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ΜΑΙΡΑ AND OTHER DANGEROUS WOMEN

This paper examines evidence for Greek heroine Μαῖρα and argues against her identification with the star Sirius, showing that the commonly accepted derivation of her name from **mr_o(r)-ih₂* ‘the shimmering one’ is unfounded. Other etymological possibilities are discussed, including a derivation from the same root as IE **mor(h_x)-eh₂* ‘evil female spirit, incubus’, the source of English (*night*)mare, Russian (*кику*)мора and Old Irish war goddess *Mor(r)íga(i)n*.

Keywords: Callimachus, Epic Cycle, Greek mythology, Irish heroic saga, Pherekydes of Athens, Polygnotos, Sirius, Slavic folklore.

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Μαῖρα и другие опасные женщины

В статье разбираются свидетельства о героине по имени Майра и выдвигаются аргументы как против ее отождествления с Сириусом, так и против общепринятой этимологии, возводящей др.-гр. Μαῖρα к и.-е. **mr_o(r)-ih₂* ‘блистающая’. Предлагается сближение с корнем **mer(h_x)-*, от которого образовано и.-е. обозначение злого женского духа **mor(h_x)-eh₂* (англ. (*night*)mare, рус. (*кику*)мора, а также имя ирландской богини войны *Mor(r)íga(i)n*).

Ключевые слова: древнегреческая мифология, древнеирландский героический эпос Каллимах, киклики, Полигнот, Сириус, славянский фольклор, Ферекид Афинский.

*Quaecumque deperdamus, sicut mene an te,
nosmetipsos semper reperimus in mari.*
Var. 95.10

1. We meet Maira for the first time in the *Nekyia* (*Od.* 11.326–7) where she is mentioned at the end of the catalog of heroines whom Odysseus met in the Underworld:

Μαῖράν τε Κλυμένην τε ἴδον στυγερήν τ’ Ἐριφύλην,
ἧ χρυσὸν φίλου ἀνδρὸς ἐδέξατο τιμήεντα.
I saw Maira and Klymene and baneful Eriphyle
who sold her dear husband for valuable gold.

No specific information about Maira is provided and it is not immediately clear why she is included in this catalog of heroines who are characterized by their relations to men, either their

husbands or sons¹. The scholia on the passage draw on Pherekydes (fr. 170 Fowler = *BNJ*² 3 F 170a–c) in whose account Maira, daughter of Proitos and great-granddaughter of Sisyphos, was a devotee of Artemis: when Zeus took her virginity (and the child Lokros was born as the result), Maira stopped coming to the hunt and Artemis shot her. If this myth is old enough to predate the composition of the *Nekyia*, Maira's death at the hand of Artemis could be the reason why she figures on this list in the *Odyssey*: an earlier trio of women encountered by Odysseus is comprised of Phaidra, Prokris and Ariadne (lines 321–5), and Artemis is explicitly named as the latter's murderer². On this theory, there would be a thematic link between two groups of women at the end of the catalog (heroines from Attic and, presumably, from Boeotian legend), namely, the similarity between Ariadne and Maira who were both killed by Artemis.

One problem with the story of Maira as a companion of Artemis who had sworn to remain a virgin, but was impregnated by Zeus is that it is nearly identical to the better-known story of Kallisto, who similarly lost her maidenhood and was punished by Artemis (*Apollod.* 3.8)³. It looks like there is a conflation at some level and Maira stands in for Kallisto, as it were. In this situation it is not unreasonable to speculate that Pherekydes' story of Maira as a huntress killed by Artemis is a product of mythographer's systematization, an invention, quite possibly prompted by the adjacent lines of the *Odyssey* in which Ariadne dies at the hand of the same goddess⁴.

¹ Other members of Maira's trio are Klymene (who is identified with the spouse of Phylakos and the mother of Iphiklos) and Eriphyle who betrayed her husband Amphiaraos and was ultimately responsible for his death. For a discussion of this catalog of heroines see Hirschberger 2001; Sammons 2010; Gazis 2015 and 2018: 125–56 with ample references to earlier scholarship.

² Ariadne's death from Artemis is presented "on the testimony of Dionysus" (Διονύσου μαρτυρίησιν): this phrase remains enigmatic.

³ Even though a full version of Kallisto's story is not attested prior to Ovid (*Met.* 2.409–530), Hesiod was familiar with the myth (fr. 66 Hirschberger = 166 Merkelbach–West).

⁴ In other words, the observation made above about the possible connection between the group of Ariadne and the group of Maira in the *Odyssey* catalog should be reversed: there was no original compositional link, but rather the whole story of Maira's punishment was invented (by Pherekydes?) to match that of Ariadne.

There are other incongruities as well: as Pausanias describes Polygnotos' mural on the Lesche of the Knidians (Paus. 10.30.5), he mentions Maira (arguably the same individual, viz. the daughter of Proitos and mother of Lokros) and quotes the *Nostoi* for the information that she departed from mankind while still a virgin⁵. As Gantz (1993: 733) and Fowler (2013: 363) point out, παρθένος is a strange word to use if the whole point of Maira's story was her illicit pregnancy from Zeus. Gantz (*ibid.*) also wonders "if Pherekydes had Zeus simply abandon the girl to Artemis' anger when elsewhere he usually provides some sort of (quite late) assistance". Overall, the version transmitted in Pherekydes and the scholion to the *Odyssey* passage is incomplete and bears all marks of being a product of secondary systematization and contamination with the myth of Kallisto⁶. The *Nostoi* apparently included a Hades scene featuring the same three women, namely, Klymene (fr. 5 Bernabé = 4 West), Eriphyle (fr. 8 Bernabé = 7 West) and Maira, and no matter how the relationship between the catalog of heroines in the *Nostoi* and in the *Nekyia* of the *Odyssey* should be envisioned in literary terms⁷, it appears that the version in which Maira dies a virgin is the more ancient one⁸.

2. Without mythological narrative, all that remains of our knowledge of Maira is her name⁹. Etymologizing personal names is a thankless task, so every proposal of this kind should be viewed as extremely tentative. With this caveat in mind, this paper will make an attempt to place the name Μαῖρα in the broader context of Indo-European myth.

As far as the morphological structure of the name is concerned, Μαῖρα is not likely to be either a *Kurzname* or a hypocoristic since the name does not show any of the suffixes typical for these

⁵ ἀπελθεῖν μὲν παρθένον ἔτι ἐξ ἀνθρώπων (fr. 6 Bernabé = 5 West).

⁶ Already Jacoby suspected that the story of Maira killed by Artemis was invented by Pherekydes (*FGrH* 1a, 428–9); similarly Uhl 1963: 66 (*non vidi*), cited in the *BNJ* commentary.

⁷ See West 2013: 277 for a plausible theory.

⁸ It has been pointed out that the word παρθένος may mean simply 'unmarried young woman' (for instance, in Pind. *Pyth.* 3.34 the word is used of Koronis long after she consummated her relationship with Apollo); while it cannot be excluded that this was the intended sense in the *Nostoi*, it is unclear what the reason for focalizing this kind of information may have been.

⁹ Μαῖρα is also the name of a Nereid (*Il.* 18.48) as well as the name of an Arcadian heroine, wife of Tegeates, the founder of Tegea (Paus. 8.48.6).

formations¹⁰. We are dealing with a single-stem female name which can be straightforwardly back-reconstructed as **marīa* going back either to IE **mr-ih₂* (**mr_o(r)ih₂* with Lindeman's law) > **mārīa* or to IE **mar-ih₂*.

Traditionally the IE root of this name has been identified with Pokorny's **mer-* 'to flicker, to sparkle' (*IEW* 733) on the assumption that the original meaning of Μαῖρα was 'the shimmering one', hence 'Dog's Star': this was the contention of Schulze (1934: 117–18)¹¹ who was followed by Thieme (1963: 240), Peters (1980: 221) and Tichy (1983: 294). But even though Schulze's analysis of Μαῖρα is formally impeccable, as is his comparison with Ved. *mārīci-* 'ray of light' (*ibid.* 117 n. 1), it is far from certain that the Greek name originally referred to Sirius or, at least, that epic Μαῖρα has anything to do with the star.

3. The idea that Μαῖρα is "die Sirioshitze in weiblicher Gestalt" originated with Preller (1872: 376 n. 2) and was adopted by Maass (1883: 124) whose book was cited by Schulze in support of his etymology. However, this idea is beset with difficulties. It is true that Callimachus uses Μαῖρα as the name for Sirius (*Aet.* 75.35 Harder)¹² and further support for this equation seems to come from Hsch. μ 94 μαῖρα: κύων, τὸ ἄστρον. The centerpiece of the argument is the account of Ps.-Eratosthenes, according to which Maira was the name of the female dog, who together with Erigone finds Ikarios dead and later goes to sky as the star Sirius (*Hyg. Fab.* 130; *Astr.* 2.35 Viré; Ovid *Fast.* 4.939). Preller and Maass sought to demonstrate the identity of epic Μαῖρα with the dog Maira — and therefore with Sirius — by referring to Polygnotos' painting in Delphi (mentioned above) on which the artist placed the daughter of Proitos next to Aktaion and a hunting dog¹³. It is highly questionable that this arrangement itself "ad Sirium relatam esse Maeram demonstrat": at most it may serve as witness of Polygnotos' (or his commissioners') mythological conception, but it cannot be seriously entertained as an argument for Μαῖρα's identity with Sirius in the

¹⁰ See e.g. Stüber 2009: 119.

¹¹ Original publication: *BSB* 1910: 787–808.

¹² Cf. also Euph. *SH* 443.7; Nonn. *D.* 5.220; Crinag. *AP* 9.555.5.

¹³ ἐφεξῆς δὲ τῆς Μαίρας Ἀκταίων ἐστὶν ὁ Ἀρισταίου καὶ ἡ τοῦ Ἀκταίωνος μήτηρ, νεβρὸν ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν ἔχοντες ἐλάφου καὶ ἐπὶ δέρματι ἐλάφου καθεζόμενοι: κύων τε θηρευτικὴ παρακατάκειται σφισσι βίου τοῦ Ἀκταίωνος ἔνεκα καὶ τοῦ ἐς τὴν τελευτὴν τρόπου (Paus. 10.30.5).

version of the myth current at the time when catalogs of heroines in the *Nostoi* and the *Odyssey* were composed¹⁴.

The possibility remains that there was a Greek word Μαῖρα ‘Sirius’, going back to Schulze’s **mr̥(r)ih₂* ‘die funkelnde’, which first surfaces in Hellenistic poetry and is entirely unrelated to the female name Μαῖρα, but this hypothesis lacks conviction *a priori*. Moreover, it may be possible to explain how the name of the heroine was transferred to the Dog-Star in the tradition preserved (but probably not invented¹⁵) by Ps.-Eratosthenes. For Greeks Sirius was Κύων *par excellence*¹⁶: the earliest and the most frequently encountered mythological conception is that of Orion’s dog that follows the hunter across the sky (*Il.* 22.29+), but other dogs in Greek myth were also associated with Canis Major and its brightest star: both Ps.-Eratosthenes (*Cataster.* 33 Olivieri) and Hyginus (*Astr.* 2.35) mention swift Lailaps, the dog that belonged to the nymph Prokris and then to her husband Kephalos¹⁷, and Hyginus adds: *quae multa proposita suos habent auctores*. It is no wonder that the dog of Ikarios was also viewed as representing this constellation and its brightest star.

Why would the dog be called Μαῖρα? It is significant that the owners of both other catasterized canines, Orion and Prokris, share an association with Artemis: Orion was a devotee of Artemis with whom he vied in hunting and whom he eventually displeased, while Prokris (at least, according to Hyg. *Fab.* 189) received the dog from Artemis. Another divine antagonist in Orion’s myth is Dionysus (acting through his son Oinopion who blinded Orion for his rape of Merope) who also has a place in the story of Ikarios, being the god who granted him wine. Dionysus is also the owner of Teumessian fox which turned out to be the ultimate competitor of Prokris’ and Kephalos’ dog Lailaps¹⁸. Just as Orion, Kephalos and Ikarios were assimilated in the tradition to the hunter Dionysus, Prokris herself was assimilated to Artemis¹⁹. It would not be difficult to imagine that as the *aition* of Erigone’s festivals (the αἰώρα and the ἀλῆτις)

¹⁴ The attempt by Preller and Mauss to align all instances of Μαῖρα in Greek myth with Sirius was met with justified criticism by Kuentzle (1897: 39–42) and Nilsson (1915: 188–9 n. 4).

¹⁵ See Pfeiffer (1922: 109).

¹⁶ Soph. fr. 432.11 Radt; Eudox. fr. 73, 82 Lasserre; Arat. 326 Kidd; Hipparch. 2.1.18; Ptol. *Alm.* 7.6.

¹⁷ Pollux *Onom.* 5.39; Ant. Lib. 41.10; Apollod. 2.4.7; Ovid. *Met.* 7.793.

¹⁸ Paus. 9.19.1.

¹⁹ See Gruppe 1906: 42.

was developed in Attica, the name of Maira, the companion of Artemis, was attached to the dog associated — albeit indirectly — with Artemis²⁰.

The tradition of catasterism of Ikarios' dog must have been known to Callimachus, who seized the opportunity to use an unusual name for Sirius, and other Hellenistic poets followed suit²¹. There is thus no evidence in mythological sources that would support the hypothesis that Μαῖρα 'the shimmering one' was originally one of Sirius' names.

4. We can now return to etymology of the name. Since there appears to be little support for a connection of epic Μαῖρα with Pokorny's **mer-* 'to flicker, to sparkle' championed by Schulze and others, it behooves us to look for other explanations. One possibility is the root **mer(h_x)-* found in various terms for young people across Indo-European languages: Ved. *márya-* 'young man' (= YAv. *mairiia-*), *maryaká-* 'youth', Gk. *μεῖραξ* (f./m.) 'youth', Welsh *morwyn* 'girl, maiden', Lithuanian *martì* 'girl, bride', etc.²² Indeed, IE **mr_o(h_x)ih₂* (= Lat. **marī* in *marītus*²³) will unproblematically give Greek Μαῖρα, and a name 'maiden, young girl' would match her demise as a *παρθένοσ* (*Nostoi* fr. 6 Bernabé = 5 West), even though we do not know the details of that mythological narrative.

While this solution seems plausible, I would nevertheless like to signal yet another possibility: Μαῖρα may go back to a different root **mer(h_x)-* which spawned names of specifically female beings in several different traditions. In Germanic we find Old Icelandic *mara* f. 'supernatural being that sits on the chest of sleeping people', Old High German *mara* 'incuba', Old English *mære* 'a monster oppressing men during sleep', Modern English *night-mare*, all going

²⁰ The fact that in the passage from Nekyia Procris is mentioned just a few lines before Maira may have further contributed to the association between the two. Finally, note that Artemis is also the divine antagonist in the myth of Kallisto with which the story of Maira the heroine was conflated (as we saw above) and in which animal catasterism likewise played a prominent role.

²¹ In addition to material cited in n. 12 note that Lycophron (*Al.* 334) uses the word *μαῖρα* to refer to the dog into which Hecabe has changed.

²² See *EWAia* 2.329–30. An etymological connection between Μαῖρα and the root **mer(h_x)-* '± young' was brought up by Thieme (1963: 240–1) who ended up collapsing this root with the root **mer-* 'to flicker' and with IE **mori-* 'sea' ("Wir erhalten also ein idg. **mériā*, *m^oriā-* im Balt. und Germ. im Sinn von 'die See', im Griech. als Name des funkelnden Hundsternes").

²³ See Watkins 1957.

back to Proto-Germanic **marō(n)-* ‘incubus, evil female spirit’ < IE **moreh₂*²⁴. We also find continuants of Proto-Slavic **mora* richly attested across all Slavic languages: Russian and Ukrainian *μόρα*, Croatian *mòra*, Bulgarian *morá*, etc.²⁵ These words refer either to nightmare or, more specifically, to a female spirit that appears at night and induces nightmares, a demonical creature that torments and suffocates people in their sleep, which is functionally extremely similar to Old Icelandic *mara* and her cognates. Finally, in Irish myth we find the same root in *Fomoir* (< **upo-mor̥io-*), the name of a race of supernatural and hostile beings²⁶, as well as in the name of the sinister goddess *Mor(r)íga(i)n* who plays an important role in early Irish mythological cycles²⁷. One of the earliest attestations of her name is as a gloss for Latin *lamia* referring to Lilith, a female night monster, at *Isaiah* 34.14. Morrígan — potentially identifiable with Morgan le Fay of the Arthurian legend — is a goddess of battle, but also a goddess of great sexual powers, a powerful shape-shifter²⁸ who sometimes acts by herself and sometimes appears as a member of a trio, joined by the Badb (‘Crow’) and either Nemain (‘Panic’) or Macha.²⁹ Ever since Stokes (1891: 128), the first element of Morrígan’s name has been connected with Germanic **marō(n)-* under the theory that spellings with a long vowel (*Mór-*) are due to folk-etymological contamination with *mór-* ‘great’³⁰.

Three traditions thus support the reconstruction of a root **mer(h_x)-* the derivatives of which specifically refer to a supernatural shape-shifting female creature hostile to men and often

²⁴ See *EWAhD* 6.147–8. The Germanic word was borrowed into Old French as *mare* ‘ghost’, Modern French *cauche-mar* ‘incubus, nightmare’, hence Russian *кошмар* ‘nightmare’.

²⁵ See *ÉSSJa* 19.211–14. For an excellent discussion of these words see Beletich & Loma 2013 whose nuanced treatment also includes Proto-Slavic **mara* ‘apparition, ghost, phantom, infatuation’ (*ÉSSJa* 17.204–7).

²⁶ See Kalygin 2006: 88–9.

²⁷ Secondary literature on Morrígan is enormous: I limit myself to citing the work by Gulermovich Epstein (1997; 1998) written from a comparative angle, where ample references to earlier scholarship may be found.

²⁸ Cf. the episode in the *Táin* when Morrígan approaches to Cú Chulainn and lists the various shapes in which she would fight against him if he does not return her love (YBL-*Táin* 1720–24, ed. O’Rahilly).

²⁹ E.g. in the 7th cent. Archaic Irish poem *Mórrígan rosc* (ed. McRuanaid) or in the *Lebor Gabála* (LL 10a 11.28–46, ed. Best, Bergin, and O’Brien).

³⁰ Stokes’ etymology was supported by d’Arbois de Jubainville (1908: 195), Thurneysen (1921: 63–4), Pokorny (*IEW* 736), and, albeit non-committally, Kalygin 2006: 117; a dissenter’s voice is Olmsted 1994: 369.

attacking them in their sleep³¹. Might it be that the name of Μαῖρα, the companion of Artemis who died a virgin, reflects the same set of beliefs from Proto-Indo-European times?

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³¹ I intentionally forgo the question of this root's identity with either *mer- 'to die' or *merh₂- 'to quash', both because it is inconsequential to the argument presented in this paper and because I have not been able to arrive at a firm opinion on this matter. Further cognates of this root may be uncovered, but they remain extremely uncertain: for instance, one might be tempted to compare Latin *Marīca*, the name of the local goddess who was worshipped in a grove between the estuary of the Liris and Minturnae, or Palaic *mārḥaš* used in the Myth of Telepinu to refer to gods (but see Yakubovich 2005: 118 n. 40 for a different — and plausible — interpretation).

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