

Blaming the Witch

Some Reflections on Unexpected Death

RADCLIFFE G. EDMONDS III

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 (φαρμάκοις); for he was his only heir to a large property and estate.¹

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

¹ Plutarch, *Consolation for Apollonius* 109b. Τὰ δὲ περὶ τὸν Ἰταλὸν Εὐθύνοον τοιαῦτά φασι γενέσθαι. εἶναι μὲν γὰρ αὐτὸν Ἡλυσίου πατρὸς τοῦ Τεριναίου, τῶν ἐκεῖ πρώτου καὶ ἀρετῇ καὶ πλούτῳ καὶ δόξῃ, τελευτῆσαι δ' ἐξαπίνης αἰτίᾳ τινὶ ἀδήλῳ. τὸν οὖν Ἡλυσίον ἐσελθεῖν ὅπερ ἴσως καὶ ἄλλον εἰσηλθε, μήποτ' εἴη φαρμάκοις ἀπολωλώς· τοῦτον γὰρ εἶναι μόνον αὐτῷ ἐπ' οὐσίᾳ πολλῇ καὶ χρήμασιν.

defines witchcraft as an explanation of unexpected misfortune,² but, while there are many ways in which such misfortunes might be explained, witchcraft 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, derailed 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."³ 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.⁴

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 variety of ways as Other, as somehow different 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 marker of the "internal outsider," resulting in the familiar association of witches with female gender.⁵ 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 witch figures in Greek and Roman literature, there is little 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 Euthynoo.

The epitaphs that 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

² E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft: Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), 63.

³ Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004), 2.

⁴ In Greek and Roman contexts, the mode of harming is often described as *pharmaka* or *venena*, words which can mean either poisons in the sense of physical substances or magical spells. Plutarch's discussion (*Table Talk* 7 680c–683b) of καταβάσκανειν, giving the evil-eye, however, shows that other modes of harm through witchcraft could be imagined, even if they do not show up in the surviving sources as prominently. Like Plutarch, Pliny (*NH* 7.16–18) attributes this power of the evil eye to certain groups of people who live far off, a familiar feature of witchcraft in anthropological studies.

⁵ Richard Gordon, "Imagining Greek and Roman Magic," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Greece and Rome* (eds. B. Ankarloo and S. Clark; University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1999), 194, "Illegitimate religious knowledge is presumptively to be found among individual non-citizens and non-men, that is, women."

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 Euthynoo's father, tend to indicate their uncertainty about the cause, naming multiple possibilities rather than piling up the levels of alterity into a single "witch" figure to take the blame. Blaming the witch is more common in Greek literature than Greek epitaphs; in real life, cases of unexpected death create uncertainty about whom or what to blame. This uncertainty over the multiple possibilities is, in itself, a fascinating aspect of the evidence that helps us better understand the ancient ideas of magical harming and untimely death.

The stele from Alexandria that relates the sad tale of Thermis and Simalos provides a striking example of this kind of uncertainty and offers the opportunity for investigating the ways in which the ancient Greeks and Romans thought about how this kind of harm might work and what sort of strategies they had for dealing with it in the social sphere. The young mother Thermis has died after a three-month wasting disease. That untimely death has traumatized her loving husband Simalos, leaving him, like the father of Euthynoo, seeking some explanation of this tragedy:

"Thermis, worthy one, greetings." "Lords of the *daimones* down there and you, noble Persephassa, Demeter's Daughter: Admit this unfortunate and shipwrecked guest, me Thermis, born to her father Lysanias, the noble wife and companion of Simalos. If someone has directed the terrible Erinyes of poison/spells against my entrails and my life, do not, immortal gods, send him any other fate than one that is similar to what I have been suffering – I who now dwell down here, having left behind, in three months of a wasting illness, the fruits of life, bereft of what Earth, Giver-of-All, gives to humans, of my children, Lords, and of my husband, whose soul existed for me only, and sweet was my life with my spouse. I have already forgotten all this, wretched me, and in my grief I pronounce a curse: 'Make them go to the big deep Vault of Hades and the Gates of Darkness, utterly deprived of their children and their city. But may all my children enjoy an unharmed, blessed life, as well as my husband, arriving at old age's time.' And if there is even small respect for prayers in Hades: may this curse reach those to whom I address it." "While I sing the Muses' song of my life with you, a song sweet and mournful at the same time, Thermis my spouse, I promise you this: the children I have from you, I will raise them in a way that is worth my love to you, my wife, and I will keep Lysas as an equal to my children. I will do this out of recognition, for blameless were the ways of your life."⁶

⁶ Long metrical epitaph, 2d cent. BCE, from Alexandria, now in Paris. Étienne Bernard, *Inscriptions métriques de l'Égypte gréco-romaine* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1969), 209 no. 46. Θέρμιν χρηστή, χαίρε. χθονίων ἔσερθε δαιμόνων ἀνάκτορες | σεμνή τε Φερσέφασσα, Δήμητρος κόρη, | δέχεσθε τὴν σαυαγὸν ἀθλίαν ξένην, | πατρός γεγώσαν Λυσανίου Θέρμιν ἐμέ, | ἐσθλήν δ' ἄκοιτιν Σιμάλου ξυσάορον. | εἴ τις δ' ἐμοῖς σπλανχνοῖσιν ἢ βίῳ ποτὲ | οἰκτρὰς Ἐρινύς φαρμάκων ἐπήγαγεν, | μὴ πώποτ' ἄλλην μοῖραν, ἄφθιτοι θεοί, | πέμψῃθ' ὁμοίαν θ' ἣν ἐγὼ κεκτημένη. | ἔνερθε ναίω, τριπτύχους μῆνας φθίσι, | βιότου λιποῦσα καρπὸν, ὃν γῆ παν–

Like Euthynooos’ father, Simalos too is at a loss to pin down the responsibility for this unexpected death. In his epitaph for her, Simalos has Thermis invoke the deities of the Underworld to bring a curse against anyone who might have been responsible for her illness: “If someone has directed the terrible Erinyes of *pharmaka* against my entrails and my life,” may that person suffer in the same way that Thermis has. Within this remarkable formulation, we may discern four different possibilities for the agent of harm: Simalos covers the whole range in his response, from the indefinite person who willed the harm (a witch), to the *pharmaka* that provide the means, to the *daimonic* forces of the Erinyes, to the chthonic deities like Phersephassa. Simalos’ formulation may be in some ways idiosyncratic, a poetic expression of his grief and uncertainty, but it nevertheless outlines the multiple possibilities for causation of untimely death. An investigation into each of these types can help illuminate the ways in which this kind of magical harming was imagined to work.

The very start of Thermis’ curse emphasizes the uncertainty – “if someone has directed.” Not only is the person indefinite, τις, but the clause is

κράτωρ | βροτοῖς δίδωσι, τοῦδ’ ἀμεστηρημέ[ν]η | τέκνων τε, ἄνακτες, κἀνδρὸς οὐ
 ψυχῇ | [μ]ία | ὑπῆρχέ μοι σὺν ἀνδρὶ καὶ βίος γλυκὺς. | τούτων ἀπάντων ἀθλία
 λελησμένη | ἀρὰς τίθημι, τοῖα ἔχουσα πῆματα, | αὐτοῖσι καὶ τέκεσι παρρίζους
 μολῖν | “Ἄδου μέγαν κευ[θ]μῶνα καὶ σκ<τ>ότου {σκοτόυ} πύλας, | τέκνων δ’ ἐμῶν
 ἄθραυστον ὀλβιον βίον | πάντων ἰκέσθαι κἀνδρὸς ἰς γήρως χρόνον,” | εἴ γ’ ἐστ’
 ἐν “Ἄδου βαιὸς εὐχολῆς λόγος, | ἀρὰς τελέης οἷς ἐπεύχομαι τελῖν. ———
 τοῖαδ’ ἐννέπω. | θρέψω δ’ ὅσους ἔφυσας ἐκ ἐμοῦ γόνους | τῆς πρὸς σε φιλίας
 ἀξίως, ξυνάορε. | Λυσᾶν τε τὸν πρὶν τοῖς ἐμοῖς ὁμόρροπον (ἔτους) ζ’, Παῦνι κς’ |
 παισὶν συνέξω, σὴν χάριν ταύτην τιθίς, | ἄμενπτον ἐν βίῳ γὰρ ἔσχηκας τρόπον.
 (“Lords of the *daimones* down there and you, noble Persephassa, Demeter’s Daughter: Admit
 this unfortunate and shipwrecked guest, me Thermis, born to her father Lysanias, the noble
 wife and companion of Simalos. If someone has directed the terrible Erinyes of poison/spells
 against my entrails and my life, do not, immortal gods, send him any other fate than one that
 is similar to what I have been suffering – I who now dwell down here, having left behind, in
 three months of a wasting illness, the fruits of life, bereft of what Earth, Giver-of-All, gives to
 humans, of my children, Lords, and of my husband, whose soul existed for me only, and
 sweet was my life with my spouse. ¹⁵I have already forgotten all this, wretched me, and in my
 grief I pronounce a curse: ‘Make them go to the big deep Vault of Hades and the Gates of
 Darkness, utterly deprived of their children and their city. But may all my children enjoy an
 unharmed, blessed life, as well as my husband, arriving at old age’s time.’ And if there is
 even small respect for prayers in Hades: may this curse reach those to whom I address it.”
 “While I sing the Muses’ song of my life with you, a song sweet and mournful at the same
 time, Thermis my spouse, I promise you this: the children I have from you, I will raise them
 in a way that is worth my love to you, my wife, and I will keep Lysas as an equal to my child-
 ren. I will do this out of recognition, for blameless were the ways of your life.” Along with
 the unformulaic, rambling, and detailed statement, Graf notes the unusual meter (iambics
 instead of elegaic couplets) and the unprofessional hand in which the text is inscribed as poss-
 ible indicators that the text was composed and inscribed, not by a commissioned professional,
 but by the grieving Simalos himself. See Graf in this volume, section A.

conditional, εἰ – there may not in fact have been someone who is responsible. As Graf has shown, this conditionality is a relatively common feature of such epitaphs, in sharp contrast to the literary imagination, where the author can specify to the audience the responsible entity.⁷ In creating a fictional model of the unknown threat, the portrait of the witch, a literary author can use established stereotypes that mark alterity – otherness of gender, of age, of nationality. If the norm is the adult male citizen, then someone responsible for such a disruption of the normal order is likely to differ in as many respects from the norm as possible. Thus, the ideal image of the magical threat is female, foreign, and either ancient or maidenly. Medea is a perfect example of such a figure, a barbarian woman, but even the stereotype of the old Thessalian witch brings together several modes of alterity.⁸ Such witches tend to be nearly omnipotent, as well; there is no limit to the powers attributed to Lucan's Erichtho or Apuleius' Meroe.⁹ They can do what no normal man can do, since they are not normal, 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.¹⁰ 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. Stratton 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

⁷ Fritz Graf, "Untimely Death, Witchcraft, and Divine Vengeance: A Reasoned Epigraphical Catalog," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 206 (2007): 144.

⁸ As Fritz Graf ("Medea, the Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-Known Myth," in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* [eds. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997], 21–43) and others have pointed out, Medea's alterity changes over time in the literary representations. In the earliest sources, Medea, like Circe, is Other because she is divine, whereas later she becomes more associated with the Persian (or rather Median) Other.

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

¹⁰ Kimberly Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Roman era; and old hags abound from the earliest Greek sources to the Christian period. The social and political circumstances she examines certainly 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 Odysseus’ wanderings to the all-too-human young, barbarian girl Medea in Ovid. The literary imagination allows 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 terrifying 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 stereotypes 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 epitaph 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.”¹¹ If the parents had a specific *saga* in mind, we might see the epitaph 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 unsolved 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 Aeacus, I Abaskantos, son of mighty parents. I have | been taken not by love potions as was the son of Peleus, but as great Ares by fatal unholy plants. But my father’s | terrible [---]. and my mourning mother [---].¹²

¹¹ CIL 6:3 no. 19747; CLE 987. Metrical epitaph, before 31 CE (?), from Rome, near the Esquilin, now in Verona; *Eripuit me saga manus crudelis ubique | cum manet in terris et nocit arte sua. | vos vestros natos concustodite, parentes, | ni dolor in toto pectore fixus eat.*

¹² IG 12:5 no. 764 Andros, metrical epitaph, Imperial Age. Ῥώμης ἥδ’ Ἀδείης ἐπιβᾶς διὰ πρᾶγματα πολλὰ | καὶ πάντων ἀέθλων νεῖκος ἐνεγκάμο[ς] | Ἄνδριος

The world-famous athlete – if that is what the references to his travels and his 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 – and *not* her – as the sort of enemy this important man might make (perhaps an athletic rival or someone bested in one of Abaskantos' many business affairs) rather than as the sort of witchy woman with whom Abaskantos might have formed, from the family's perspective, an undesirable entanglement.

In other circumstances, of course, it might be useful to employ the stereotype of the witch, even if there is no accusation that the anomalous death was itself caused by magical means. Nothing in the story of Acte and M. Iunius Euphrosynus suggests that the death of Iunius or his little daughter Iunia were caused by the spells or poisons of Acte, but labeling Acte as a *venenaria* assimilates her to one witch stereotype, the dangerous female of uncontrolled sexuality for whom it is in character to abandon her children and run off with another lover.

Here is written the eternal disgrace of the freedwoman Acte, sorceress, faithless, treacherous, with a hard heart: a nail and a hemp rope to hang her neck, and boiling pitch to burn her evil breast! Freed for nothing, she followed an adulterer, cheated on her master and abducted the servants, a maid and a boy, while her master was lying in bed, so that the old man, left alone, pined away. (And for Hymnus and Zosimus who followed the same disgrace.)¹³

Acte may not, like Medea, have killed her children, but like Medea, she values caring for her children less than following her own passions. In this case, the reputation of the victim is less damaged by the idea that he was seduced by an evil witch than that he was a cuckold who lost out to a slave 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.

Αἰακίδης τέκνω μίγα τῶδ' ἐνὶ τύμβῳ ἰ κεῖμαι Ἀβάσκαντος, παῖς δρατερῶν γονέων· ἰ οὐχ ὥς Πηλείδης φίλτροις, ἀλλ' ὥς μέγας Ἄρης ἰ μοιριδίῳ λημφθεὶς οὐχ ὁσίαις βοτάναις. ἰ ἀλλὰ πατρὸς μὲν ἐμεῖο λυγρὸς [— υ υ —] ἰ μήτηρ πενθαλέη [δ'] ἐστ[ε — υ — υ υ —]. ἰ

¹³ CIL 6:3 no. 20905; CLE 95. Rome, inscription on a back side of the grave altar of Iunia Procula, 2nd cent. CE. *Hic stigmata aeterna Acte libertae scripta sunt* ἰ *venenariae et perfidae, dolosae, duri pectoris: ἰ clavom et restem sparteam ut sibi solum alliget ἰ et picem candentem pectus malum commurat suum.* [4] ἰ *manumissa gratis secuta adulterum ἰ patronum circumscripsit et ministros, ancillam et puerum, ἰ lecto iacenti patrono abduxit ἰ ut animo desponderet solus relictus spoliatus senex.* [8] *le[t] Hymno [et] eadem stigmata secutis Zosimum.*

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’ 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 (ἐπήγαγεν) 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 2d/3d century CE 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, 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; fathers of fathers 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 untimely 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 witches do – but, just as in Thermis’ curse, the precise agent of the de-

¹⁴ Roy Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets the Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze “Lamellae”* (Abhandlungen der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften; Sonderreihe Papyrologica Coloniensis 22; Westdeutscher Verlag: Opladen, 1994), 239–244, #46. Silver lamella from Aleppo, 2nd/3rd century CE. λύσατε τὴν ἰουλιανὴν ἀπὸ πάσης φαρμακίας καὶ παντὸς πάθους καὶ πάσης ἐνεργείας καὶ φαντασίας δαιμονώδους νυκτὰς καὶ ἡμέρας, ἤδη ἤδη ταχὺ ταχὺ, ἄρτι, ἄρτι, ἄρτι.

¹⁵ Audollent, Defix. Tab. 25 ; I. Kourion 130, Kypros – Amathous – mid./end 3rd c. CE? [δέμονες οἱ κ]ατὰ γῆν κὲ δέμονες οἵτινές [έσ]τε κὲ [πατέρες πατ]έρων κὲ μητέρες ἀντιενίριοι ἄνδριοι [ἦτε] | [γύναιοι, δέ]μ<ο>νες <οἱ>τινές ἐ<σ>θε κὲ ἐνθά[δε κῖσθε βίον λιπόντες] | [πολυκηδ]έα, βιωθάνατοι εἴτε ξένοι ἴτε ἐντόπιοι ἴτε [ἄπο] | [ροι ταφ]ῆς ἴτε ἀπὸ τῆς ἀδρεάς τῶν ἄστρον φέρεσθε εἴτε [έν] | [ἄερι πο]υ πλάσξεσθε κὲ σὺ ὁ ὦδε κάτω κίμενος, παρα[λάβετε τὰς] | [φω]νὰς τῶν ἀντιδίκων ἐμοῦ. . . .

ceased's wrath is often left uncertain. Orators warn of the danger to the whole community if justice is not done, but they never specify whether the danger comes from the ghost of the deceased, from some demonic entity like the Erinyes who would inflict harm, or simply from the anger of the gods.¹⁶ A similar ambiguity is found throughout the tradition. Elpenor begs Odysseus to bury him, lest he become a cause of wrath for the gods, but it is never clear what exactly Odysseus would be worrying about – Elpenor's restless shade, some Furies, or yet another god who might be angry at him.¹⁷

While the Erinyes can represent just retribution, there is, however, no reason to see them here as indicating that Thermis' illness comes in revenge for something wrong she did, for Simalos 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.

The 241st year, the month of Panemos, the 2nd day. Great Artemis Anaetis and Mên of Tiamos. Because Ioukoundos fell into a condition of insanity and it was noised abroad by all that he had been put under a spell by his mother-in-law Tatia, she set up a scepter and placed curses in the temple in order to defend herself against what was being said about her, having suffered such a state of conscience. The gods sent punishment on her which she did not escape. Likewise, her son Sokrates was passing the entrance that leads down to the sacred grove and carrying a vine-dressing sickle and it dropped on his foot and thus destruction came upon him in a single day's punishment. Therefore great are the gods of Axiottenos! They set about to have removed the scepter and the curses that were in the temple, the ones the estate of Ioukoundos and Moschios had sought to undo. The descendants of Tatia, Sokrateia and Moschas, along with Ioukoundos and Menekrates,

¹⁶ Cp. Antiphon 4.1.3–4; Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purity in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 108–9 notes the overlap in meaning for such words as *aliteros*, *prostropaios*, *palamnaios*, and even *Erinyes*, which can all refer to demonic spirits who bring vengeance or to something about the perpetrator (a *miasma*) that brings about the vengeance.

¹⁷ Homer *Odyssey* 11.71–76. ἔνθα σ' ἔπειτα, ἄναξ, κέλομαι μνήσασθαι ἐμεῖο. μή μ' ἄκλαυτον ἄθραπτον ἰὼν ὄπιθεν καταλείπειν νοσφισθεῖς, μή τοί τι θεῶν μῆνιμα γένωμαι, ἀλλὰ με κακῆῃαι σὺν τεύχεσιν, ἅσσα μοί ἐστι, σῆμά τέ μοι χεῦναι πολιῆς ἐπὶ θινὶ θαλάσσης, ἀνδρὸς δυστήνοιο, καὶ ἐσσομένοισι πυθέσθαι. ("My lord, remember me, I beg you! Don't sail off and desert me, left behind, unwept, unburied, don't, or I may draw the gods' fury upon your head. No, burn me in full armor, all my harness, heap my mound by the churning gray surf – a man whose luck ran out – so even men to come will learn my story.")

constantly propitiate the gods and praise them from now on, having inscribed on this stele the deeds of the gods.¹⁸

Tatia, it seems, was accused of having bewitched her son-in-law, but her protestations of innocence, which included a public oath in the temple, 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 Maionia 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 publicized and exalted 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 Meltine who has published this act of vengeance.¹⁹

The unexpected death of the young Heraclides was attributed to the vengeance of the dishonored god, and his mother, Syntyche, publicly blames herself instead of putting the blame upon some malevolent witch figure, specific or unspecified. There may well have been factors in the tangled social situation that preceded this public declaration that made the mother of Heraclides feel it was indeed her fault or that made the blaming of an alien witch impossible, but, for the Greeks, the gods always remain a poss-

¹⁸ Confession Stele from Knidos 156/7 CE. TAM V,1 318. ἔτους σμα', μη(ν)ος Πανήμιου β. ἡ Μεγάλη Ἀρτεμις Ἀναεῖλιτις καὶ Μεῖς Τιαμου. ἐπὶ ἡ Ἰουκούνδος ἐγένετο ἐν διαθέσει μανικῇ καὶ ὑπὸ πάντων διεφθίμωσθαι ὡς ὑπὸ Τιατίας τῆς πενθεράς αὐτοῦ φάρμακον αὐτῷ δεδόσθαι, ἡ δὲ Τιατίας ἐπέστησεν ἡ σκήπτρον καὶ ἀράς ἔθηκεν ἡ ἐν τῷ ναῷ ὡς ἱκανοποιούσας περὶ τοῦ πεφθίμωσθαι αὐτὴν ἐν συνειδήσει τοιαύτη, ἡ οἱ θεοὶ αὐτὴν ἐποίησαν ἐν κολάσει ἣν οὐ διέφυγεν· ὁμοίως καὶ Σωκράτης ὁ υἱὸς αὐτῆς παράγων τὴν ἴσοδον ἡ τὴν ἰς τὸ ἄλσος ἀπάγουσαν ἡ δρέπανον κρατῶν ἀμπελοτόμον, ἐκ τῆς χειρὸς ἔπεσεν ἡ αὐτῷ ἐπὶ τὸν πόδα καὶ οὕτως μονημέρῳ κολάσει ἀπὸ πηλῶν. μεγάλοι οὖν οἱ θεοὶ οἱ ἐν Ἀζίττοις ἐπέζητησαν ἡ λυθῆναι τὸ σκήπτρον καὶ τὰς ἀράς τὰς γενομένας ἐν τῷ ναῷ, ἡ ἔλυσαν τὰ Ἰουκούνδος ἡ καὶ Μοσχίου, ἡ γονοὶ δὲ τῆς Τιατίας, Σωκράτεια καὶ Μοσχᾶς ἡ καὶ Ἰουκούνδος καὶ Μενεκράτης κατὰ πάντα ἐξελασάμενοι τοὺς θεοὺς καὶ ἀπὸ νοῦν εὐλογοῦμεν στηλλογραφήσαντες τὰς δυνάμεις τῶν θεῶν. See the discussion in Gordon, “Imagining Greek and Roman Magic,” 247.

¹⁹ SEG 37:1001.17–25. Confession stele from Maionia c.150–250CE. καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοῦτο ἐνεμέσῃσιν, ὅτι οὐκ ἐξεφάντευσε οὐδὲ ὑψώσε τὸν θεὸν ἡ Συντύχη· διότι ἐποίησεν αὐτὴν ἐπὶ τέκνου Ἡρακλείδου ἐτῶν ἰγ' νέμεσιν ἐπὶ τὸν τόπον αὐτοῦ ἡ στηῆσαι, ὅτι τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων μᾶλλον ἐπόησεν ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ. ν Συντύχη Ἀπολλωνίου ἡ θυγάτηρ καὶ Μελτίνης ἡ προγεγραφοῦσα τὴν νέμεσιν.

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. Do not 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.²² While a variety of individuals may have engaged in practices that they or others might have labeled "magic,"²³ including curse tablets and *pharmaka* intended to bring harm upon others, the kinds of witches we meet in literature, from Medea to Erichtho, 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

²² Cp. Gordon, "Imagining Greek and Roman Magic," 167. "In my view, it is much too easy to be distracted by the archaeological survival of curse- and vindictive-tablets, and the remains of Graeco-Egyptian magical receptaries (grimoires), from the essential point, which is that *the true home of magic is a body of narrative*, what Cicero calls 'old women's tales,' which construct the social knowledge to which any event, real or supposed, fearful or peculiar, may be referred and in terms of which, if need be, explained" (emphasis mine). On pages 204–210, Gordon explores the development of the 'night-witch' figure in the literary imagination, linking the changes to various social shifts.

²³ On the difference between other-labeling and self-labeling, see Radcliffe Edmonds, "Extraordinary People: Mystai and Magoi, Magicians and Orphics in the Derveni Papyrus," *Classical Philology* 103 (2008): 16–39.

evidence of the curse tablets, providing new light on this murky, yet fascinating, aspect of the ancient world.

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