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(r)-ih₂ ‘the shimmering one’ is unfounded. Other etymological possibilities are discussed, including a derivation from the same root as IE *mor(h)-eh₂ ‘evil female spirit, incubus’, the source of English (night)mare, Russian (кики)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.

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:

Μαῖραν τὲ Κλυμένην τὲ ἵδον στυγερήν τ’ Ἐριφύλην,
ἡ χρυσὸν φίλου ἄνδρον 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 sons\textsuperscript{1}. The scholia on the passage draw on Pherekydes (fr. 170 Fowler = BNJ\textsuperscript{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 murderer\textsuperscript{2}. 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)\textsuperscript{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 goddess\textsuperscript{4}.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{2} Ariadne’s death from Artemis is presented “on the testimony of Dionysus” (Διονύσου μαρτυρίηις): this phrase remains enigmatic.

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

\textsuperscript{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 virgin\(^5\). 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 Kallisto\(^6\). 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 terms\(^7\), it appears that the version in which Maira dies a virgin is the more ancient one\(^8\).

2. Without mythological narrative, all that remains of our knowledge of Maira is her name\(^9\). 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

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\(^5\) ἀπελθεῖν μὲν παρθένον ἐτι 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).
formations\(^{10}\). We are dealing with a single-stem female name which can be straightforwardly back-reconstructed as \(\star{\text{maria}}\) going back either to IE \(\star{\text{mr-ih}}_2(\star{\text{mr(r)ih}}_2\) with Lindeman’s law) > \(\star{\text{məri}}\) or to IE \(\star{\text{mar-ih}}_2\).

Traditionally the IE root of this name has been identified with Pokorny’s \(\star{\text{mer-}}\) ‘to flicker, to sparkle’ (IEW 733) on the assumption that the original meaning of Μάηρα 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 Μάηρα is formally impeccable, as is his comparison with Ved. \(\text{məri̯i-}\) ‘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 Μάηρα has anything to do with the star.

3. The idea that Μάηρα 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 Μάηρα as the name for Sirius (Aet. 75.35 Harder)\(^{12}\) and further support for this equation seems to come from Hsch. μ 94 μαίρα· 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 Μάηρα 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 dog\(^{13}\). 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 Μάηρα’s identity with Sirius in the

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\(^{10}\) 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 ἐστίν ὁ Ἀρισταίου καὶ ἡ τοῦ Ἀκταίωνος μήτηρ, νεβρὸν ἐν ταῖς χερσίν ἑχοντες ἐλάφου καὶ ἐπὶ δέρματι ἐλάφου καθεξόμενον· κύων τε θηρευτικὴ παρακατάκειται σφισι βίου τοῦ Ἀκταίωνος ἐνεκα καὶ τοῦ ἐς τὴν τελευτῆτιν τρόπου (Paus. 10.30.5).
version of the myth current at the time when catalogs of heroines in the *Nostoi* and the *Odyssey* were composed\(^{14}\).

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 \textit{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 invented\(^{15}\)) by Ps.-Eratosthenes. For Greeks Sirius was \textit{Kύων 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 Kephalos\(^{17}\), and Hyginus adds: \textit{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 Lailaps\(^{18}\). Just as Orion, Kephalos and Ikarios were assimilated in the tradition to the hunter Dionysus, Prokris herself was assimilated to Artemis\(^{19}\). It would not be difficult to imagine that as the \textit{aison} of Erigone’s festivals (the \textit{αιώρα} and the \textit{ἀλῆτις})

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\(^{14}\) 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 Artemis.

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 suit. 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-), maryakā- ‘youth’, Gk. μεῖρας (f./m.) ‘youth’, Welsh morwyn ‘girl, maiden’, Lithuanian marti ‘girl, bride’, etc. Indeed, IE *mr(h)xih2 (= Lat. *marī in marītus) will unproblematically give Greek Μαῖρα, and a name ‘maidens, 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

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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. *mériə, m̥riā- 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. We also find continuants of Proto-Slavic *mora richly attested across all Slavic languages: Russian and Ukrainian мóра, Croatian мòра, 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 Fomoire (< *upo-morío-), the name of a race of supernatural and hostile beings 26, as well as in the name of the sinister goddess Mor(r)íga(i)n who plays an important role in early Irish mythological cycles 27. 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-shifter 28 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(h₃)- 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 ĖSSJa 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’ (ĒSSJa 17.204–7).
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).
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 dissentier’s voice is Olmsted 1994: 369.
attacking them in their sleep\textsuperscript{31}. 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?

References


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 \textit{Marīca}, the name of the local goddess who was worshipped in a grove between the estuary of the Liris and Minturnae, or Palaic \textit{mārḥaš} used in the Myth of Telepinu to refer to gods (but see Yakubovich 2005: 118 n. 40 for a different — and plausible — interpretation).


