

Many (Un)Happy Returns: Ancient Greek Concepts of a Return from Death and their later Counterparts

Sarah Iles Johnston
The Ohio State University

Abstract:

Greek myths liked to meditate on why death came to particular people at particular times, on what happened to souls after death, and on the question of whether those souls could sometimes return to the world of the living. Interestingly however, with the notable exception of Alcestis (and perhaps not even always in her case), the Greeks did not imagine the return to life to be a *happy* thing. Myths such as those of Orpheus and of Protesilaus' wife suggest that such returns brought tragedy for the living; myths such as that of Sisyphus suggest that the revenant himself was likely to regret his return. After analyzing the reasons that the ancient Greeks could not even begin to imagine a happy return from death, I will turn to some examples of stories about the revenants from European cultures of the 18th through 20th centuries and explore the very different ways in which they manage to send the same message—namely, that humans are better off leaving death alone, as a final decision.

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Many (Un)Happy Returns: Ancient Greek Concepts of a Return from Death and their Later Counterparts¹

Sarah Iles Johnston
The Ohio State University

We hear a great deal, both from ancient sources and from contemporary scholars, about the journey *into* death as the ancient Greeks imagined it. The newly disembodied soul was expected to meet Charon, the ferryman who would carry it across the river that separated the land of the living from the land of the dead. It would see Cerberus, a three-headed (or according to other reports, a 100-headed) dog that guarded the entrance to the palace of Hades and Persephone, the gods who ruled over the dead. Confusing roads that might lure the unwary soul into dangerous parts of the underworld wove through a landscape dotted with cypress trees, asphodel, and springs of water that could wipe clean all memories of life within the thirsty souls who drank from them. For the well-prepared or the lucky, there was a place of continuous sunlight where they might spend eternity eating, drinking, and engaging in pleasant pursuits. For those not so well prepared or lucky, they were dank, muddy places of punishment or, at best, boredom (Johnston 1999, 14–16; Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 103–07).

We hear much less about how the Greeks imagined one coming *back* from death. I do not mean coming back as a ghost—a disembodied soul that had somehow escaped from Hades’s realm, about which the Greeks had plenty to say (see Johnston 1999)—but

¹ I am grateful to audiences at McGill University, Bryn Mawr College, and Uppsala Universitet for their helpful comments following oral versions of this paper.

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rather back in the absolute sense, as a fully reincorporated person. What we do hear about this possibility comes from myths, the narrative form that is often used, in so many cultures, to explore the ramifications of what seem to be desirable, yet impossible, goals. In this essay, I will look closely at those myths, asking what they can tell us about Greek ideas of life and death, and why the Greeks liked to entertain certain variations of a possible return from death, but not others.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will survey the Greek stories we have about a bodily return to life after death and make some observations about them. Second, I will look at stories about revenants from another culture—namely, our own Western culture—and draw some conclusions about them. As we will see, there is quite a contrast between the two sets of stories. Third, I will suggest two reasons for this contrast—two factors that may have predisposed modern Western peoples to think differently about the possible return of the dead from the way that the ancient Greeks did. My suggestions are hypothetical, and like all hypotheses, they are provisional, intended more to provoke thought than to provide absolute answers.

I. GREEK STORIES ABOUT THE BODILY RETURN OF THE DEAD

My dossier for this topic includes thirteen stories. Let us start with the one for which we have the oldest evidence: the tale of Sisyphus. Sisyphus first evaded Death by managing to chain him up and then, after Death had been released and duly came to claim him, Sisyphus found a clever way to exploit an existential loophole and return again to the upper world: namely, before he died, he instructed his wife not to give him burial rites, which stranded him between the upper and lower worlds—a pitiable state. He then prevailed upon Persephone to allow him to return home to ask his wife to perform them. Of course, once there, he refused to return to the underworld and lived on for quite a while longer (Alcaeus, frag. 38 [Lobel and

Page 1955]; Theognis 702–712; Pherecydes, *FGH* 3F119; see Fowler 2013, 52; Gantz 1993, 173–76).²

An even more famous Greek myth about an attempted return to life involves the singer Orpheus, who traveled to the underworld to recover his wife. Orpheus used his talents as a musician to persuade Persephone to allow him to lead his wife back to the upper world. Although there may have been an early version of the story in which he succeeded in this task, in all extant versions, Orpheus failed. His wife slipped away from him at the last moment because Orpheus violated Persephone's stipulation that he not look back at her until they reached the upper world. Plunged into an even deeper grief than before, Orpheus refused to remarry and was eventually murdered by a group of women whose attentions he spurned ([Pseudo-Eratosthenes, *Cat.* 24](#); [Euripides, *Alc.* 357–362](#); [Plato, *Symp.* 179b–179d](#); [Moschus, *Ep. Bion.* 3.123–124](#); Conon, *FGH* 26F1.45; see Gantz 1993, 721–25; Graf 1987).

The general pattern behind Orpheus's story is also found in that of Protesilaus and his wife, who is sometimes referred to as Laodamia. After only one day of marriage, Protesilaus joined the Greek expedition to Troy and was killed as soon as he leapt off the ship. The gods took pity on the despairing Laodamia and allowed Protesilaus to return to the upper world for a single day, in order to bid her farewell. Upon her husband's second death, however, Laodamia plunged into even greater despair, which drove her to commission a statue of her husband that she could take to bed with her. Upon discovering what she was doing, Laodamia's father had the image destroyed, and Laodamia killed herself ([Homer, *Il.* 2.698–](#)

² For all of the myths I discuss, I offer a few of the earliest sources and references to either or both of two good scholarly works on early Greek mythography (namely, Fowler 2013 and Gantz 1993) where more early sources can be found. The embedded hyperlinks offer the reader easy reference to open-access (though often older) scholarly editions. I do not usually cite later primary sources; references to them can be found often in Gantz's treatments of the myths, and also in any number of scholarly works such as *The New Pauly Encyclopedia of the Ancient World*.

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[702](#); Proclus, *Cypr.* arg. 10 [West 2003]; *Cypr.* frag. 22 [West 2003 = [Cypr. 17](#) in Evelyn-White 1914]; [Ovid, *Her.* 13](#); [Apollodorus, *Epit.* 3.29–30](#); [Hyginus, *Fab.* 104](#); see Gantz 1993, 592–94).

Similar in some ways to the story of Protesilaus is that of Iolaus, the nephew of Heracles, who was brought back to life by the gods in order that he might help Heracles's children win their battle against Eurystheus, and then, the battle having been won, died again ([Scholia Pindar, *Pyth.* 9.137](#)).³

In all four of the stories that we have looked at so far, the return to life is represented as a favor that the gods can freely bestow upon mortals, when they choose to. The next case takes us in a different direction. Asclepius eventually honed his medical skills to the point that he could raise the dead, and did so on several occasions. Zeus put a stop to this by striking Asclepius with a lightning bolt. In most versions of the story, no reason is given for Zeus's action, but according to Diodorus of Sicily, Hades asked Zeus to do it because the lower world was losing citizens (Hesiod, frag. 51 [Merkelbach and West 1967]; Stesichorus, *PMG* 194; Acusilaus, *FGH* 2F18; Pherecydes, *FGH* 3F35; [Pindar, *Pyth.* 3.55–58](#); see Fowler 2013, 74; Gantz 1993, 91–92).

Here, for the first time in our dossier, we have a mortal succeeding at what otherwise only gods could do: raising the dead. That Asclepius was a *physician* makes a certain sense in that regard—I will return to that point. But let us note, for now, that it is the gods who put Death back into business for reasons of their own. The same idea plays out in the earlier part of Sisyphus's story: Sisyphus initially thwarts Death by chaining him up, and Death must be released from his bonds by Ares. We should also note that, as in the cases of Orpheus and Laodamia, the mortal who sought to reverse death (Asclepius) ends up the worse off for it himself.

My sixth case is Alcestis. When it was time for her husband, Admetus, to die, Admetus's friend Apollo intervened and got the

³ [Euripides, *Heracl.* 799–866](#) has him rejuvenated by the Dioscuri rather than resurrected, perhaps, conjectures Gantz (1993, 464–66), because the original story was too incredible.

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Fates to agree that, if someone else volunteered to die in his place, Admetus would be spared. (Here again, we see the intervention of a god in matters of life and death, and again for purely personal reasons.) The only person who volunteered to die for Admetus, however, was Alcestis, and die she did. On the day of her funeral, Heracles dropped by for a visit, and when he heard what had happened, set out for the cemetery, confronted Death as he came to claim Alcestis, and beat Death in a wrestling match. Heracles then led Alcestis back to her husband (Phrynichus, *TrGF* 3F3 [[≈ Phrynichus, frag. 3 TGF](#)]; [Euripides, *Alcestis*](#); see Fowler 2013, 75; Gantz 1993, 195–97). As in the second part of Sisyphus’s story, victory was complete; both Alcestis and Admetus lived on to ripe old ages. As in the first part of Sisyphus’s story, Death was conquered by a mortal, using physical means—although there is also a version of the story, passed down by Plato, in which either Persephone or all the gods, admiring Alcestis’s courage, freely decided to send her back to the world of the living ([Plato, *Symp.* 179b](#); cf. [Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 1.9.15](#)). That version aligns with the other cases we have looked at, in which the gods decide which mortals merit a return to life.

As a final case in this section of my dossier I offer Pelops, who was chopped up into a stew by his father, Tantalus. The goddess Rhea (or in another version of the story, Clotho, one of the Fates) reassembled Pelops’s dismembered pieces and then brought him back to life ([Pindar, *Ol.* 1.25–27](#); [Bacchylides, frag. 42](#) [Snell and Maehler 1970]; see Gantz 1993, 531–34; cf. Graf and Johnston 2013, 75–76). As in the other cases we have looked at so far, it is a god, or gods, who bring about the resurrection, and as in the case of Alcestis, the story seems to have had a happy ending, at least in the short term—the renewed Pelops married, won a kingdom, and sired children.

Let us move on now to three more cases that share a different twist: namely that the revived individual not only returns to life, but also enters into a new, divine state. Semele perished in flames when Zeus revealed himself to her in all of his divine glory. But after her son Dionysus grew up, he journeyed to the underworld and

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convinced Hades and Persephone to release Semele's soul. Dionysus thereupon led his mother up not only to the world of the living, but to the very heavens, where she joined the company of the gods (Iophon, *TrGF* 22F3 [= [Iophon, frag. 3 TGF](#)]; see Gantz 1993, 472–79; cf. Graf and Johnston 2013, 73–74). Sometimes it was said that she took on a new name at that time, Thyone ([Diodorus of Sicily 4.25.4](#)). Similarly, Artemis revived, or asked Asclepius to revive, her dead devotee Hippolytus, after which she named him Virbius and established him as a divine figure (Gantz 1993, 285–88; *Naupactia*, frag. 10 *PEG*; [Ovid, *Metam.* 15.497–546](#)). And finally, Eos convinced Zeus to bestow immortality upon her dead son, Memnon (Proclus, *Aeth.* arg. 2 [West 2003 ≈ [Aeth. 1](#) in Evelyn-White 1914]; see Gantz 1993, 37).

All three of these stories represent an escape from death, won by the favor of a god—but they also include a simultaneous promotion to divinity or semi-divinity for the formerly deceased, and sometimes include what amounts to a change of identity as well. They differ, then, from our seven other stories, in which the deceased individuals resumed existence in exactly the existential form that they had previously enjoyed.

Our final two cases are only partial returns to life. First there is Castor, the mortal twin of an immortal brother, Polydeuces. When Castor died, Polydeuces asked Zeus to restore him to life and Zeus made them a deal: each of the brothers would be dead half of the time and alive half of the time ([Homer, *Od.* 11.298–304](#); Proclus, *Cypr.* frag. 9 [West 2003]; [Pindar, *Nem.* 10.55–59](#); see Fowler 2013, 423–34; Gantz 1993, 318–28). In other words, the story of Castor and Polydeuces again presents a situation in which a member of the dead returns to life at the request of a loved one, through the intervention of a god. And then, finally, there is the Argonaut Aithalides, who was granted by his father Hermes the boon of spending half his time after death above on earth, and half below—much like Castor (Pherecydes, *FGH* 3F109; cf. [Apollonius Rhodius, *Argon.* 1.640–648](#); see Gantz 1993, 343).

There is one more case—although I have kept it separate from our main corpus because our sources for it are later than those for the other stories we have looked at, though the story itself was said to be set during the reign of Philip of Macedon. The second-century CE author Phlegon of Tralles, and more briefly the fifth-century Neoplatonist Proclus,⁴ both tell of how a young man, Machates, a guest in a wealthy house, was visited two nights in a row by a young girl who called herself Philinnion. After making love to him, Philinnion left behind jewelry and pieces of clothing as tokens of her affection. Upon seeing the tokens, the young man's hosts realize that this visitor is none other than their dead daughter, who had died a newlywed bride. They confront her on her third visit, and she cries that they have ruined everything—if her visits had continued undisturbed for three nights, then by the will of the chthonian gods she would have returned permanently to life, but now, instead, she will return whence she has come. So far, this sounds like a variation of the Orpheus story, but the final part takes us in a new direction: the local seer commands the parents to disinter their daughter's body, burn it outside the city, make offerings to Hermes Chthonios, the Erinyes, and Ares, and then purify themselves and the local temples. Here, perhaps for the first time, we seem to see some fear of the returning dead—or at least a strong desire to ensure that she stays where she belongs, once she has again retreated to the underworld. Machates, by the way, kills himself in despair—again, a variation of the Orpheus story.

We can divide the stories we have looked at into three types: those in which the return of the dead is wholly successful (Alcestis, Pelops, Iolaus); those in which the return of the dead is successful but those who initiate it are punished by the gods (Sisyphus and Asclepius); and those in which the dead fail to fully return and it is

⁴ Phlegon, *Mir.* 2.1 (and see commentary in Hansen 1996); [Proclus, *In R.* 2.115–116](#) (most easily available in English as Appendix 1 of Hansen 1996). Proclus mentions three other cases of the dead returning to life from approximately his own period (the fifth century CE). None of these three people threaten the living; indeed, they offer help of various kinds.

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the failure itself that has dire consequences for those who initiate it (Orpheus and Laodamia). Of our remaining cases, Semele, Hippolytus, and Memnon belong in their own category, since they all become divine. As for Castor, although we might argue that the return of Castor had dire consequences for Polydeuces, insofar as he loses half his immortality, the myth does not present the situation that way; Castor's story probably belongs, therefore, in the same category as those of Alcestis, Pelops, and Ioalus, as does that of Aithalides. The story of Philinnion probably belongs, as I noted, in the same category as the stories of Orpheus and Laodamia.

Notably, none of these stories implies that returning from the dead is in and of itself a problem—it is a special dispensation that a god might bestow, or that a particularly clever mortal might devise. Nor are the returning dead *themselves* presented as problems in these stories, with the possible exception of Philinnion. The problems, when there are problems, arise either from angering a god, as in the cases of Asclepius and Sisyphus, or from having failed to accept limitations set by the gods, as in the cases of Orpheus, Laodamia, and Philinnion. If the Greeks feared the return of the dead in and of itself, it was the return of the dead in the form of the restless, disembodied souls that I mentioned earlier, or in other words, ghosts—not the possibility that the dead might return in embodied form.

II. MODERN STORIES OF THE RETURNING DEAD

The stories told about the return of the dead in the modern West (of which I will focus in the short space of this essay only on anglophone examples) are quite different. In 1902, W. W. Jacobs published a short story called "[The Monkey's Paw](#)."⁵ The title refers to a mummified monkey's paw that a soldier has brought home from India, a talisman that can grant its owner three wishes. Having experienced its dangerous powers himself, and wishing to destroy it, the soldier, nonetheless, reluctantly gives it to his friends. Their

⁵ The story appeared in Jacobs's (1902) anthology [The Lady of the Barge](#).

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initial wish is for 200 pounds to pay off their mortgage. The next day, their son is killed in a horrible accident; the compensation for his death is exactly 200 pounds. Ten more days go by and the mother, overwhelmed by grief, snatches up the paw and makes a second wish—that her son come home. Immediately, there comes a knocking at the door. As the mother joyously fumbles to open it, the father—who had been the one to identify his son’s badly mutilated body at the morgue—quickly picks up the claw and makes a wish of his own. When the door swings open, nothing is there but the wind, whistling through the empty street.

“The Monkey’s Paw” was an enormous success. A year after its publication, it was adapted for the London stage,⁶ and there have been many radio, film, and TV versions as well. Stephen King used the idea that underlies it in several of his novels, most prominently *Pet Sematary* (1983), in which a young doctor uses the power of an ancient Native America burial ground to resurrect, first, his daughter’s cat, and then his two-year-old son. As in all tales of “The Monkey’s Paw” type, the doctor learns, to his regret, that—as another character had warned him—“sometimes dead is better.” In *Pet Sematary*, those who return carry a lingering stench of the grave and also, far more alarmingly, a vicious spirit called the wendigo. Indeed, although the *body* that returns may be that of a cat or a child, the soul and intelligence that animate it are purely evil.

Similarly, in C. S. Lewis’s 1945 novel *That Hideous Strength*, a team of scientists who are bent on taking over the world think they have reanimated the head of a recently executed convict, a brilliant but criminally insane man who will lead them in their endeavors. Bad as that sounds, it gets worse. As it turns out, the head is no longer inhabited by the soul and mind of the convict. It has been possessed by an evil force that has its own colonizing plans, which extend to the whole universe. In *Solaris*, a 1961 novel by Stanislaw Lem, which has been made into a movie three times ([1968](#), [1972](#),

⁶ [“The Monkey’s Paw: A Story in Three Scenes,”](#) co-written by W. W. Jacobs and Louis N. Parker.

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and [2002](#)), a team of scientists sent to investigate a distant planet are apparently visited by loved ones they left behind on earth—including, for the main character Kris, his dead wife Rheya, who committed suicide after Kris told her he was leaving. Rheya is willing to let bygones be bygones and resume their marriage. Although drawn to her by a combination of guilt and desire, Kris is more alert to danger than are the protagonists in other “Monkey’s Paw” type stories and initially resists temptation.

The original novel and two of the film versions end with Rheya helping the scientists find a way to end her new existence, which has become as unhappy for her as her first life was. The end of the third, most recent film is ambiguous; we could understand Kris as choosing to stay with the new Rheya, although in an altered bodily state himself. In any case, all versions of Lem’s story bring us up against the central issue of “The Monkey’s Paw” and ask us to consider, once again, whether staying dead might be better—better for those who have died and also for those who are left behind.

We could go on at great length with this catalog of twentieth-century stories that center on the bodily return of the dead, and the disasters that follow—a whole lecture could be devoted to H. P. Lovecraft’s treatments of the idea, and particularly his stories of “[Herbert West: Reanimator](#)” (1922), in which a young medical student’s attempts to reanimate the dead prompt decaying corpses—or parts of corpses—to violently attack the living. But let us pause, instead, and consider what we can take away from *these* stories and many others like them, as we did for the ancient myths.

First, modern stories are never of the Alcestis type—that is, the return of the dead does *not* end happily. At the very least, as in some versions of *Solaris*, resurrected individuals long to die once more, and sometimes they take loved ones along with them. They follow the Orpheus paradigm, in other words. Overall, moreover, far from implying that the return of the dead might be a special dispensation granted now and then to favorite mortals, modern tales almost always make it clear that such a thing is against the laws of God, fate, nature or all three. Life may be better than death, but in these

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stories, death is always better than anything that lies between the two.

Second, many of these stories offer lavish descriptions of the reanimated body's decaying state: in King's *Pet Sematary*, as I noted, those who return from the dead carry a whiff of the grave and the marks of their wounds. The reanimated head in Lewis's novel must be artificially supplied with saliva before it can talk, and then it drools disgustingly into its own beard. The father makes his last wish on the monkey's paw because he realizes how gruesome a sight his son's reanimated corpse will present when his wife opens the door. "Herbert West: Reanimator" is filled with adjectives such as "ghastly," or "hideous." In the modern West, the returning dead are expected to be vile.

Third, in many modern stories, the corpse is reanimated not by its own soul, but by a force of evil—a wendigo, a colonizing space alien, or some more vaguely identified but still horrible force. Sometimes it *is* the original soul who repopulates the corpse, but with a temperament that has changed for the worse and a hunger for living flesh. What remains of one of Herbert West's experiments, who in life was the beloved dean of the medical school, is described as "strewing red death in its wake."

III. CHRISTIANITY'S CONTRIBUTIONS

So, why are the two groups of stories so different? Why did ancient Greeks express anxiety about the return of the *soul*—that is, the ghost—but not about the *bodily* return of the dead, whereas modern Western culture, although certainly not immune from fear of ghosts, seems obsessed with the horror and danger of the reanimated corpse? We might guess that it has something to do with the advancement of technology; we might conjecture that the potential to restore bodily life seems closer to realization now than it ever did before, and that stories like those I sketched above are a medium through which we can think about the ramifications of that possibility. The fact that doctors and scientists are very often the reanimators in modern stories—in *Pet Sematary*, in *That Hideous*

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Strength, in *Solaris*, and in ‘Herbert West,’ for example—would seem to support this. But there is a flaw in this analysis: Asclepius, after all, was a doctor. The Greeks were also capable of using stories about the return of the dead to think about the ramifications of advancing technology, and yet they never presented the reanimated corpse *itself* as being any problem.

I suggest that there is another, and much older, reason that contemporary Western culture fears the bodily return of the dead, namely, Christianity and its enduring effect upon even secular representations of death in the West. Christianity is a religion anchored in the promise that a human once rose from the dead and that those who believe in him will rise from the dead as well. One of the passages most central to those claims is [1 Cor 15:21–54](#) in which Paul, discussing the resurrection of the dead, promises that when “the [last] trumpet sounds . . . the dead shall rise again incorruptible For this corruptible body must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” ([1 Cor 15:52–53](#)). In short, Paul promises that like Christ, we will trade the bodies in which we die for some better version of those bodies.

Central to this passage, and to the ardent debates that went on over it for more than thirteen centuries amongst clerics and scholars, is the question of *how* the dead rise. As Caroline Walker Bynum (1994) showed at length, there was a deep, abiding desire that one’s personal, individual body be restored when the last trumpet sounded, even down to its moles and warts. This meant that the particles of each body had to reassemble themselves *exactly* into that same body upon resurrection. That is, *Peter’s* body could not be allowed to include disintegrated particles of *Paul’s* body (as the medieval debaters put it; cf. Bynum 1994, 134–35). How did God *deal* with all of this? What about people who had been eaten by cannibals? How did God straighten out *those* two bodies at resurrection? (cf. Bynum 1994, 33).

The history of these debates is fascinating—nor did they stop with the end point of Bynum’s book, the year 1336, which simply represents the moment when Pope Benedict the Twelfth formally

declared that souls will experience beatific vision at resurrection—that is, that souls will indeed have eyes. Martin Luther certainly had something to say on the topic—that is, he supported the ideas of a unified self and bodily resurrection—and as far as I can tell, bodily resurrection is still doctrine not only in the contemporary Catholic Church, but also in most forms of Protestantism. But for our purposes, two overall points that emerge from Bynum’s book are important. First, that early on, Christians developed a *unified* concept of the self, which valued both body and soul—indeed, they assumed that neither part of this self could be resurrected without the other and therefore that without the resurrection of the body, the self could not be resurrected at all.⁷ I doubt that a truly dualist concept of the self is found anywhere outside of certain philosophical systems such as Platonism, but some peoples, including the ancient Greeks, have a modified form of it, according to which it is the soul that survives death and goes on to some sort of existence afterwards, even as the body rots, but it is a soul that has *somatomorphic* qualities.⁸ That is, the soul carries along with it into the afterlife certain characteristics of embodiment, such as potential sensation and individualized appearance. This is why Odysseus is able to recognize his dead friends and relatives in the *nekuia* of Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, and why souls are able to suffer pain and enjoy pleasures in the Greek afterlife.

The second overall point is that, although Christianity insisted on the eventual bodily resurrection of every person, it acknowledged the initial corruption and decay of the body. Indeed, Christianity both reviled and reveled in that decay: the rot and disarticulation of the body that followed death were understood as necessary steps on the way to eventual resurrection, but as *only* steps, and therefore as signs that the process was underway but not yet complete. This sentiment that decay is an undesirable and yet crucial stage in the

⁷ This conviction likely has antecedents in certain streams of ancient Jewish thought and literature, which similarly presume notions of body-soul unity. See, for example, Cavallin 1974 and Segal 2004.

⁸ I borrow the term “somatomorphic” from Bynum 1994, ch. 7.

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perfecting of the self underlies two fearsome creatures who appear in the course of the Middle Ages: one is the revenant whose body has begun the process of decay but has not yet *finished* it, who reappears amongst the living in a ghastly physical form. In other words, the reanimated corpse. Nancy Caciola's (1996; see also Caciola 2014) study of such medieval revenants shows that they were traced to one of two causes: theologians and scholars argued that it was demons who animated the rotting corpses, while the common people tended to believe it was the souls themselves, bent on returning to their former homes. Either way, such a creature was big trouble, doing such things as raping virgins and murdering people. In other words, the medieval reanimated corpse is an ancestor of the modern Western phenomena I talked about earlier.

The other fearsome creature is the revenant whose body does *not* decay at all, and who does not, therefore, even enter into the process that eventually leads to resurrection. Here, too, either the lingering soul or a demonic force is understood to animate the corpse—leading eventually to belief in what becomes known as, among other terms, the “vampire.” Notably, nothing like the vampire—that is, a dead person who returns to attack the living—appears in Greek sources until well after Christianization. Our first discussion of such a creature is found in Leo Allatius's 1645 treatise on what were then contemporary Greek beliefs ([*De Graecorum hodie quorundam opinionibus*](#)).⁹ Allatius, a Greek from Chios who was trained in classical literature, theology, and medicine, calls them *vrykolakes*—a Slavic term that means “werewolves,” although “werewolf” for the Slavs meant not the creatures that we think of, who transform from humans into wolves and back again, but rather nasty revenants, who returned from the grave to wreak havoc.

In other words, when threatening revenants finally enter our record of Greek beliefs, they do so under a borrowed name, perhaps implying that the belief was borrowed as well—although how much earlier than Leo Allatius's account that borrowing occurred is

⁹ On Allatius's treatise, see now Hartnup 2004, esp. chs. 7 and 8.

impossible to say. What might have laid the groundwork for such borrowing? One possible answer is the Greek Orthodox practice of exhuming the deceased after three years and giving him or her secondary burial, a practice mentioned by Allatius that is still alive in many parts of Greece today (Danforth 1982). Although normally only bones would be left when a grave was reopened, occasionally (for what are now well-understood biological reasons having to do with the acidity of the soil and similar variables) a body will be mummified or saponified—that is, turned into a soap-like substance that preserves the features remarkably well—or tympanated—that is, inflated by interior gases into a drum-like state—all of which understandably lead to the belief that the dead are not dead at all (Barber 1988, 102–32).

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Let us bring together the ideas suggested in this essay. First: Western culture, under the enduring influence of Christianity and its promise of eventual bodily resurrection, developed a stronger aversion to the corpse than had many pre-Christian Mediterranean cultures, because the corpse—which by definition is a dead body in some state of decay, greater or lesser—signified that the process of decomposition that preceded creation of the second, more spiritual resurrection body was not yet complete. A rotting corpse that was *reanimated* signified that either the original soul or a demon had improperly taken possession of it—thus interrupting the process of dissolution, reconstruction and resurrection, either temporarily or permanently. Given that such a thing was against God’s plan for the resurrection of all individuals, the reanimated corpse could only be understood as evil.¹⁰

¹⁰ Caciola (2014) collects some fascinating exceptions to this, in which the returning dead seem, at least at first glance, to be innocent and even pious in their behavior. However, as Caciola shows, these stories have been appropriated, altered and repurposed by Christian narrators intent on turning traditional tales of frightening revenants into proofs of the resurrection promised by Christianity.

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The pre-Christian Greeks, by contrast, located the enduring self in the soul; it was in the soul that the self would experience any postmortem existence, good or bad. The corpse, although avoided by the living as a source of contact pollution, was not understood to have a continuing relationship with or affect upon the soul, once the corpse had been properly disposed of—either tucked beneath the ground or incinerated on a pyre, and in either case accompanied by proper funerary goods. The soul endured, experienced whatever rewards or punishments the self had earned while alive.

Interestingly, this idea that the body and the soul were severed from one another after death left open the possibility of imagining the rare bodily return to life in almost any way, including a positive one; as being a boon from the gods, for example. No stigma seems to have been attached to such a possibility precisely because no postmortem relationship between the body and the soul had ever been conceptualized, much less regularized, as it was in early Christianity. Certainly, everyday expectations were confounded when, in myths, the dead rejoined the living, but no horror was attached to the idea in those myths. We should note, in this respect, one more thing about the myths that we examined: they are so little concerned with the issue of the corpse that they fail to say anything about the body in which the returning dead makes its appearance. Apparently, it looks just like the body did before the person had died—Admetus can recognize Alcestis, for instance. This contrasts strongly with later tales of revenants, where the body is vile in appearance, smell, or both, and does not always function correctly.

Of course, were this essay a longer one, in which we could take a more expansive look at both ancient and modern Western cultures, we would surely discover that some ancient cultures proposed a stronger, more enduring link between the soul and the body than the Greeks did—the Egyptians would seem to be an obvious example, given the care they took to preserve the bodies of their deceased. We might also discover that some modern Western cultures are relatively disinterested in horrifying tales of the returning corpse—although my own initial survey of French,

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German, and Scandinavian cultures suggests that they are just as fascinated with the idea as anglophone cultures have been. And, of course, there are cultures that have developed strong beliefs in the threatening return of the corpse under little or no influence from Christianity. The African religious tradition that originally produced the concept of what we now call a “zombie” is an example. The medieval Christian idea of the reanimated corpse was particularly apropos for *this* essay because of its historical situation—it lies between the ancient Greek model of death, with which we know it perforce interacted, and the modern Western models that I used as contrast for the Greek model, reacting against the one and influencing the other—but it is not the only one.

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