

## THE HOMERIC SIRENS

GERALD K. GRESSETH

*University of Utah*

The form and significance of the Sirens remain a question to this day. The two main positions that scholars have proposed are that they were soul-birds (Weicker) or otherworld enchantresses (Buschor).<sup>1</sup> Buschor's view was explicitly formulated as an answer to Weicker's somewhat one-sided position. More recently Buschor has himself come under criticism for his attempt to make the Sirens Muses of a special sort.<sup>2</sup> Briefly stated, Weicker thought the Sirens were, both in literature and art, essentially representations of the souls of the dead. There is no question that the art form goes back ultimately to the Egyptian Ba-form (i.e., the human-headed bird type).<sup>3</sup> Although Weicker recognized what we may call the *Musen des Jenseits* aspect of the Sirens (*Seelenvogel*, 13-16) it is fair to point to his statement, "Unverkennbar ist der vampyrartige, stark erotisch gefärbte Grundzug des Sirencharakters" (*Seelenvogel*, 37) as typifying his view. However, it was quite evident from the pictorial and monumental evidence that this view excluded other equally important aspects of the Siren.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Georg Weicker, *Der Seelenvogel* (Leipzig 1902), hereafter cited as **Seelenvogel**, and his article in Roscher's *Lexicon* 4 (1910-15) 601-39, s.v. "Seirenen," hereafter cited as **Roscher**. Ernst Buschor, *Die Musen des Jenseits* (Munich 1944), hereafter cited as **Die Musen**. The most recent attempt to deal critically with the Sirens is Károly Marót's *Die Anfänge der Griechischen Literatur: Vorfragen* (Budapest 1960), hereafter cited as **Die Anfänge**. For a brief survey of work on the Sirens until recently see John Pollard, *Seers Shrines and Sirens* (London 1965) 142-43.

<sup>2</sup> See John Pollard, "Muses and Sirens," *CR* 66 (1952) 60-63. Buschor's choice of title for his work was no doubt unfortunate and his attempt to identify the Sirens with Muses is on some scholarly grounds shaky, as Pollard points out; but he had an intuition at least of what the Sirens were.

<sup>3</sup> See Weicker, *Seelenvogel* 85-88. But the form comes into Greece apparently through a Near East intermediary (see Emil Kunze, "Sirenen" [*Athenische Mitteilungen* 57 (1932)] 128-29).

<sup>4</sup> I refer to their "musical" or joyous aspects, particularly in association with heroes, Erotes, and the like (cf. Weicker, *Roscher*, figs. 4, 6, and 28).

Buschor's charming little book called attention to these neglected aspects of the problem. First of all, he separated what I may call the Greek Siren idea from the Oriental art form (*Die Musen*, 13). Buschor also claimed that Homer's Sirens were anthropomorphic and therefore different from the Oriental *Mischbild* (*Die Musen*, 11). Buschor's chief contribution to the Siren question, however, was undoubtedly his seeing that the earlier meaning of the Siren (before the fifth century) was not that of *Todesdämon* but what he calls (47) *Himmelssirenen*. They are, further, "das Gegenteil von verderblichen Wesen . . . und . . . zwar im Jenseits, aber keineswegs im Reich des Hades hausen" (40). Weicker had said that the home of the Sirens was the grave and the Underworld (*Seelenvogel*, 8). It is fair to say that these two positions have been the main ones to date. Marót has criticized both Weicker and Buschor (*Die Anfänge*, 33, 134-35). Marót also calls attention to the fact that a true investigation of the Sirens must begin with Homer (134). But, perhaps most importantly, he states that the literary and pictorial traditions have not been harmonized (135). In turn, however, it seems to me that Marót himself has come up with a rather improbable view of how the name and tale of the Sirens arose.<sup>5</sup> The present state of this inquiry can be summed up in the words of Pollard (*Seers Shrines and Sirens* [above, note 2] 143): "The whole Siren problem seems past solution in the absence of literary evidence . . . the monuments, in the main, fail to support a consistent theory."

It is on the literary evidence, especially Homer, that I intend to concentrate here. The literary aspect of the problem has not, it seems to me, been assaulted in the right way. That is, most investigators seem to have approached the subject by asking simply what a Siren is.

<sup>5</sup> Marót's argument (*Die Anfänge* 142-49) in essence is that, since all attempts to derive the name *Σειρῆν* from Greek have failed we must look to the Orient. He takes Bérard's suggestion that the name Siren derives from Phoenician *šir* "*Zaubergesang*." That is the first syllable does. The second syllable comes from another Semitic word meaning "tying" in a magical sense. Since the Greeks had this association of ideas in their own language—and indeed in the word which seemed to echo it—the Greeks were more inclined to accept this new word as their own. As to the story itself, again from Bérard, Marót says that Greek sailors got from Phoenician sailors a tale about two singing *Mädchen-Sirenen* on an island. These became Homer's Sirens, name and story. Later the *Mischwesen* form of art was borrowed from the Orient too. This art form had no name; but, Marót assumes, because they (real Sirens and art form) shared the features of *Gesang* and *Wahrsagen* the bicorporeal type took over the name Siren as its own. It seems to be an argument of *improbabilia per improbabiliora*.

But it is evident that the Sirens in literature exist within a folklore context. To look more closely at the total complex of motifs about the Sirens may yield better results. Folklore is not, as a rule, discrete bits of unrelated tradition handed down in random fashion; but rather, especially in tales, it is a fairly complex association of themes or motifs that have a tendency to attract and cling to each other. What this means in terms of our present examination is that the closest cultural context to the Sirens is obviously the rest of the Apologue, the *Odyssey* and Homer generally, in that order—simply another way of stating Aristarchus' rule for explaining Homer. The next closest body of evidence would be the rest of Greek literature in order of time from Homer. Further afield we might expect Indo-European mythology to show us related types or motifs. It is possible (see note 5, above) that the tale is not a part of native tradition but a borrowing *in toto* from the East; I hope to show, however, that this is not so.

The primary literary source, both in time and importance, is of course Homer (*Od.* 12.39–54, 158–200). The episode is a short one, divided into Circe's foretelling of the event and the event itself. In summary, Odysseus and his crew arrive suddenly at the Sirens' island. A mysterious calm ensues. After the crew's ears are plugged with wax and Odysseus is tied to the mast the ship is rowed closer to the island. The Sirens address Odysseus by name and tell him that they know all that goes on in the world. Odysseus then wishes to be free. But by prearrangement his crew only bind him tighter and they sail safely past the Sirens' isle. In spite of the brevity of the episode there are difficulties and perhaps contradictions within it. But the leitmotif of the whole episode, which we may call Magic Song, stands out quite clearly. This theme dominates the episode from beginning to end.<sup>6</sup> The individual names given to the Sirens (Thelxiepeia [or Thelxiope or Thelxinoe], Aglaope [or Aglaophone], Peisinoe [or Molpe], and

<sup>6</sup> The episode opens with the mention of this theme: αἶ ῥά τε πάντας / ἀνθρώπους θέλγουσιν (39–40). It recurs through the whole passage (41, 44, 52, 158–59, 183, 185, 187, 192, 198). But I would like to call attention to the structure of this motif within the episode. It is mentioned first before anything else, other than the Sirens themselves. Then, at the critical mid-point (184–94) where, if he had not been warned, Odysseus might have halted his ship (cf. 185), this theme occurs three times (185, 187, 192). It (Magic Song) is clearly marked as the luring mechanism. Finally, they are only out of danger when they are out of voice range (197–98).

Himerope)<sup>7</sup> would seem to support the contention that magic singing was the central characteristic of the Sirens.

The question why the singing of the Sirens is dangerous, as it apparently is, presents a real difficulty. That is, other than the general sweetness of their singing what is it exactly that so attracts Odysseus? One very old suggestion, going back to Cicero (*Fin.* 5.18), is that it wasn't the sweetness of their song "*sed quia multa se scire profitebantur, ut homines ad earum saxa discendi cupiditate adhaerescerent.*"<sup>8</sup> The hero who saw the cities of men and knew their mind might reasonably, I suppose, be curious about the Sirens too. But I find this explanation unacceptable. To begin with, if it were merely a matter of information, Odysseus might well pick up a good deal of it as the ship goes by at a rowing pace. And even if Odysseus himself is that thirsty for knowledge it is hard to believe that the crew must have their ears stopped up to protect them from this desire. In addition, why is the magic power of song so emphasized if it is simply the vehicle for conveying information? Then too, if we look at the actual text, the only specific mention of this sort is the statement (189-90) by the Sirens that they know what happened at Troy—hardly news to Odysseus. It is true that in the next line the Sirens make a claim to knowing all that happens in the world, but it hardly seems likely that this very general statement in one line can be the source of the Sirens' charm. What we perhaps would have expected—which would be consistent with the rest of the Apologue—is some offer on the part of the Sirens to tell Odysseus a short way home. But they do not offer this information and Odysseus does not ask this or any other question of the omniscient Sirens, though he is well within voice range (181).<sup>9</sup> But even if we

<sup>7</sup> See Zwicker in *RE* 3.1 (1929) 291-92, s.v. "Sirenen" for full references. All these early names come from epic (hexameter) sources. The name Himerope is not found in the literature but on a red-figured vase of ca. 500 B.C. in the British Museum (see Weicker, *Roscher*, fig. 1).

<sup>8</sup> Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer* 1 (London 1961) ad 12.184-91 expands Cicero a bit: "in other words they appeal to two of the most prominent feelings of the Greeks: the love of music and poetry, and love of information and 'new things' . . . So the temptation is something like that of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis 3.5."

<sup>9</sup> The fact that Odysseus asks nothing here is fatal to the view that he is eager for knowledge, though it may be that the Sirens possess it. What we have here actually is a well-known type of folktale, the gist of which is that when a supernatural calls it is dangerous to answer. Weicker recognized this and called attention to other Indo-European examples (*Weicker, Seelenvogel* 39 and 39 n. 3). The type is perhaps world-

were to allow the Siren's offer of information and Odysseus' desire to hear it as a sufficient motivation for our hero's compulsion to leap overboard, presumably, and swim to shore (as Butes later did, Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* 4, 913-15), the question still remains what would then have happened to Odysseus. The Alexandrian scholars also wondered about this. In two scholia (*ad Od.* 12.43) they suggest that the Sirens' victims waste away over a long period of time from lack of nourishment due to the enchantment of the Siren's song (*protsetékotes epi makron té ôdê*). Later speculation (e.g., *Myth. Vat.* 2. 101) went so far as to make the Sirens consume their victims (see Weicker, *Roscher* 614-15, for further texts and references).

It is typical of Homer in these short scenes that he does not detail the danger but instead leaves an ominous but unspecified aura about the scene. However, if folklore is traditional material handed down and used in a patterned way, we should be able to sketch in what Homer has not made specific. The Lotos-eaters scene (9.82-104), though different in other ways, parallels the Sirens in several particulars and especially in the type of danger. Both scenes are short; both cut details to a minimum. For instance, what do the Lotos-eaters look like? What exactly was the Lotos? However, in the matter of the danger to the hero the poet is quite specific: in both cases he who comes under the spell of Lotos-eating or Siren-listening does not return home (9.94-97; 12.41-43). It is true that the Lotos-eater passage is more explicit than the other, stating that the Lotos-eaters devised no death for Odysseus' men but that whoever ate the Lotos forgot his return (97). Since, in the Siren passage, physical assault is apparently ruled out and their victim does not return I would say much the same thing is implied. The central motif of the Siren episode (Magic Song) implies bewitchment, perhaps some kind of sleep,<sup>10</sup> in any case rendering him helpless. This motif is patterned in this way in Greek literature. The

wide. The Tiv of Nigeria have an excellent example (see John Greenway, *Literature among the Primitives* [Hatboro, Penn., 1964] 45-46). There is as well another example in the *Odyssey*. In the Circe episode Odysseus' men hear Circe singing (a kind of call) and they make the mistake, unlike wise Odysseus, of calling back to her (*Od.* 10.229).

<sup>10</sup> I have called attention to the use of *thelgō* in this passage (40, 44). The word clearly has magical associations and can by itself mean "put to sleep." Cf. *Od.* 5.47, *ommata thelgei*, sc. Hermes with his wand; and 10.213 of Circe's bewitchment of humans into animal form. Hesiod uses this verb of the Sirens staying the winds (Merkelbach and West, *Fragmenta Hesiodica* [Oxford 1967] fr. 28).

most famous case is doubtless the Binding Song sung by the Furies in the *Eumenides*. Their song sung over the victim is maddening, deranging, will-destroying; it binds the mind (*desmios phrenôn*), it withers the victim. By this means the Furies compel him beneath the earth (Aesch. *Eum.* 328-39). The Sphinxes, in many ways like the Sirens, are said to carry off the person captured by their song (Eur. *El.* 471-72, *oidimon agran pherousai*). In a more general way the opening lines (1-15) of Pindar's first Pythian is a tribute to the power of song. This is enough to explain the danger Odysseus is in. He may be cast into a sleep, held in some Lotos-land-like indolence, or even snatched away somewhere (cf. *Od.* 14.371). In any event, he would lose his return. Homer may not have given any more detail than he has because his tradition has forgotten what exactly the Sirens did with their prey. As in the passage just quoted from Euripides, we may ask where are the Sphinxes taking these men. Euripides doesn't say and probably didn't know.

Though the aspect of enchantress is no doubt the main motif of the Sirens, there are others that, though subordinate, contribute toward making of the whole episode a pattern of interrelated motifs. One of these is the location of the Sirens. By this I do not mean a geographical location. There is no real geography here, only mythology. First of all, as is the case with most of the adventures of the Apologue, the Sirens are on an island. This may be, of course, only the natural consequence of real geography. But, as will be seen later, it is at least a curious coincidence that, in Indo-European myth (Irish), Odyssean type adventures with enchantresses take place on islands. More significant perhaps is the statement that the Sirens are seated in a meadow (45), further characterized as a flowery meadow (159). This feature of the episode has been explained along purely naturalistic lines (see Pollard, [above, note 1] 62). But there are at least two reasons why such an explanation looks unlikely to me. To begin with, in an episode that has such little detail about the main *personae* it seems strange that Homer chooses to mention a meadow twice that is not otherwise involved in the story. It looks like a detail of embedded tradition that went with the tale, though to Homer it probably meant very little. In Greek literature we find a great many similar meadows and plains. Beginning with Homer, we find that Calypso lives on an island which has soft, flowery meadows (5.72). I might observe too

that she sings (61) and is another one who keeps Odysseus from his return. In the Underworld by the streams of Ocean there is an asphodel meadow where the dead live (11.539; 24.13). According to the dictionaries the asphodel was a liliaceous plant. One would suppose therefore that asphodel in this context and flowery were synonymous.<sup>11</sup> There is also the Elysium plain (*Od.* 4.563) presumably flowered as well and located near Ocean. To forestall an obvious objection, there may be a great difference in myth conception between the Underworld and Menelaus' paradise; but all I intend here for the moment is to call attention to the formal structure of these and similar examples. The pattern is strikingly similar: a distant location (e.g., *peirata gaiês*, 4.563) usually near Ocean (or the equivalent), a meadow or plain (in earlier Greek literature often flowered) and inhabited by the dead or other supernaturals. Another example comes from the *Theogony* (270 ff.). This section of the *Theogony* deals with the offspring of Phorcys (also said to be the father of the Sirens in *Soph.* fr. 861, Pearson). Here beyond Ocean we find along with the Graiae and Gorgons the clear-singing Hesperides in a soft, flowery meadow (279). Pan listens to the singing of the nymphs and Echo in a soft, flowery meadow (*h. Hom. Pan* 25). There is no Ocean here but there is a spring of dark water (20), better suited to Pan's mountain haunts. There are numerous other examples of the general pattern,<sup>12</sup> but those cited show that the flowery meadow of the Sirens is not simply an accidental feature of the episode.

Another—though minor—motif in our episode is that of the sudden, magical windcalm that meets Odysseus on his approach to the Sirens' isle. This *Windstille* plus a rather erotic representation supposedly depicting a Siren attacking a sleeping man,<sup>13</sup> has led to the theory that we have in the Sirens a case of the meridian demon, a type of

<sup>11</sup> So *LSJ*, s.v. ἀσφodelός. They cite *h. Hom. Merc.* 221, 344 for comparison.

<sup>12</sup> Compare further: *Il.* 6.201-02, 16.151; *Theognis* 1216; *Pind.* fr. 114a, line 2 (Bowra); *Soph.* *OC* 1564, 1577, 1681; *Ar. Ran.* 186, 326, 343, 351, 1300; *Pl. Phdr.* 248B, *Resp.* 621A. This myth motif is not confined to Greek tradition. We find it in Irish folklore (W. Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* [1911; rpt. New Hyde Park, N.Y. 1966] 335). Two names for the Irish Otherworld are Mag Mar, "the great plain" and Mag Mell, "the happy plain."

<sup>13</sup> See Weicker, *Roscher*, fig. 8. A theoretically possible etymology that derives Siren from the lexical word Σείρ, "sun," is used to support this theory; see Zwicker (above, note 7) 290.

succuba.<sup>14</sup> Whatever may be said for ordinary ghosts and other nocturnal prowlers, Marót is clearly right in saying that the noonday demon type is not found in classical Greek art or literature (*Die Anfänge* 140). In our Homeric episode there is no emphasis on noonday heat nor is there any suggestion of amorous attack on the part of the Sirens. The windless calm, it is true, is suggestive of the meridian demon. I would like, however, to put forward a different explanation. Throughout folklore unusual weather often marks the epiphany of supernaturals. An example frequently cited is the famous stillness in the *Bacchae* (1084–85) just before the appearance of Dionysus. A closer parallel to our passage, though, was suggested to me by two passages in the *Odyssey*. On the morning of his third day in the water as Odysseus is nearing Phaeacia the same windless calm occurs in very nearly the same words—and just at that moment he sees land (5.391–92). Even more interesting is the departure of Odysseus and his men from the land of the dead. They hurriedly embark; then the last two lines of the eleventh book say: “The stream of Ocean carried them along. At first they rowed; afterwards they had a good wind.” It would seem then that a mysterious windcalm surrounds some of these extraterrestrial places.<sup>15</sup> The calm about the Sirens’ isle is apparently another, and perhaps the most dramatic, instance of this motif.

The question of what the Sirens looked like has polarized about two very different positions. Weicker, as already mentioned, held that in art and literature they were soul-birds. Since Buschor’s day scholarly opinion has taken the view that, whatever may be the case in art, Homer’s Sirens were anthropomorphic maidens.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately the

<sup>14</sup> For bibliography and discussion see Weicker, *Seelenvogel* 38 and n. 7; Charles Picard, “Néréides et Sirènes,” *Études d’Archéologie Grecque*, *Annales de l’École des Hautes Études de Gand* 2 (1938) 144–45; Marót, *Die Anfänge* 140 and nn. 70, 71, and 75; *Standard Dictionary of Folklore* . . . (New York 1950) s.v. “Lilith.”

<sup>15</sup> Merry-Riddell, *Homer’s Odyssey* 1 (Oxford 1886) *ad loc.*, say, “Here there was no wind, perhaps because they were in an unearthly place beyond the ordinary atmosphere.” Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1557–58, *ôkyporon porthmeum’ acheôn*, i.e., swift flowing Acheron. Cf. Pind. fr. 114c (Bowra) *bléchroi* . . . *potamoi*; this seems to be a contradiction. But the lack of wind here has dominated the scene and made the rivers sluggish. Cf. *Il.* 8.478–81: Iapetos and Cronos sit at the ends of the earth where Tartarus is and where there is neither sunlight nor wind.

I wonder, too, if this could be the reason Charon has a punting pole.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Jane Harrison independently of Weicker reached the same conclusion about the form of the Sirens (see Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of*



whole question of the form of Homer's Sirens has been further complicated by the additional question whether the Greeks of Homer's day believed in soul-birds or not. This question properly belongs to the study of Greek religion rather than folklore, though there is obviously some overlap between the two areas of study.

It is certainly odd, and has never been satisfactorily explained, why, if Homer's Sirens were wholly anthropomorphic, every piece of the monumental evidence shows in one style or another the bicorporal form.<sup>17</sup> It is all well and good to say arbitrarily that the two traditions have nothing to do with each other; but, besides looking like an explanation thought up to get out of the difficulty, this solution does not explain why the same name is used for two such diverse forms. The main piece of evidence used to support the case for the anthropomorphic Sirens is the fact that Homer does not say that they had bird forms of any kind. Actually Homer doesn't say anything on this matter either way. This fact must certainly be seen in the perspective of Homer's style. In this episode, for instance, Homer not only doesn't tell us what the Sirens looked like; he doesn't give us any genealogical information, the location of the island; or, as we saw, the nature of the danger they threaten. Elsewhere in the Apologue Homer doesn't tell us that Phaeacia is an island; presumably, however, it is. He doesn't tell us outright that the Cyclops has only one eye; yet everyone believes, no doubt rightly, that this is the case. Euripides (*Hel.* 167) is the first one in literature to make specific mention of the Sirens' bird form. But this is not decisive; he may be reporting literary tradition or he may have been influenced by the art form long established by his day.

Homer gives us no genealogy for the Sirens; the first notice comes from the Attic dramatists. Sophocles tells us their father was Phorcys; Euripides says that their mother was Chthon.<sup>18</sup> In mythology, as is well known, the genealogies are added after the event. But they are

*Greek Religion* [1903; rpt. New York 1955] 197 n. 3). For the more recent view see Buschor, *Die Musen* 11-13; for Marót see note 5, above.

<sup>17</sup> It is true that there is one late example of pure anthropomorphism (Marót, *Die Anfänge*, Pl. 10). But Weicker is correct in saying (*Seelenvogel* 32) that this is merely the result observable stage by stage in the progressive *Vermenschlichung* of the art form.

<sup>18</sup> Soph. fr. 861 (Pearson); Eur. *Hel.* 168. Texts and citations of other genealogical information *apud* Weicker, *Roscher* 603. The two here given (i.e., Phorcys and Earth) seem to me to be the only ones of any folklore importance. Weicker traces the Sophocles genealogy back to Hesiod.

not without importance in folklore research. Where other information is lacking, as in the case of the Sirens, their genealogical assignments can indicate how they were thought of, even perhaps what they were thought to look like. Hesiod has been called the father of Greek myth genealogies. If these genealogies go back to his time they would likely be good literary evidence, independent of the art form, for the appearance of the Sirens. One would assume at first surmise that Phorcys was chosen as father of the Sirens because of his association with the sea; he is the son of Pontos (*Th.* 237). Phorcys is *par excellence* the father of monsters. The first of his children to be mentioned in the *Theogony* are the Graiae (270), then the Gorgons (274). We find the Hesperides here too (275), though they are not the daughters of Phorcys. Like the Sirens, the Graiae and Gorgons are sets of females; they are dangerous, located in a distant place (here the far west) near Ocean. We do not usually think of the Gorgons as musical, but it was in imitation of their dirge that Athena invented the "tune of many heads" (Pind. *Pyth.* 12.23). It is interesting that in this ode the adjective *thespesios* (13) is used to describe the Graiae; Homer applies it to the Sirens (12.158). Hesiod doesn't describe the form of the Graiae and the Gorgons. Aeschylus calls the Graiae *kyknomorphoi* (*PV* 795) and the Gorgons *katapteroi* (*PV* 798).<sup>19</sup>

Euripides says (*Hel.* 168) that Chthon (= Gaea) was the mother of the Sirens.<sup>20</sup> Earth is also a producer of monsters in Greek myth genealogies, especially the *Mischbild* types (e.g., Typhon, Giants, Furies). In a variant genealogy (Eur. *Ion* 989) she is mother of the Gorgons and also (Soph. *OC* 1574) of Thanatos apparently.<sup>21</sup> Chthon

<sup>19</sup> It is curious that one of the Graiae is named Pamphredo (*Th.* 273), obviously a PN form of *pemphrêdôn*, a kind of wasp. One of the etymologies given for Siren is *seirên*, a type of bee (Arist. *HA* 9.40.2).

<sup>20</sup> We are left to conjecture who the father was, presumably Phorcys. Weicker (*Roscher* 603) also cites Acheloos, from the blood dripping on Earth from his broken horn. But the texts are late (Lucian and Libanius) and evidently patterned on the birth of the Furies. It does show, however, that the Sirens were thought of as similar to the Furies.

<sup>21</sup> In art the winged Thanatos is pictured with the winged Hypnos carrying off the body of Sarpedon (see *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* [New York 1960] 189). So Sphinxes, Harpies/Sirens (on the so-called Harpy Tomb), winds, gods carry people off, some alive, some (temporarily?) dead. As to where they go, see Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: the Cult of Souls* (Engl. trans 1925; rpt. New York 1966), I, Ch. ii, "Islands of the Blest."

was also the mother of Dreams (Eur. *Hec.* 70-71; *IT* 1262). In the *Odyssey* the country of dreams is located by Ocean and the Gates of the Sun and the asphodel meadow at the entrance to the Underworld (24. 11-14). Helen asks Persephone to send the Sirens to her (Eur. *Hel.* 175), which must mean that the Sirens can come from the same region as dreams. Dreams are winged (Eur. *Hec.* 70-71) and have the gift of prophecy (Eur. *IT* 1262-68) as the Sirens do. Gaea is called *prôtomantis* (Aesch. *Eum.* 2), the first source of prophecy. We can see why. It is almost a universal belief that dreams bring prophetic or secret knowledge. The Greeks imagined the personified dream as a bird- or wraith-like being that came at night to warn or deliver a message. The interesting thing, however, is that they were regarded as coming from the earth.<sup>22</sup> We can see from this perhaps why Earth was chosen as mother of the Sirens; both Sirens and Dreams have prophetic gifts. They apparently share much the same location as well. In the *Odyssey* dreams are near the entrance to the Underworld. From Euripides' *Helen* we saw that Persephone can send the Sirens. A fragment of Sophocles (fr. 861, Pearson) says that the two Sirens sing *tous Haidou nomous*, literally, "Hades' tunes," whatever exactly is meant by that. Dreams do not sing; but they speak prophetically to a person in sleep. In so far as the intention of the Sirens' singing was hypnotic trance the two states are much alike. Echidna is the official mother of the Sphinx (Hes. *Th.* 326). However, Echidna lives under the earth (*ibid.* 304) and in a sense the Sphinx is a production from the earth (cf. Eur. *Phoen.* 1019-20, *gas locheuma / nerterou t' Echidnas*). The Sphinx is a winged *meixoparthenos* (*ibid.* 1023); she sings, has arcane or prophetic knowledge, carries off her victims (*ibid.* 809, 1026-27), and is sent by Hades to do so (*ibid.* 810-11).

It is a well-known fact that in art the Sirens look much like Keres, Sphinxes, Gorgons, Harpies, Erotes, Erinyes and the like. Yet, with the assumption of a purely anthropomorphic form for Homer's Sirens

<sup>22</sup> Gaea possessed the oracular shrine at Delphia before Apollo. (For two differing accounts of how Apollo got it see Aesch. *Eum.* 1-8 and Eur. *IT* 1249-83.) According to Pausanias (5.14.10) there was a *gaion* or shrine of Gaea at Olympia built over a *stomion*—apparently an entrance to and from the lower world, a gate for dreams perhaps. The whole practice of *incubatio* and the rites of Trophonios would seem to be connected with this idea; that is, if prophetic dreams come from the earth, it is best to get right on or in it.

it was inexplicable that, with one late exception, all art evidence should show the bicorporal form. One might have expected some adherence, especially in paintings of the Homeric scene, to the supposed Homeric form. Only Buschor and Marót, so far as I am aware, have addressed themselves to this problem—both attempts unconvincing to me. Buschor's argument (*Die Musen* 11-12) in essence is that "Das Mischbild des Vogeldämons hat dann die Gemüter der frühen Betrachter und Bildner aufs Tiefste erregt. Sie deuteten es verschieden . . . vor allem aber auf . . . die Sirenen, die jetzt erst zu Singvögeln geworden sind." The argument is arbitrary, non-evidential, and vague. What so moved these *Betrachter* and *Bildner* to do so? Marót's argumentation (*Die Anfänge* 142-49) is more complex. Marót assumes (see note 5, above) that Homer's Siren story, name and all, came from Phoenician mariners; these Sirens were of purely human form. Later the *Mischbild*, having nothing to do with the Siren tale, was also borrowed from the Orient. This art form had no name. But because of the similarity of prophetic singing (*Gesang und Wahrsagen*) it took over the name Siren from that time on. Besides the problematical etymology (from Semitic) of the name Siren and the unlikelihood of the Siren episode being a sailor's tale inserted in the *Odyssey*, the one factor of prophetic singing, even if true, seems an insufficient reason to have caused the sharing of a name by two such otherwise dissimilar and unrelated forms.

What I have tried to do is to put the Sirens into the context of other folklore types that Greek tradition evidently thought they were related to, in genealogies, function, and location. Such evidence covering several instances (Graiae, Gorgons, Dreams, etc.) is not likely to be arbitrary, and found in several sources (Homer, Hesiod, the dramatists), is likely to take us back to early Greek folklore tradition, and therefore not susceptible to the charge of being influenced by the art form. Besides, it is one thing to say that when Euripides calls the Sirens winged he does so because of the paintings and monuments he has seen; but it is quite a different matter to assume that an Oriental art form could so structure the supposed anthropomorphic Sirens of Homer that we find them in a complex, patterned relation with the Graiae, Gorgons, Sphinxes, Dreams etc. If we find the Sirens closely associated with these and similar types—to answer now the question of their form—it

seems highly likely that they too in Greek tradition were bicorporal as well. If this is admitted it removes at one stroke one major difficulty in the whole Siren question; namely, why every Siren in art has wings. The art form was, of course, borrowed; it was given the name Siren because Greek folklore tradition (not *necessarily* Homer) knew that Sirens had wings. Because there were no art forms of these "Homeric" Sirens no one can say whether they were thought of as the Ba-types or what—probably simple "winged." On the other side, the borrowed form had no folklore and they went together well.

This conclusion is quite consistent with the epiphanies and apophanies of Homeric deities in bird form (see Weicker, *Seelenvogel* 33). Odysseus himself appears once as a bird (*Od.* 19.548–49). What role, if any, the soul-bird plays in the Siren problem is a far-reaching question. Part of the difficulty is semantic, I believe. If the question asks whether Homer believed that the human soul became a bird at death the answer is evidently no. The eleventh book of the *Odyssey* is enough to show this. But if we ask instead whether there were in Homer's tradition remnants of such a former belief the answer might well be different.

Arguing largely from monumental evidence, Picard<sup>23</sup> concluded that "Le premier paradis grec a été un Paradis pour navigateurs, un Paradis insulaire, celui des Îles Bienheureuses." This is essentially the view of Rohde that Elysium, Phaeacia, and the Isles of the Blest—all representing fundamentally the same concept—were pre-Homeric in origin.<sup>24</sup> The Siren episode is set in a wider context that is largely concerned with such places. It would be too long a search to examine this larger context here; but a few words are perhaps not out of place concerning this wider frame of reference. If these Otherworld places go back to an early stage of Greek tradition, it is reasonable to suppose that the provenience of this type is ultimately Indo-European. The general similarities between some Irish hero-adventures and the *Odyssey* are quite remarkable. These adventures often begin with a hero and his crew in a boat sailing west from island to island. These islands have various names, all indicative of the Elysium type: Tir-na-nog (The Land of Youth), Tir Tairngire (The Land of Promise), Tir Naill

<sup>23</sup> Picard (above, note 14) 138.

<sup>24</sup> Rohde (above, note 21) 63, 75–76.

(The Otherworld), Mag Mar (The Great Plain) and others.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes (as in the case of Bran) these heroes do not return but continue on who knows where. But Cormac, for instance, not only returns home but wakens there magically one morning and with wondrous gifts—very like Odysseus. There are other similarities too: the dominance throughout these scenes of the god Manannan (the Irish Poseidon), the long delayed return of the hero, the sudden nostalgia to return, the hero's return often as a very old man. But what is of particular interest here is the role of singing goddesses in these tales. Under the influence of a mysterious woman singing sleep-inducing music Bran and his companions sail west from Ireland to the Isle of Joy and the Isle of Women. They see Manannan riding on his chariot over the waves (which he calls a "flowery plain"). At the Isle of Joy one of Bran's companions refuses to leave (similar to the Lotos-eaters episode). At the Isle of Women, as in the Circe episode (cf. *Od.* 10.472), Bran's men have to urge the hero to be on his way. Of further interest is the fact that these Irish enchantresses appear sometimes in the form of birds; these birds also have the power of trance-inducing song.<sup>26</sup> This whole correspondence of motifs between Irish and Greek myth demands much more consideration than can be given here. The sole feature I would like to emphasize is that these singers in Irish myth are very often women, usually with erotic implications. Calypso (*Od.* 5.61) and Circe (*Od.* 10.221) are both beautiful, seductive singers. If there was in Homer's tradition a close motif connection between female gender and seductive singing this could explain the fact that in Greek literature all Sirens are female while in art some early Sirens are bearded.

Marót speaks of the "hartnäckige Dualität" of the Sirens. The

<sup>25</sup> See Wentz (above, note 12) 335 (island names), 338–56 (adventures); and J. A. Mucculoch, *Celtic Mythology*, Mythology of All Races 3, Ch. ix, "The Divine Land," 114–23. Mucculoch remarks (123), "The parallel between Celtic and early Greek conceptions of Elysium is wonderfully close."

<sup>26</sup> See Mucculoch (above, note 25) 121: "Goddesses sometimes took the form of birds . . . and they sang exquisite, sleep-compelling melodies. Sweet, unending bird-music . . . was a constant note of Elysium . . ." Listening to this music could cause a loss of the sense of time. These myth themes were apparently brought from the mainland to Ireland by the Celts. Anne Ross (*Pagan Celtic Britain* [London/New York 1967] 241) says that these Irish tales remain faithful to concepts of the Urnfield and Hallstatt phases of European pre-history.

pictorial representations of the Sirens show them singly, in pairs, in threes, or indefinite in number (Weicker, *Roscher* 603; Marót, *Die Anfänge* 115-19). There is no question that Homer's Sirens were two in number, at least in the Siren episode itself (cf. *Od.* 23.326, *hadinaôn*). It seems to me a reasonable approach to ask what is there about the Siren episode that would demand only two Sirens. In the episode as now constituted evidently nothing. But the obvious importance given to the Phaeacia section of the Apologue, the moving from island to island, the dominance of Poseidon (rather than Zeus) in this section of the *Odyssey*, the supernatural transportation of Odysseus back to Ithaca, his bemused waking there—all these point to an overall type of Otherworld journey as the general theme of the Apologue. It was the opinion of Karl Meuli that parts of the *Odyssey* and the Argonautic saga (he mentions in particular the Siren episode and the Planctae)<sup>27</sup> belonged to the same *Sagenkreis*, which would be pre-Homeric and of considerable antiquity. The Planctae with Scylla and Charybdis immediately follow the Siren episode (*Od.* 12.55-126, 201-59), again divided into Circe's foretelling the event and the event itself. Whatever Homer himself may have understood the Planctae to be, it is clear that their folktale significance is that almost universal motif, the Symplegades motif. As Frazer has indicated, the hero often seeks the water of immortality or ambrosia beyond such portals.<sup>28</sup> Just a few lines following the Sirens we find the Planctae (the "strikers" rather than the "wanderers," I think) and also the doves that bring Zeus his ambrosia (61-65). Every time the doves go through, the Planctae destroy one of them (no doubt the last one through). I would like to suggest that, if in the original pattern the Sirens were located at the entrance to these two cliffs, then it is obvious why there are two.

In summary, let me repeat that the Sirens are a part of Homer's inheritance of folklore and must be examined accordingly. They represent primarily Magic Song. They are patterned closely to the Sphinxes, Harpies, Gorgons, Graiae, and Dreams. I conclude from this that Homer's Sirens must have been winged. To admit this removes the intolerable dichotomy recent scholarship has placed

<sup>27</sup> Karl Meuli, *Odyssee und Argonautica* (Berlin/Sächingen 1921) 25.

<sup>28</sup> James Frazer, *Apollodorus* 2 (Loeb), App. v, "The Clashing Rocks."

between Homer's Sirens and those of art. The Sirens formed only a small part of the total myth pattern of the Apologue, which resembles a type of Otherworld journey we find in Irish myth. This overall pattern further suggests why Homer's Sirens were female and two in number.