

Critically examine the literary and artistic representations of chthonic deities in the Graeco-Roman world.

Chthonic deities are the Gods of the underworld in Graeco-Roman mythology we can see many examples of underworld Gods all over the world whether it be the Greek God Hades to the Norse God, Hella to Satan From Christianity. Many believe these gods to be nothing but the gods of evil and hatred however, the representations of these Gods can vary some are represented in a positive light some are more morally grey and others are the personification of evil itself¹. Here we will examine some of the myths surrounding these chthonic deities and examine what this would mean for how these characters are portrayed as through the examination of myth we can tell what the character of one of these Gods would have been viewed as in the ancient world whether it be a character of pure evil or those of a moral ambiguity.

There are many chthonic deities in Greek mythology from Persephone the goddess of spring growth, to her husband Hades the ruler of the underworld and god of the dead, to Hermes the messenger god but also a god of cunning, trickery and diplomacy. These gods are all complex figures this means that their base descriptions cannot portray the true nature of these deities. For example, as we examine the mythological stories surrounding the goddess Persephone. The myth of how Persephone became the goddess of spring is a good example of this as previously stated Persephone is the bride of Hades however, she was taken by Hades as he admired her beauty. He accomplished this with the aid of Zeus Persephone's father and ruler of Olympus. However, Demeter the wife of Zeus was aware of Zeus's involvement and sent the goddess Hekate to retrieve Persephone from the underworld. However, Persephone was now bound to Hades by the fruit of Hades which would mean she would have to spend a portion of the year with him in the underworld. This would symbolise the coming of winter as Persephone returns to her husband in the underworld and her return to earth in the spring when vibrant life returns to all plants². This representation of Persephone shows that she was weak in her young age as she was taken by Hades. However, as a goddess of spring she is represented as a beautiful figure as is seen in many art works depicting her in others she is depicted as subservient to Hades as she brings him gifts. Persephone was a character rife with pain and anguish one myth surrounding her is her love for the human Adonis. Adonis was a human who was taken to the realm of the gods by the goddess of love Aphrodite for his beauty. Aphrodite would then place him into a box and give him to Persephone to keep him away from the eyes of the other gods. However, Persephone would then peak into the box and fall for Adonis's beauty and refuse to return him to Aphrodite. Zeus would later intervene and ruled that Adonis must split his years into thirds one of which he would be with Persephone one with Aphrodite and one to himself however he would spend two thirds of his year with his love Aphrodite³. This portrays her character as someone who is unhappy with their current situation and is actively trying to change the way in which she lives. Persephone is portrayed

¹ Fairbanks, 1900, pp. 241-259

² Dixon-Kennedy, 1998, pp. 108-109

³ Dixon-Kennedy, 1998, pp. 250

as a goddess who was stolen from her family and sent to suffer with the god of the underworld and each time she is presented with a better way of living it is stolen from her no matter what it would be whether it be the love of Adonis or the inevitable return to Hades. Persephone is portrayed as a tortured soul that has done terrible things however, this is due to the actions of the other God. These actions caused the misery Persephone suffered in a constant cycle of misery. Persephone would then have been regarded in both a positive and a negative light as she would be the bringer of spring and life but would also leave the earth in decay with her return to Hades in the winter. People of the time would then worship Persephone during the spring time in order to appease her as she would have been seen as a figure who controls the growth of the crops and hope gain a rich harvest before the coming winter

Hades as previously mentioned is the husband of Persephone and lord of the underworld accompanied by his monstrous guardian of the underworld Cerberus. Hades is also the brother of all four of the Greek Gods said to have been eaten by their father Kronos and ultimately saved by Zeus. After Three Gods would set out to drive the titan Gods to the pit of Tartaros. The three realms that made up the world would then be divided between three Gods Hades, Zeus, and Poseidon. Hades after this was given dominion over the underworld⁴. Here we can see then that the beginning of the life of Hades as presented by mythology was strife with war and death. This could be an indication of what was to come of the representation of Hades in the Greek mythos as the God of the underworld it is fitting that his life would begin with war and death. It was said that at Birth the mother of Hades, Rhea could see no pity in his heart as is said in The *Theogony* by Hesiod "But Rhea was subject in love to Kronos and bare splendid children, Hestia, Demeter, and gold-shod Hera and strong Hades, pitiless in heart, who dwells under the earth."⁵ Here then we can see that from the beginning Hades is represented as a cold and merciless figure. Hades is also referred to as the Lord of riches or Plouton. Hades is often portrayed as a regal God meaning he would display traits that are applicable to any Monarch portraying him then as the monarch of the underworld. Here we can see an Image of Hades and Persephone that



Persephone and Hades
British Museum, London,
Catalogue No 1847,0909.6, 430
BCE

shows Hades in a rather regal form as he is being waited on by Persephone with a crown on his head and a bearded face. Here we can see then that he was portrayed as an emperor of sorts or a man of high social status in the ancient world. Hades was also thought to have released a plague on the people of Thebes as punishment for king Kreon not allowing the burial of the dead warriors. This example shows the utter disregard for lives that is portrayed in the myths surrounding Hades. Hades then is portrayed to be an evil, manipulative, and merciless God⁶. This would then be comparable to the Satan of modern-day Christianity as a

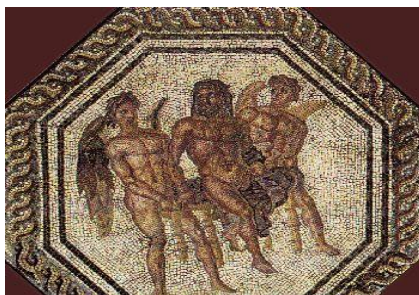
⁴ Apollodorus, 200 AD

⁵ Hesiod, 8th century BCE

⁶ <https://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Haides.html> Accessed 07.06.2020

God of unspeakable evil with actions that would seem sociopathic to any person. The portrayal of Hades similar to many deities from other mythologies. Hades then is a figure of evil as he is a pitiless and heartless being who's only ambition is to bring pain and suffering.

Kronos the father of Hades and many of the Gods in the Greek mythos. As previously stated, Kronos as the father to Hades Zeus and Poseidon would eat his children. However, this was a calculated move on the part of Kronos. Kronos would commit this atrocity due to a prophecy that one day one of his children would grow to overthrow him. He would eat all but one Zeus who would be hidden by Rhea the wife of Kronos until the day he would overthrow Kronos and free his siblings from his father stomach. After this event in the mythos Kronos is cast down into the pit of Tartaros⁷ ⁸. This story tells us much of the paranoia displayed in many ancient Greek stories such as the story of Oedipus. This common theme shows that even gods fear what is to come and the attempt at altering actions based on a prophecy will create the outcome of that prophecy. Many generations later Zeus Grants Kronos the permission to leave the pit of Tartaros in order to guard over the island of Elysium the home to the blessed dead this meaning the dead who had died honourably or who had lived a life of honour worthy of the blessing of the gods⁹. This would portray Kronos in a semi positive light as he would seem to have been redeemed in the eyes of Zeus therefore the people of the time in ancient Greece and Rome would have believed him to be redeemed in the eyes of Zeus. This then Paints his Character in a more positive light as a steep contrast to the introduction of Kronos to the Greek mythos. Being the ruler of Elysium would have also cast good light on the Character of Kronos as he would then be a desirable god to please due to the want by the people to attain the ability to enter Elysium upon their deaths. Kronos was also considered to be the ruler of Olympus during a golden age of mankind it is said to have been a time of peace and prosperity and a time were animals were able to communicate with humanity. However, this would then change during the reign of Zeus after he would overthrow his father and claim control of Olympus. It is also said that during the time of Kronos's golden age that the humans were gold and immortal¹⁰. This would then indicate that Kronos while despicable to his children was not as such to his subjects and would be able to maintain a level of prosperity that would ultimately end at the hands of the ones he had wronged. Here we can see a roman representation of Kronos



Saturn-Cronos as Saturday, Greco-Roman mosaic from Orbe C3rd A.D., Roman villa of Orbe-Boscéaz

or in their mythos Saturn as the character Saturday. Here we can see Kronos represented by a muscular man with angelic wings. Seemingly being very strong with a muscular body. Here then we can identify that to the Romans saw Saturn/Kronos to a figure of masculinity as and is represented as a strong character despite his defeat by Zeus. We can also see here that this in particular is a mosaic which would indicate that this would have been created not for the lower levels of

⁷ Homer, 8th century BCE, 14, 203 ff

⁸ Hesiod, 8th century BCE, 617 ff

⁹ <https://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Haides.html> Accessed 07.06.2020

¹⁰ <https://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Haides.html> Accessed 07.06.2020

Roman society but instead for the higher class of people within Roman society as a mosaic would not have been affordable by any of the lower class of the Roman Empire. This then would suggest that Kronos would have been a God that was admired by the higher reaches of society as a paragon of strength and power but can also be seen as a symbol of peace as the ruler of a golden age that had its basis in peace and longevity of life.

To conclude, we have examined 3 of the Chthonic deities within the Greco-Roman mythos all of which have extremely different origins and all have their own defining personalities, problems and aspirations. The simple ideal that all underworld gods are evil and manipulative cannot work in this instance as there are many complexities to their stories for example Persephone being stolen from her home and forced to live as the wife to Hades. Or be it the fear the Kronos held towards his children and the prophecy of his child overthrowing him. However, this ideal does reign true in some instances such as in the mythos surrounding Hades as he was seen to have no pity in his eyes from his own mother. To summarise, here we have looked at the artistic and literary representations of these Chthonic deities and have seen that not all of these Gods are Gods of simple death and despair but instead they are written as real people with troubles and problems of their own in an attempt to put forward a cohesive story for the accurate representation of these Gods in such a way that would allow the people of the ancient world to understand and empathise with many of these Gods with the exception of those such as Hades.

Bibliography

The Chthonic Gods of Greek Religion, The American Journal of Philology Vol. 21, No. 3, 1900

Dixon-Kennedy, Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology, 1998,

The Library Book 1, Apollodorus, 200 AD

The *Theogony*, Hesiod, 8th Century BCE

Persephone and Hades, British Museum, London, Catalogue No 1847,0909.6, 430 BCE

<https://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Haides.html> Accessed 07.06.2020

Saturn-Cronus as Saturday, Greco-Roman mosaic from Orbe C3rd A.D., Roman villa of Orbe-Boscéaz

Homer, Iliad 8th century BCE