Blaming the Witch: Some Reflections upon Unexpected Death

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They say that the following incident happened to the Italian Euthynoos. He was the son of Elysios of Terina, a man foremost among the people there in virtue, wealth, and repute, and Euthynoos came to his end suddenly from some unknown cause. Now it occurred to Elysios, as it might have occurred to anybody else, that his son perhaps died of sorcery (?pcÿppdKot2); for he was his only heir to a large property and estate.

When Euthynoos dies suddenly from unknown causes, as Plutarch relates, his father immediately suspects pharmaka - witchcraft or sorcery or poisons, but he is at a loss to put his suspicions to the test. Someone or something must be to blame for an anomalous death, but too many unverifiable possibilities exist to allow the surviving relatives to pinpoint the blame. If this were a detective novel, we would say there are too many suspects, too many people who might envy the young, rich, and distinguished aristocrat who was heir to his father's fortunes. This envy, the natural product of a competitive environment, might have led to some action against him, sorcery or witchcraft, whether by pharmaka in the sense of attacking through magical spells or in the sense of administering poisons. The suspicion of witchcraft is natural in such a situation, Plutarch remarks; it is the first thing that would have occurred to anyone.

"Witchcraft" is a term used in the modern anthropological study of many different cultures, and it has proven a useful analytic category despite the fact that many of these cultures, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, have no particular term in their own vocabulary that corresponds to the range of things "witchcraft" signifies in English. E. E. Evans-Pritchard defines witchcraft as an explanation of unexpected misfortune, but while there are many ways in which such misfortunes might be explained, witch-
craft specifically refers the cause of the misfortune to a personal agent within the society - blaming the witch. As Wolfgang Behringer remarks, witchcraft “links human agency with supernatural powers. Basic human feelings, like envy or jealousy, anger or hate, detailed personal relationships or social tensions, can be linked to specific cases of misfortune. The basic hypothesis of witchcraft is that the origin of misfortune is social.”

The category of witchcraft, then, may include in any given culture a variety of means of causing misfortune and different types of people within that society may be identified, by those suffering the misfortunes, as responsible for the misfortunes, i.e., as witches.

A “witch” may thus be defined as the sort of person who would use witchcraft, abnormal or supernatural powers, to cause misfortune for another member of the community, and these witches tend to be imagined in a way as different as possible from the normal members of the society. While witches are thus often imagined as foreigners, alien people from outside the community, gender is of course often the root of the “internal outsider,” resulting in the familiar association of witchcraft with female gender. Many cultures at different times, from the Azande of Evans-Pritchard to early Modern Europeans, make extensive use of accusations of witchcraft to explain events, but, despite elaborate depictions of witchcraft in Greek and Roman literature, there is no evidence of widespread witch-hunts or even a consistent pattern of blaming witches for misfortunes in life, whether failure of the crops or the unexpected death of a youth like Euthynoos.

The epitaphs Fritz Graf has collected that refer to an unexpected death as caused by witchcraft provide a welcome supplement to the evidence scholars of ancient religions generally rely on to understand the ideas of magical harming and untimely death, the curse tablets and the literary depictions. It is worth noting, however, that, in the evidence Graf has compiled, the relatives of the deceased, like Euthynoos’s father, tend to identify the cause of the misfortunes, i.e., as witches.4

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2 In Greek and Roman contexts, the use of harm is often described as pharmaka or venom, words which can mean either poison in the sense of physical substances or magical spells. Many cultures at different times, from the Azande of Evans-Pritchard to early Modern Europeans, make extensive use of accusations of witchcraft to explain events, but, despite elaborate depictions of witchcraft in Greek and Roman literature, there is no evidence of widespread witch-hunts or even a consistent pattern of blaming witches for misfortunes in life, whether failure of the crops or the unexpected death of a youth like Euthynoos.


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6 RichardGodden, "Imagining Greek and Roman Magic," in Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Greece and Rome (ed. B. Astebro and S. Clark; University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, 1990), 194. "Illegitimate religious knowledge is presumably to be found among individual non-citizens and non-men, that is, women."
Thermis invoke the deities of the Underworld to bring a curse against any-

Like Euthynoos's father, Simalos, too, is at a loss to pin down the respon-

indefinite person who willed the harm (a witch), to the pharmaka that pro-

markable formulation, we may discern four different possibilities for the

may that person suffer in the same way that Thermis has. Within this re-

rected the terrible Erinyes of pharmaka against my entrails and my life,"

sibility for this unexpected death. In his epitaph for her, Simalos has

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responsible. As Graf has shown, this conditionality is a relatively common

which this kind of magical harming was imagined to work.

The very start of Thermis's curse emphasizes the uncertainty - "if

Not only is the person indefinite, "if -" but the clause is conditional, "if -" there may not in fact have been someone who is

Graf in this volume, section A.

inscribed, not by a commissioned profbssional, but by the grieving Simalos himself. See

Graf in this volume, section A.

Fritz Graf, "Medea, the Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-Known

Meroe.9 They can do what no normal man can do, since they are not nor-

modes of alterity.4 Such witches tend to be nearly omnipotent, as well;

there is no limit to the powers attributed to Lucan's Erichtho or Apuleius's

Meroe.5 They can do what no normal man can do, since they are not nor-

ormal, not men, not citizens, and so forth. Within a literary work, the levels

of alterity can be piled up for effect or particular aspects, such as Medea's

femininity or her barbarian status, can be highlighted in different accounts.

In her recent study, Naming the Witch, Kimberly Stratton has examined

the way different modes of alterity are emphasized in different historical

contexts.6 She notes the prominence of young, vengeful female witch-

figures in Greek tragedy in contrast to the old, lustful women in Roman

poetry, pointing out that both these female types differ from the male,

alien sorcerers of early Christian literature. Strutton rightly draws attention to

the links between the choice of type of alterity (age, alien status, gender) and

the specific historical circumstances in which particular images of the

witch were produced, but her account becomes at times overly schematic.

The different types of alterity coexist with one another as possibilities for

accusations of witchcraft in all of the historical periods she examines -

male, foreign witches show up in Greek and Roman literature; young,

vengeful sorceresses appear in both pagan and Christian literature of the

Roman era; and old hags abound from the earliest Greek sources to the

Christian period. The social and political circumstances she examines cer-

tainly play a role in determining which kinds of witches predominate, but

considerations of genre and even individual authorial preference also have

their influence. The particular attributes of any given witch figure depend

first and foremost on the role the character plays in the literary narrative,

from the divine foreigner Circe in Odyssseus’s wanderings to the all-too-

human young, barbarian girl Medea in Ovid. The literary imagination al-

 lows the figure of the witch to be shaped to fit the story, focusing on one

type of alterity or heaping strangeness upon strangeness to create a terrify-

ing figure.

However, while the female foreign witch, powerfully sexual in either an

exotically alluring or repulsively hideous way, may be the most satisfying

literary creation, life is never as clear-cut as literature, although the stereo-

9 See Gordon, "Imagining Greco and Roman Magic," for the place of such witches in

the Greco-Roman imaginary.
types of alterity from the literary tradition remain available for use. The epigram that attributes the death of a little child to the hand of a witch seems to borrow from the literary trope, although it is unclear whether the author is hinting at a particular witch whose continued practice remains a threat to loving parents or whether the epigram provides a general warning of the uncertain threats that may destroy a beloved child. “The most cruel hand of a witch (saga) has killed me, while she remains on earth and causes damage through her craft.” Parents, guard your children, lest grief will attach itself to your heart.” If the parents had a specific saga in mind, we might see the epigraph as a strategy to mobilize public opinion against this individual, but the parallels suggest that a specific target would be cursed by name. The uncertainty indicates the generalized concern.

This very uncertainty, however, could create problems in the social sphere; an unresolved mystery leads to speculation and rumors, as different members of the society answer the question of “who did it?” in their own way. The epigram from Andros for Abaskantos illustrates the problem and one strategy for dealing with it.

After I visited Rome and Asia on much business and suffered the strife of many fights, I lie here in this tomb together with my child, a man from Andros, from the family of Anacis, I Abaskantos, son of mighty parents. I have borne taken not by love potions as was the son of Peleus, but in great Ares by facial unholy plants. But my father’s I terrible [—], and my mourning mother [—].

The world-famous athlete—if that is what the references to his travels and contests indicates—perished from some unholy poison, not from an overdose of love potion; the very protestations suggest the social scenario that would make such a strategy necessary. Specifying the individual perpetrator is less important than classifying him—as the sort of enemy this important man might make (perhaps an athletic rival or someone bested in one of Abaskantos’s many business affairs) rather than as the sort of witchy woman with whom Abaskantos might have formed a contract or in the competition for the affections of the lady. For the family too, it is better to marginalize Acte as a venenaria and blot out her name from the family tomb; the neighbors still will talk, but it is better to be pitied than scorned.

A venenaria or a saga is the sort of person who would use venenum or pharmaka, the poisons or spells that are also part of Thermis’s curse. There, however, not only the agent but the means themselves are unclear: what are the terrible Erinyes of pharmaka? As Graf has pointed out, the term pharmaka itself is ambiguous, since it could refer either to poisonous drugs or to magical spells, but the reference to the terrible Erinyes of pharmaka, raises the possibility that the affliction of Thermis came, not from ingesting poisonous substances administered by an enemy, but by demonic attack from spirits led on (ρυγαίας) by the will of some enemy. The possibility that unexpected or inexplicable illness or death could be caused by demonic intervention is reflected in the variety of protective amulets, such as the silver lamella from Aleppo, dating to the 2nd/3rd century C.E. that requests protection for a certain Juliana, “Release Juliana from all sorcery and from all passive suffering and all active influence and demonic apparition of the night and day; now, now; quickly, quickly; immediately.”

"Release Juliana from all passion and from all passive suffering and all active influence and demonic apparition of the night and day; now, now; quickly, quickly; immediately."
diately, immediately, immediately. 14 Curse tablets, too, invoke the daimones of the netherworld to afflict the target. 15 Daimones under the earth and daimones whoever you may be, terrors of men and mothers who are a match for men, whether male or female, daimones whoever you may be and who lie here, having left grievous life, whether violently slain or foreign or local or unburied, whether you are borne away from the boundaries of the stars or wander somewhere in the air and you who lie under here, take over the voices of my opponents. In her curse, Thermis asks for equal retribution against whoever brought about her death; that is, she asks for terrible Erinyes of pharmaka equally to afflict her enemy. The idea that one unjustly and violently dead might bring the Furies against the one responsible for her death is an idea that recurs in literary sources—most famously in Aeschylus, whose portrait of the Furies bears many of the same stamps of alterity that later pictures of demonic spirits who bring vengeance or to something about the perpetrator (a miasma) words as aliteros, prostropaios, palamnaios, and even Erinyes, which can all refer to a god. A stele recording the death of the woman from Knidos who was accused of using a pharmakon against her son-in-law evokes a whole complicated narrative of accusations of witchcraft and divine vengeance. While the Erinyes can represent just retribution, there is, however, no reason to see them here as indicating that Thermis’s illness comes in re-venge for something wrong she did, for Stamkos explicitly concludes his poem with the claim that “blameless were the ways of your life.” Again, we can see such a protestation as a strategy against potential blame from the community. Some of the confession stelae show that one possible community response to an unexpected death was to attribute it to the will of a god. A stele recording the death of the woman from Knidos who was accused of using a pharmakon against her son-in-law evokes a whole complicated narrative of accusations of witchcraft and divine vengeance.

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were proved false in the eyes of the community when both she and her son suffered some unexpected misfortunes that were understood by the community as the vengeance of the god.

Another confession stele from Maionis was published by a mother who claims her 13 year old son was killed by the god because she had failed to properly honor the god. And the god took revenge for this, because Syntyche had not published and extolled the god. Therefore he made her set up in his sanctuary this account of the revenge he took on her child of thirteen years, Heraclides, because Syntyche held the things of man in higher account than the things of the god. It is Syntyche the daughter of Apollonius and Maionis who has published this act of vengeance.

The unexpected death of the young Heraclides was attributed to the vengeance of the dishonored god, and her mother, Syntyche, publicly blames herself instead of putting the blame upon some malevolent witch figure, because Syntyche held the things of man in higher account than the things of the god. It is Syntyche the daughter of Apollonius and Maionis who has published this act of vengeance.

Ultimately, in the story of Euthynoos, too, it is the will of the god, not some jealous rival employing witchcraft, that brings about the untimely death of the youth. When his father consults the oracle of the dead, he sees the shades of his son and his own father, who inform him that the son's early death was not caused by malice, but by the favor of the gods.

Being in perplexity as to how he might put his suspicions to the test, he visited a place where the spirits of the dead are conjured up, and having offered the preliminary sacrifice prescribed by custom, he lay down to sleep in the place, and had this vision. It seemed to him that his own father came to him, and that on seeing his father be related to him what had happened touching his son, and begged and besought his help to discover the man who was responsible for his son's death. And his father said, "It is for this that I am come. Take from this person here what he brings for you, and from this you will learn from all things over which you are now grieving." The person whom he indicated was a young man who followed him, resembling his son Euthynoos and close to him in years and stature. So Elysios asked who he was, and he said, "I am the daimon of your son," and with these words he handed him a paper. This Elysios opened and saw written there these three lines:

"Verily somewhat the minds of men in ignorance wander; Dead now Euthynoos lies; destiny as has decreed.

Not for himself was it good that he live, nor yet for his parents.

Such, you observe, is the purport of the tales recorded in ancient writers."

The minds of men wander in folly, says the oracle; the gods know an early death to be the best thing for a good man. Plutarch includes this anecdote within his consolation speech to a father whose son has died young, transforming the uncertainty of the cause of death into a philosophical sermon on the limitations of mortal perspective. Don't blame a witch, trust instead that the gods provide what is best for mortals.

The place of the witch, then, of the horrific scare-figure who piles up levels of alterity - female, foreign, and superhumanly powerful - is more in the imaginary of the Greco-Roman world than in its reality. While a variety of individuals may have engaged in practices that they or others
might have labeled "magic," including curse tablets and pharmaka intended to bring harm upon others, the kinds of witches we meet in literature, from Medea to Erichthon, do not, from the evidence of the epitaphs or from contemporary historical accounts, seem to have been regularly identified as the figures responsible for particular misfortunes, such as the untimely death of a young wife or the promising young heir to his father's estate. Rather than fastening the blame on a specific individual and identifying her as the witch or engaging in widespread witch hunts, those afflicted with misfortunes seem more likely to express their uncertainty over the precise cause - it might have been a witch, but then again it might have been something else.

Thus, we see that, within the range of possible causes, either the specification of one - a witch or a poison - or the emphasis on the uncertainty itself can serve as a strategy for dealing with the social situation. This corpus of epitaphs can help illuminate the complex social situations that surrounded the phenomenon of untimely death in Greek and Roman societies, giving us insight into the structures of the society and the ways people negotiated within them. At the same time, these epitaphs, with their range of attributed causes for death, can help us understand the multiple ways in which magical forms of harming were thought to work in the ancient world, particularly with the insight that one mode need not exclude others in an explanation. These epitaphs supplement the literary accounts and the evidence of the curse tablets, providing new light on this murky, yet fascinating, aspect of the ancient world.

Works Cited


