see all the wrong constellations. . .

The stakes have now been raised to the point where it is fair to call the witch a goddess once again. One should note here that the original goddess topography — the hills and rivers and vegetation — are meticulously preserved in all the accounts.

At this point I may profitably examine in somewhat more detail the two witch preoccupations, fertility and death, which I noted above in our consideration of herbs. It is these that define the witch as *actively* a descendant of the Earth Mother, who is both womb and tomb to all who come to life. As may be anticipated, the positive traits survive inverted. I mentioned Euripides' play in which Medea promises King Aegeus drugs to overcome his childlessness. This is the only instance of the witch's normal relation to the theme. Horace' witches typically steal children. Apuleius' Meroe closes the womb of a sexual rival so her pregnancy continues indefinitely, swelling her to elephantine size. Birth-magic is only part of the fertility paradigm: virtually all the witches' spells are directed to compelling sexual desire.

Let us now examine of the other side of the archetype — the witches' special relation to death. Already the sites of life, hilltops and springs, have been superceded by those that suggest the nearness of death, what one might call the "stations of the crossroads." Cemeteries and the midnight hour are preferred for rites that are almost always modeled on the necromancy Odysseus performs in the *Odyssey* — and that was performed, be it recalled, according to Circe's instructions.

The Homeric necromancy differs from its successors in one important detail — Homer's dead are weak things, fluttery shades that feebly squeak, like insubstantial bats. These are angular shadows that fly crying through the infinite underworld night. They survive in the least material aspects of their

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mortal being, shade and echo. Nothing transcendent about these creatures, and no new awareness. They are exactly what they were in life, only less so. Homer speaks of them as “not having the strength to hold up their own heads” — numbed nodding creatures on the verge of tottering back into absolute non-being. Even Teiresias receives no new or special qualities — he can advise of the future because he’s Teiresias, not because he’s passed the limits of mortality.

How different are the dead to whom the witches appeal! Needy and dangerous figures waiting in the shadows of existence. And the witches choose the ghosts they will control with an evil refinement — they particularly want the spirits of those who died young or violently, the unhappy and unsatisfied dead with their restless energy and free-floating rage. Thus children are the ideal subjects for necromancy. Consider the powers of the angry prepubescent dead, depicted in the speech of a boy Horace’ witches are starving to death:

Your magic spells have no the power to alter right and wrong,
nor to avert human justice. The curse I utter now will hound you,
no sacrifice will ever placate me or turn aside my grudge.
No, when I, whom you have doomed, will have breathed my last,
I’ll return by night as a vengeful spirit, and as a ghost I’ll come and tear
at your faces with my crooked claws: such is the power of the dead!
I’ll seat myself on your racing hearts and terror of me will keep you from sleep.

An even more interesting, because non-literary, document of the how the angry dead were viewed is found in this spell from the *Greek Magical Papyri*:

Come, Hecate, goddess
of the crossroads, who with your fire-breathing phantoms
have dominion over scary roads
and harsh enchantments.
Hecate I call you,
and with you those untimely passed away,
the strong dead, those who died
before they could have a wife and children,
hissing wildly, yearning in their hearts.

Though the dead are ordinarily employed as agents in the witches’ most characteristic activity — sending love spells or terrorizing those who do

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not erotically submit — the dead have their own associations and powers that effectively complete our picture of the witch.

There is a universal belief that the dead can see the future, that they *know everything*. For them time does not exist as it does for us who measure it by successive days. They inhabit the earth's black dream, the womb of every day, the belly of fate from which all that occurs arises briefly to our sight — they have passed decisively beyond the limits of the human condition, including that partial knowledge confined to what light reveals. Accordingly, in Lucan's epic the arch-witch Erictho enquires of the future from a common soldier whose only qualification is being dead.

Setting aside the matter of the dead imparting to witches their more than mortal knowledge, the mere fact that the dead can *return at all*, though only to be questioned, is a violent reversal of the ordinary laws and course of time. Thus there is a logic to the re-emergence of Chaos in necromantic rites. We see this where Ovid's Circe is threatened by Picus' followers:

But she sprinkled upon them her baleful drugs
and poisonous juices, summoning to her aid
Night, and the gods of Night, from Erebus,
and Chaos, calling on Hecate
in long-drawn, wailing cries.
The woods, wonderful to say,
leaped from their place, the ground rumbled,
the neighboring trees turned white,
and the herbage where her poisons fell
was stained with clots of blood.
The stones also seemed to voice hoarse bellowings;
the baying of dogs was heard, the ground
was foul with dark, crawling things,
and the insubstantial shades of the dead
seemed to be flitting about.

Chaos appears again in *The Golden Ass*, where the witch Pamphile

. . . is considered the most consummate magician and necromancer. By breathing out words and charms over plants and minerals and other seemingly trivial things, she can throw the stars down into the bottom of hell, and return them to the condition of primordial chaos.

Lucan's Erictho is on a first-name basis with Chaos. She says:

I invoke the Furies, the horror of Hell,
the punishments of the guilty, and Chaos,
eager to blend countless worlds into one indistinct ruin. . .

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So does Seneca's Medea, and Dido, the lover of the hero Aeneas in Virgil's first-century A.D. epic. Dido is an accomplished witch. Vergil says:

. . . Dido, dark priestess, calls in thunder tones
on thrice a hundred gods,
Erebus and Chaos, and threefold Hecate . . .

Hecate herself is finally identified with Chaos in the *Magical Papyri*, where she is invoked with phrases like "Primal Chaos," "Chaos, too, you rule" and simply addressed as "broad Chaos."

I feel that the figure of the witch herself may best be understood as a survival of the archetype of the fertility goddess. Her original divinity was demonstrated in the previous chapter. I have reviewed in this one her recapitulation of the fertility goddess' iconography. The witch's ghosts and her invocations of Chaos are also a part of the symbolism of the fertility goddess, particularly as it appears in the context of *new year's rites*.

The principles at play in these festivals of agricultural societies is that the inauguration of the new year repeats the cosmogonic act, the creation, which requires first a return to the state of chaos whence order arose. This is symbolized in a number of ways (carnival license, &c.) but primarily through the return of the dead whom the abrogation of all limits (including those of time) has now brought back into contact with the living. Mircea Eliade's copious documentation of the new year pattern cannot be here presented in full — one apt example must suffice: In European tradition, during the twelve intercalary days preceding the new year in mid-winter, the dead come in procession to visit their families, led by one of the chthonic-funerary fertility goddesses (Holda, Perchta, &c.). The analogy of Hecate and the spook-horde with the European version is clear, and the near eastern antiquity of the motif is evident from the Sumerian poem *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World*. Describing Inanna's return from her unsuccessful attempt to extend the rule of life over the world of the dead, the poem says:

When Inanna returns from the nether world,
truly, the dead hasten ahead of her . . .

To Hecate, Holda and Inanna we may now add a degenerated heir of the symbolism, the rotting goddess who is the Graeco-Roman witch. This is further supported by her special relation to a liminal region of time. As the uncorrupted deity leads her ghost-horde at the turning of the year, the witch bullies her few straggling spooks across the midpoint of a single night. Further, the carnival amorality of the New Year celebration has its

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parallel in the witches' transcendence of sexual norms and limits, as their love-magic bears witness.

Looking over the assembled traits of the final Roman witch figure, and asking ourselves what she means, in an existential sense, in the context of late antiquity's civilized discontent, religious dissatisfaction, and desperate desire to refresh an existence sick with history by a renewal of time itself, we may begin to appreciate the inverted grandeur and ambivalent, millennial fascination of the witch, who is, on this level, a one-woman apocalypse, a terrifying female avatar of chaos, a violent outbreak of the forces of the Beginning in a world that felt itself nearing the End.

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown, through all of Hecate's adaptations and evolutions, a steady demonization of her originally benign traits. The full outline of the figure so prejudicially treated only came into view as we turned our attention from Hecate to her followers, the witches. They effectively displaced and fully represented her by the end of antiquity.

I have noted that the witches finally attain godlike powers, and this trend is paralleled by the steady waning of Hecate. In fact, so peripheral does Hecate rapidly become that the only passages in which she actually *appears* are in book three of the Apollonius of Rhodes' third-century B.C. epic, *The Argonautica*, and in the satirist Lucian's second-century A.D. comic sketch *The Lover of Lies*. Even these two sources don't include enough description to make a full sentence. There exists nothing comparable to even these paltry depictions in the earlier (Greek) or later (mainly Latin) literature.

And these appearances are just that — appearances. Nowhere in the extant classical literature does Hecate speak even a word. In the face of Hecate's silence there was no recourse but to put our questions to the witches.

These proved to be, in all their constant details, a faithful reflection of the fertility goddess, of which archetype Hecate is a parade example. I was brought to the novel conclusion that the actual practice of witchcraft — that is, private magical activity centered on Hecate as a source of power and not just any casual practice of magic, herbalizing or midwifery — is perhaps the result and not the basis of the witch, who is at first at *mythological* figure.

The first account of Greek witchcraft as something contemporary and real is in the second *Idyll* of Theocritus, written in the third century B.C., approximately 400 years after Hesiod formalized Hecate's entrance into the Greek pantheon. Chronologically, the sequence is half a millennium of Hecate-vilification and heroic-literary witches (like Medea) before actual contemporary witchcraft appears.

Carlo Ginzburg's book, *Night Battles* has shown how the same classical witch literature, in the hands of inquisitors, produced not only innocent victims but, as propaganda, finally persuaded many simple practitioners of agricultural magic that they were indeed "witches," and finally made some so in fact. The same myth had the same effect more than a thousand years before. The witches in Theocritus and later follow a *literary* not a ritual tradition.

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The conclusion is reinforced by the fact that there was never an original basis in Hecate worship for witchcraft. But if the witch is just the goddess reduced to a folklore motif, and the real witches a tardy result of that folklore, we must now repeat the question we have already and often posed — why was the fertility goddess so resolutely demonized?

The best explanation would be that here we have another instance of that same Greek dualism which Rhoads, Nilsson, Picard and Guthrie — a century of classical scholarship — has described, I feel correctly, in terms of a conflict between indigenous Mediterranean and Indo-Aryan invader cultures. This produced the generally recognized schizophrenia of Greek religion, that has, on the one hand, earth-centered popular worship, and on the other, the aristocratic sky-centered “orthodox” classical religion.

Now, Hecate is a goddess who literally straddles the earth-heaven religious divide. A member of the Olympian circle since Hesiod, her worship included the principal areas of earthly sacrality — which the Greeks called *miasma*, “pollution,” and her characteristic sacrifice, that of a dog, was a purification offering, that is, part of a rite meant to maintain the spiritual boundaries of the heavenly and earthly realms.

The Greeks possessed relatively few taboos (their usage defines these as ritual prohibitions relating to the state of purity in which it was permissible to approach the heavenly gods). Those taboos they did have were concerned with physical uncleanness, reproduction and death. Euripides sums up the rules nicely in these lines from *Iphigenia at Tauris*

Any mortal stained by bloodshed,
any mortal who has just assisted at childbirth,
any mortal who has just touched a corpse
is impure, must be driven away from the altar!

Hecate, a fertility goddess who by definition is deeply involved in birth and death, and who is, further, explicitly in charge of dirt and impurity, is the very embodiment of the earthy concerns that were central to indigenous Mediterranean, pre-Greek religiosity. This explains the basis of Hecate’s infernalization. Introduced into the Olympian ranks by Hesiod, in spite of her now obvious unsuitability, her demonization is part of a methodical (though unconscious) attempt to reject her. Bear in mind that Cybele, Hecate’s famous cognate goddess, was never admitted to Olympus. Artemis, also from Asia Minor, became a full citizen of Olympus only after *transferring* her inconvenient traits to Hecate.

The fertility goddesses in the Eleusis cult do not at all call into question the very deep Greek ambivalence to what fertility religion implies — the rites of Demeter and Kore are, after all, the most bracketed exception in all of Greek religion. It was literally illegal to even discuss these rites!

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To add further plausibility to our theory that the demonizing of the witches and Hecate is the working out of a deep conflict between cultural strata, I will cite three outside examples of the revaluation of fertility religion as witchcraft, in all cases by nomadic, sky-god worshipping and warlike incoming populations.

The Witch of Endor, who is treated in more detail in an appendix to this work, is only a witch in the eyes of the recently arrived Hebrews — her entire practice is consistent with the norms of Canaanite agricultural religiosity.

Among the Norse, the conflict between agricultural indigenous peoples and Indo-European invaders has, in the opinion of the great scholar de Vries, left traces in accounts of the war between the two families of gods, the Vannir and the Aesir, at the start of which Gullveig (a manifestation of the Vannir fertility goddess Freya), is burnt *as a witch*. The Volva (prophetess) sings in *The Elder Edda*:

She remembers the war
— first in the world —
when they riddled
Gullveig with spears
and burned her
in the hall of Odin;
thrice they burned her,
the thrice born,
often, time again;
but yet she lives.

They called her Heith
in every house where she came,
sibyl skilled in prophecy;
she enchanted magic wands,
she cast spells whenever she could,
she cast spells in a trance;
she was ever the joy
of evil women.

The fertility goddess of the Wampanoag Indians of Cape Cod, Squant, is originally a consort of the Creator-god Maushop, and an evident embodiment of the ocean life which sustained the tribe:

. . . a sea woman . . . her eyes were square, her head was covered with locks of seaweed, her fingers were webbed as the tern's feet, and she sang a wild song, in which joined the Wolf-Waves who followed her, howling as they came . . . her hair was green, glistening, her body wide and flat like a ribbon of kelp . . . she was Squant, the Sea-giantess . . .

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After the white man imposed his sky-inhabiting gods on the Wampanoag's earthy religion, Squant degenerated into the evil witch Granny Squannit:

Over and over her tales are told, backward and forward like ocean combers. Medicine men of the Upper Cape say that Squannit drew her knowlege of the underness of women from her even deeper knowlege of the underness of the sea. She, as a Kelp-squaw, dragged ships down and held them below till their hulls crumbled. She, as the Water-witch, square eyed, mischievous, knew how to haunt the Gentle Giant (Maushop) till he lost remembrance of wife and children, and followed to her cave. As mer-woman with a sea-green tail, she drifted in the wake of ships, and slowed their sailing by hanging on to the keel. The captain put out the topgallants and cursed the barnacles on the hull, but the Cape sailors knew that Squant would abide unless, by chance, the mate sang the Doxology, or the moon's path cut across her trail, or star-spikes, sharp in the water, pricked her and drove her below. As a Bog-witch, she scolded the owl and the marsh-owl scolded her. She planted quicksand on ancient trails; gathered to her breast young swamp-devils with reedy voices, and while they floated on her long black hair, she wallowed in the mud.

Only the very old Indians talk of Squant the Sea-woman; but many who live in Mashpee remember Granny Squannit as the bogey of their youth. A bad boy was certain to see her, and she was no sight for even a grown man: better keep her off by obedience and by going to sleep when told.

(The account of Granny Squannit is from Elizabeth Reynard's book *The Narrow Land*. It's worth noting that this ethnographer studied anthropology under Franz Boas at Barnard—with her friends Maya Deren and Zora Neale Hurston!)

Returning to the Greek witch, her degeneration should now appear not as a singular and cryptic phenomenon, but as the predictable outcome of a particular kind of culture-clash.

The special importance and influence of the Greek witch mythology is due to its being the crystallization and symbol of classical culture's relationship, not only to an earlier culture, but to what that culture's central goddess represented: sexually generated material existence.

One need not here tediously prove anew the weary observation that the early Greeks were uniquely responsive to the richness and charm of the physical world, which they found quite as entrancing as Odysseus' comrades did Circe in her garden among the tame wild-animals. Nor is it reasonably to be disputed that the Greeks gradually came to view the material world with

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the same suspicion, then dread, with which they (at the same historical point) regarded the sex-crazed hag picking magic salads in the graveyard. The fertility goddess in her descent to witch-status is a symbol of changing Greco-Roman attitudes to material existence. The late hag-like witch, with her lust and her funereal preoccupations, is an allegory of the physical appetites that bring us screaming into existence and the physical laws that send us groaning hence.

Bear in mind that the negative witch depiction, like the dark Hecate, appears only in the fifth century B.C., contemporary with Plato. The same dualism which made the great philosopher and his followers see the world and sex as the doomed and rotting prison of the soul is also operant on the goddess who represents the world and sex. The witch, a late echo of the earth mother, is vilified in exactly the same terms as the material world: infernal Hecate with her torch and her cave meaningfully parallels the setting of Plato's allegoric troglodytes. The analogy with Plato's cave is even more strikingly apt when one recalls that it occurs in the exact center of Plato's *Republic*, whose setting is the feast of Bendis, a Thracian goddess with whom Hecate was conflated, and who was associated, as Hecate always was, with torches, and connected, as Hecate was (via Enodia), by the time *The Republic* was written, with horses.

Here then ends my exposition of Hecate and the witch. It only remains to add the reflection that I have not "explained away" the power and mystery of the archetype by tracing its historical phases and determinants. Hecate and the witch have had a long and fascinating life from Homer through to Shakespeare and Goethe. And judging by the films and fiction of the twentieth century, the archetype that is the witch has lost nothing of her strength.

Great symbolic images, that combine form and meaning in a unity that can be not only felt, not only understood, but both felt and understood at once, that is, *experienced* — these images are the points where the world of spirits has broken through into our world. To learn these is to learn the *real* rudiments of magic.

Appendices

The Witch of Endor

Despite its large authority in European law and legend, the Biblical account of witchcraft is all too brief. But a few interesting and as yet undiscovered details can be wrung from this material, particularly when we juxtapose it with the classical sources. All the detailed mentions of witchcraft in the Bible seem to equate it with the practice of Canaanite religion. One passage, the earliest mention of witchcraft in the Bible, may here be cited in full. Micah (late eighth century B.C.) writes:

In that day
— declares the Lord —
I will destroy the horses in your midst
And wreck your chariots.
I will destroy the cities of your land
And destroy all your fortresses.
I will destroy all your sorcerers,
And you shall have no more spell-crooners.
I will destroy your idols
And the phallic stones for Baal in your midst;
And no more shall you bow down
To the work of your hands.
I will tear down the sacred poles of Ashtoreth in your midst
And destroy your idols.

In the Biblical condemnations, the worship of Ashtoreth is always mentioned alongside witchcraft as an “abominable practice,” thus we may expect that the Canaanite goddess stood in some relation to the Witch of Endor comparable to that of Hecate to, for example, Medea.

We meet the witch of Endor in the *First Book of Samuel* in the Bible. The story is set in the eleventh century B.C. King Saul, a monotheist, has outlawed witchcraft. Now, at the low-ebb of his fortunes, he calls on the witch who lives near the town of Endor, to have her summon the soul of the dead prophet Samuel. Samuel is to be asked whether Saul and his sons will survive their battle with the Philistines the next day. Saul visits the witch at night, and in disguise: it is a furtive, illegal consultation.

The witch performs her divining in an *ecstatic* state.. At first she does not recognize the disguised Saul — *only when she has gone into her trance* (for she, not Saul, sees the ghost of Samuel), is she able to *see through* Saul’s disguise. Evidently she has transcended the limits of human knowledge and power, she has gone into ecstasy. To what extent is ecstasy common to all witchcraft?

Although we have no account of Ashtoreth being a sender of trance or madness in the extremely sparse textual record, we have abundant

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documentation for other and cognate goddesses from the region, such as Cybele and especially Hecate, who are *ordinarily* given this description. The classical witches *always* go into frenzy for their rites. For example, the Roman stoic philosopher Seneca wrote a play about Medea, in which a character says of her: “I’ve often seen her raving, staggering, stunned.” Too much should not be made of the ecstasy as a mark of neolithic religiosity — ecstasy is basic to *all* levels of religious culture, from the hunter-gatherer shamans, through the bacchantes of a world in awe of the mysteries of agriculture, to the solitary mystics of scriptural religion. Still, common as ecstasy is to every period, it is far from common to *everyone* in a given period, and so it constitutes an important link between the two worlds of witchery.

As the world of the dead, the world underground, is a central and legitimate concern of the fertility goddess, so it is for the women associated with her. It is the best-attested object of classical witchcraft, from Homer’s Circe, who advises Odysseus on how to raise the ghost of the prophet Teireias and cause him to utter the future, to the Roman poet Lucan’s witch Erichtho, who raises the ghost of a republican soldier to foretell the results of the battle between Caesar and Pompey at Pharsalus. In this connection, the interrogation of the dead, we find the most valuable link between the witches of Greece and Israel — a sound which emerges from the *ov* or “ghost-bottle.”

The most common epithet applied to the witch of Endor, and all the other Hebrew witches, is *baalat ov*, “possessor of an *ov*.” In ordinary use, the Hebrew word *ov* means a skin used to hold water or wine. Unfortunately, the biblical account doesn’t actually describe the witch using her *ov*. To figure out what it was, we have to gather clues from several places.

Parallels to the notion of ghosts or spirits residing in a bottle or gourd are many, from the lamp-inhabiting genies of the *Arabian Nights* to the bottle-gourd of China, itself a symbol of necromancy and attribute of the Taoist Immortal Li Tieh-Kui, who is typically represented holding a bottle gourd from which spirals of smoke ascend, indicating his ability to leave his body at will in spirit form. Fans of Hong Kong horror films are well familiar with the ceramic jars in which Taoist sorcerers keep the ghosts they force to serve them.

But we can clarify the *ov* from sources closer to hand. Our knowledge of Canaanite religion is based on Israeli archaeology, references in the Bible and, most importantly, the texts of Ugarit. This last is a thirteenth-century B.C. library unearthed in the early twentieth century in a lost city on the coast of Syria. It gives detailed mythological accounts of the gods worshipped in Canaan, in a language (that scholars call *Ugaritic*) which is nearly identical to Biblical Hebrew. And, in fact, shared images and whole borrowed lines make it clear that the epic poetry of ancient

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Canaan was known and used by the poetical writers of the Bible as much as classical mythology was by Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

The Ugaritic texts contain the word *ilib*, which seems to mean “ancestral spirit,” and we should probably take this to mean “spirit of the bottle.” The word *il* means god or otherworld being, and is cognate with the Hebrew word *el* (“god”). The word *ib*, meaning bottle, is cognate with the Hebrew word *ov*. (Fuller and fascinating detail about this etymology is found in Theodor Gaster’s *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament*, where he offers many interesting insights into the witch of Endor story.)

Another piece of evidence that helps us see that the “ghost-bottle” or *ov* of the Witch of Endor was intended to hold a spirit comes from the Septuagint’s rendering of the word *ov*. The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, made at Alexandria in the third to first centuries B.C. Scholars value the Septuagint because the translators may have had better copies of the biblical texts, or a better understanding of them, than we now possess. After all, ancient Israel still existed then, so there were living authorities to consult.

The Septuagint always translates the word *ov* with the Greek word *engastrimouthos*, meaning literally “belly-speaker.” This was a person who delivered oracles in a strangely altered voice, perhaps using ventriloquism. An ethnographic parallel that helps draw together all the evidence, is provided by the *govi* or ancestral spirit jar of Haitian Voodoo. A year after a family member’s death, the soul of the deceased is summoned, with the aid of the voodoo priest, to reside in the *govi* jar on the altar. Here it can be venerated and, through the priest, it may be consulted on behalf of the living. We have an eyewitness account from Maya Deren in her book *Divine Horsemen*, which describes the sound the priest causes to proceed from the *govi*:

. . . the summoned voice in the *govi* . . . is an objective oracular authority that booms as if from the bowels of the earth.

Another important characteristic of the *ov* is the special kind of sound that emerges from it. The most frequently used epithets of the Hebrew witch all relate to *sounds*. She is a “crooner,” *m’onen* (from *anan*, a word whose Arabic cognate seems to mean “to hum”); she is a “hisser,” *m’nabesh*, a term related to the word *nabash*, “serpent.” The eighth-century B.C. prophet Isaiah describes witches as making special spooky sounds:

Now, should people say to you, “Inquire of those who have a ghost-bottle and the diviners that chirp and coo; for a people may inquire of the spirit world, of the dead on behalf of the living. . .”

and

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Your speech shall sound like a ghost-bottle (*oi*), it shall
come from underground,

Your voice shall chirp from the region where you are
buried.

Now the Graeco-Roman dead speak in similar funereal chirps for the Homer's Odysseus, when he performs his necromancy. Seven hundred years later the Latin poet Horace depicts witches who extort sounds "sad and shrill" from the dead in a cemetery on the Esquiline hill in Rome.

Rather than fatiguing the reader with the copious Graeco-Roman record of necromantic chirps, I will offer a cross cultural comparison. This comes from the Norse witches, priestesses of Freya, the Great Goddess and fertility figure of the North, who mediumistically speak for the dead in magic chants called *galdr*, from the verb *galan*, "to sing" — a word used especially with reference to bird song.

The logic behind the chirpings of the ghost-bottle, and the classical and Nordic spooks is a symbolic one: the dead are imagined with the voices of birds as an emblem of their transcendence of the limits of the body: they are free and can "fly". The same concept is behind the *Ba* or soul-bird of Egypt and the winged angels of Christian Europe.

Into the Cauldron

The Graeco-Roman witch, due to her ecstatic rites and mysterious access to the world of ghosts and spirits, was a natural magnet for folkloric material relating to shamanism. This was a late but fascinating addition to the mythology of the witch. There have been a few attempts by scholars to show a connection between far northern and Siberian shamanism and various shadowy ancient figures of myth like the Thracian prophet Zalmoxis, and Abaris, the sage of the mythical land Hyperborea. The mysterious religion of the Orphics has also been pondered for its shamanic content. Even features of early philosophy, such as the magical flight described in Parmenides' great poem, have excited interest for possible traces of shamanism.

A vestige of shamanism may perhaps be seen in the *goes* (pronounced "go-ace," a Greek word meaning "howler"). The term *goes* was generally applied to professional practitioners in the Orphic-magical-Dionysiac-mystery tradition, to mountebanks and charlatans, healers and fortune-tellers, in fine, to every sort of paid purveyor of supernatural thrills. In addition, though less usually, the word could be used to refer to shape-shifters, like the Scythian werewolves mentioned by Herodotus.

The word *goes* does have a shamanic ring to it. One of the shaman's standard functions is to lead dead souls to their place of rest in the underworld. He does this through an ecstatic performance, in the course of which he "becomes" various gods and animal spirits, that is, he impersonates for his audience, vocally and in mime, many of the figures in his supernatural journey. The *goes* of classical Greece, with his dealings with the dead, spiritual pretensions, and name that suggests animal howls and shape-shifting, may be a late debased survival of the shaman.

But I don't need to pronounce on the shamanic motifs in Greek literature here, because none of these are ever related to the *witches*. Even the best attested of the Greek shamanic motifs, the rather general term *goes*, is never applied to a witch, though the term seems appropriate to individuals who ordinarily go into ecstatic states for their rites and have an ongoing traffic with the spirit world.

The Greek shamanic lore that remained from ancient Indo-European sources and what arrived in accounts that came south from Scythia (Russia), constituted too feeble a trickle of influence to make the shamanic a powerful current in Greek supernatural thinking. The Greeks typically turned their political ambitions east, south and west, and took little notice of the fur-clad barbarians up north. The Romans, on the other hand, were peculiarly concerned with the primitively equipped races they could handily defeat. These barbarians, in direct contact with

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their Roman foes, are the most plausible source for the shamanic lore which (as I shall strive to show) enriched the Roman witch depiction.

Simply defined, a shaman is an individual in an archaic society who is able to enter ecstatic states or trances in which he travels through other worlds — heavens and underworlds — typically on healing missions, such as to cure a sick man by finding his strayed or stolen soul. The shaman first achieves this ability in a spiritual crisis which it would be fair to call a death, since it places him decisively outside the limits of the human condition. During this “death” he characteristically suffers dismemberment and the replacement of his organs with immortal equivalents, makes an ascent through the heavens and a descent through the underworld. All this takes place on the spiritual plane, of course, while his body remains comatose. In the course of his terrific journey the shaman acquires spiritual helpers, the ability to take on the shapes of animals, to speak in the tongues of all creatures and even of the gods, and achieves mastery of fire (handling coals, &c.).

We shall follow this mystical itinerary in our survey of the classical literature, giving in each case examples from the witchcraft of the Roman period and parallels from Eliade’s study, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, which remains the classic exposition of the subject.

1: Crisis — Death State

The shaman’s first initiatory seizure, and to some extent all his succeeding trances, are “deaths” — excursions beyond the limits of the human condition and the borders of mortality. He can see the souls of the dead and share in their uncanny knowledge because he too has experienced death and is, though alive, also “dead.” He signalizes this by modes of behavior appropriate to the dead, such as comatose states. He also dresses in a post-mortem style: the Siberian shaman’s costume is typically ornamented with iron objects that represent bones — he wears his skeleton on the outside, visible like that of a man long dead.

In the same spirit, the Roman witches operate at the hour when ghosts are abroad — “the silent center of the night” in the words of the first-century B.C. Roman poet Tibullus. And it is only in Roman literature that the graveyard became the site for witching, and that corpse became a primary magical tool. Lucan’s Erictho is the most fully realized portrayal of this living-dead witch:

To her it was a crime to shelter her accursed head in a city or under a roof. Dear to the deities of Hell, she inhabited deserted tombs and haunted graves from which the ghosts had been driven. Neither the gods of Heaven, nor the fact that she was still living, prevented her from hearing the speechless conversation of

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the dead, or from knowing the abodes of Hell and the mysteries of subterranean Pluto. Haggard and loathesome with age is the face of the witch; her awful countenance is overcast with a hellish pallor and weighed down by uncombed locks, it is never seen by sunlight . . .

This extreme image is characteristic of the Roman witches and entirely at odds with the lovely witches of Greece: Circe, Medea, Simaitha! The funerary is a new element, and one that will endure. We may perhaps see in the witches' acquisition of shamanic death-garb the origin of the black-robed graveyard glamor we associate with the witch today.

2: Dismemberment

Once in the deathlike state that is part of the spiritual crisis of initiation, the shaman is — on the spiritual plane — hewn apart, often boiled in a cauldron, then rebuilt with immortal equivalents of his former organs. A similar event is associated with the later witches. Apuleius tells us how the witch Meroe put her runaway love-slave into a deep magical sleep during which she slit open his throat, reached down into his entrails, and pulled out his heart! This loss to his circulatory system she made good by inserting a charmed sponge. He lived, and was in fact unaware of the loss he had sustained. Elsewhere in the novel, the hapless Thelyphron was similarly hexed into a “deathlike” sleep, he was “dead asleep” and “buried in slumber.” The witches then cut off his nose and ears, replacing them with wax copies. A close parallel is provided by the initiation of the Araucian shaman of South America, cited by Eliade, whose nose or eyes may be torn off and exchanged with those of his initiator.

The Roman poet Ovid says that, among the carefully chosen substances of Medea's rejuvenation brew that will *replace* the blood of old Aeson, are stones — “pebbles sought in the farthest Orient. . .” Likewise Lucan's Erictho replaces the innards of the corpse she will return to unhappy and equivocal life with stones “. . . that rattle when warmed under a breeding eagle. . .”

Stones are popular as organ-replacements in shamanic initiation world wide, as among the Wotjobalak tribesmen of Australia, where rock-crystals are especially favored.

The logic of the stones lies in rock's immediate implication of superhuman immutability and duration, of immortality, which would explain why this substance is the most universal choice for funerary monuments.

Boiling the dismembered body *in a cauldron* is also recorded: this, says Ovid, is Medea's procedure when she rejuvenates an old ram (to show

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that her magic will really work) and again when she pretends to do the same for the aged Pelias.

The poet Propertius, Ovid's near contemporary, shows us a witch who also possesses a cauldron. To be sure, one brass pot does not a shamaness make, but when we note that she is also a shape-shifter, able "... to disguise her shape with the form of the night-prowling wolf. . .", we are entitled to see in the cauldron part of the shamanic pattern.

That the witch is the agent and not the subject of the dismemberment procedure does not compromise the idea of shamanic influence. Such distortion is to be expected when a religious reality travels far to become folklore. What is of moment is the constant constellation of ideas — dismemberment, organ-replacement, death-state, cauldron — over and over again, in the larger framework of shamanic motifs I will set forth in the course of this essay.

It should be noted that this is the first era in which the witch appears *with cauldron*, a feature whose later prominence needs no comment.

3: Ascent

After the physical renovation that finalizes his post-mortem and more-than-mortal state, the shaman characteristically makes an ascent to heaven to meet the gods and receive from them the secrets of shamanizing. Typically he does so on the back of, or in the form of, a bird. For this reason birdly features, from decorative feathers to full-body bird disguise, are typical of the shaman's costume.

The witches also turn into birds: Ovid ponders whether screech owls aren't witches who have shifted shape, while Apuleius gives this detailed account:

. . . first I saw how Pamphile put off all her garments, and took out wooden boxes. She opened one and warmed the ointment therein with her fingers, and then rubbed her body with it from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head. When she had whispered much over the lamp, she shook her whole body, and as her arms gently moved I perceived how plumes grew out on them, and how they grew into strong wings. Her nose became crooked and hard, her nails turned into claws, and Pamphile became an owl. She cried and screeched, to try her powers, fluttered up from the ground by little and little, till at last she leaped up and flew quite away.

Here we see another motif familiar from European witch lore, the "flying ointment" the witches use to travel to the Sabbath, on the backs of their familiar spirits or else in animal form themselves.

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4: Descent

Here there is only one classical example of the shamanic motif, but it is so rich and complex as to make it a standard and touchstone for all others. Unfortunately, its great length prohibits quotation here. In view of this amazing text it will be clear that neither the necromancy Homer's *Odyssey* nor any of the pre-Roman witch-rites are particularly *shamanic*, whatever their funereal overtones. Though a shaman can see ghosts, not everyone who sees a ghost is a shaman.

The account in question is Book Six of Lucan's *Civil War*. There the witch Erichtho makes an explicit descent to the world of the dead through a mountain cave to summon back from Hades a newly dead soul and force it to re-enter its own corpse. Shamans ordinarily make such descents to the world of the dead in order to hale hence the strayed or stolen soul of an ill person.

5: Animal Transformation

Shamans, many of whose helper spirits are animals, access their power by taking on their forms (i.e., imitating their sounds and movements). Now the witches can change, not only into birds, but into virtually any animal. Apuleius tells us:

. . . witches change their skins and turn themselves at will into all kinds of beasts, and their disguises would deceive the eyes even of the all-seeing sun, or the eyes of Justice itself. Sometimes they change into birds, sometimes into dogs and mice, and sometimes into flies . . .

A more direct echo of the shamanic motif is the witches' use of animal-sound in their incanting. This is the description of Erichtho's magic chant from Lucan's epic:

. . . and lastly her voice, more powerful than any magic herbs to rule over the powers of Hell, first uttered indistinct sounds, tuneless melodies, far different from human speech. The dog's bark and the wolf's howl were in that voice; it resembled the complaint of the restless owl and the night-flying screech-owl, the shrieking and roaring of wild beasts, the serpent's hiss, the beat of waves dashing against rocks, the sound of forests, and the thunder that issues from a rift in the cloud: in that one voice all these things were heard.

Here we have gone beyond animal transformation and touched on the shaman's power to make use of the language of spirits, to "speak in the tongues of men and angels," in St. Paul's phrase.

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6: Language of the Gods

The shaman learns, in the course of his initiatory journey, the “language of the gods,” which contains every sound and cry in the natural world, and is a sort of auditory microcosm.

This concept is developed explicitly in an invocation to the moon from the *Greek Magical Papyri*. The moon, whose cycles are described as the pattern of all being, is associated with a cosmic range of sounds. In the spell, the magician describes the sounds. Magically, that is the same as actually producing them:

And the first companion of your name is silence, the second a popping sound, the third groaning, the fourth hissing, the fifth a cry of joy, the sixth moaning, the seventh barking, the eighth bellowing, the ninth neighing, the tenth a musical sound, the eleventh a sounding wind, the twelfth a wind-creating sound, the thirteenth a coercive sound, the fourteenth a coercive emanation of perfection.

7: Mastery of Fire

As a demonstration of his transcendent condition, the shaman can handle fire or walk on coals. It is a proof of this order that Erictho provides:

. . . but if storm and black clouds take away the stars, then she issues forth from rifled tombs and tries to catch the nocturnal lightnings.

The Buryat of Siberia give a shaman’s burial to anyone struck by lightning and consider his close relatives entitled to become shamans. The Soyot and Kamchdal believe that lightning flashes (without impact) can signify someone’s shamanic election. There is also record of an Eskimo shaman who obtained his power after being struck by a “ball of fire.”

Two insights emerge from our review of shamanic motifs in witch-depiction. First, meaningful echoes of shamanism only appear in witch mythology as of the first century B.C. Ecstasy and necromancy, witch characteristics from the start, favored the assimilation of shamanic lore, but are themselves neutral. The late enrichment of the witch myth with shamanism is probably to be attributed simply to the Romans’ large military involvement in, and thus contact with, the barbarian world where shamanism was practiced.

Second, we have identified the deeper meaning of a number of well-known features of the witchcraft known to European literature and art — the funereal garb, flying ointment and animal transformation.

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These motifs were introduced into the mythology of the witch via the brilliant poetic creations of Ovid, Lucan and Apuleius.

Rotting Goddess Bibliography

Previous to the publication of this book, there was no thorough or successful treatment of Greco-Roman witchcraft or Hecate. The specialist articles and smaller works I have consulted were nowhere particularly helpful and need not be cited. Nor has an adequate study succeeded my work, since the classics profession has carried on a “media blackout” regarding my findings for the last decade. The few reviews of my book only explained that it should be ignored because of my personal shortcomings, *e.g.*, because I am a pagan (arguable), because I am a man (on firmer ground here), and because I espouse the ideas of scholars who are out of fashion. It is this last which invites a response: the classical philologists are really not in position to offer fashion tips on *any* level.

Although I cannot recommend the recent works of my colleagues, I list however the books of general interest which will agreeably increase the reader’s knowledge of some specific topics mentioned.

The Malleus Malleficarum, Kramer & Sprenger, translated by Montague Summers, is still available from Dover. This is a wonderful romp through the classical source material, and it represents in detail the view of witchcraft which was standard in Europe for the entire Christian period.

The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Edited by Hans Dieter Betz. All the texts, which are fascinating, but without any commentary or explanation. Pretty puzzling much of the time, but still worth getting.

Stories from Ancient Canaan, Michael David Coogan. Not actually stories but epic poetry. The most readable and literary introduction to the Ugaritic material, this gives us the cultural background of the witch of Endor.

The Norse Myths, Kevin Crossley-Holland. The Norse myths, because of their superior literary form, and their availability in English, are an indispensable point of reference for discussing history of religion. Crossley-Holland’s book of translations is a literary jewel in its own right.

Archaic Roman Religion, Georges Dumézil. The best and most thorough book there is on what Roman religion was really like before Greek influence covered it over. All of Dumézil’s books are worth reading. One *must* read a few to be able to speak of Indo-European religion at all.

Divine Horsemen, Maya Deren, a study of Voodoo in Haiti which provided some very helpful ethnographic parallels for this book. Deren was a brilliant

filmmaker and an initiated Voodoo priestess. Her book, despite its somewhat over-ripe literary style, remains the best one overall on Voodoo.

Patterns in Comparative Religion, Mircea Eliade, this is the finest single book ever written on history of religion. *All* of Eliade's books (with the exception of his fiction) are fascinating and worth owning, regardless of whether you are already interested in the topic. What's more, they are all written in an agreeable, literary style, and quite accessible to the non-specialist.

Myth Legend and Custom in the Old Testament, T. H. Gaster. A mind-expanding study of the primitive religious background to the Bible. All of Gaster's works are brilliant must-have's for the student of religion. His edition of *The Golden Bough*, with its adroit condensation and illuminating additions, is also extremely valuable..

The Greeks and Their Gods, W. K. Guthrie. The best book there is, in any language, on ancient Greek Religion.

