CERBERUS
By Gaynor Borade

Greek mythology comprises a huge pantheon, extensive use of anthropomorphism and mythical creatures that are symbolic. Cerberus, the three headed dog was believed to be the guardian of the realm of death, or Hades. Cerberus, it was believed, prevented those who crossed the river of death, Styx, from escaping. River Styx was supposed to be the boundary between the Underworld and Earth. Greek mythology propounded that Hades or the Underworld was encircled nine times by River Styx and that the rivers Phlegethon, Cocytus, Lethe, Eridanos and Acheron converged with Styx on the 'Great Marsh'. Cerberus guarded the Great Marsh.

Importance of Styx in Greek Mythology:
Hades and Persephone were believed to be the mortal portals in the Underworld. This realm was also home to Phlegyas or guardian of the River Phlegethon, Charon or Kharon, the ferryman, and the living waters of Styx. Styx was believed to have miraculous powers that could make a person immortal, resulting in the grave need for it to be guarded. This realm relates to the concept of 'hell' in Christianity and the 'Paradise lost', in the literary genius of 'The Divine Comedy'. In Greek mythology, the ferryman Charon was in charge of transporting souls across the Styx, into the Underworld. Here, it was believed that the sullen were drowned in Styx's muddy waters.

Cerberus: The Guardian
Cerberus, the mythical guardian of River Styx has been immortalized through many works of ancient Greek literature and architecture. Cerberus is easily recognizable among the other members of the pantheon due to his three heads. Cerberus is believed to be the sibling of the Nemean Lion, Lernaean Hydra and the Chimaera. Cerberus' parents were the half-woman-half-serpent, Echidna, and the fire-breathing giant, Typhon. Greek mythology projects Typhon as the one who even the Olympian gods feared. Cerberus had a two-headed hell hound brother called Orthrus. Cerberus, in Greek mythology, is depicted as a creature with three heads, a serpent mane like that of Medusa, a dog-like body and a dragon's tail. He is believed to have the power to look into the past, present and future with his three heads. Another theory propounds that Cerberus' heads represent birth, adulthood and old age. Cerberus has been an important part of Greek classics such as Aeneid, The Labors of Hercules, Symposium and Iliad.

Hercules and Cerberus:
This mythical creature was believed to have an eternal longing for fresh meat. This was the reason behind his being given the primary responsibility of ensuring that the souls that entered Hades remained there for fear of being torn to pieces. Hades' loyal watchdog was supposedly presented to King Eurystheus by Hercules. The story highlights that the king had given Hercules the task of capturing the guardian of Hades alive, without the use of weapons. Hercules sought Eleusinian Mysteries to enter and exit Hades alive. He was helped by Hermes to get through the entrance, and by Hestia, to get past Charon. Hercules managed to earn an audience with Hades, the God of the Underworld, and sought permission to take Cerberus to the surface. Hades agreed, but like King Eurystheus, did not permit the use of weapons. However, empowered by the magical Eleusinian Mysteries, Hercules was able to subdue Cerberus and drag the creature out of Hades, to Eurystheus. But, the frightened king begged Hercules to return the monster to the Underworld and released the muscular hero from his labors.

http://goo.gl/rLZ5l
According to Horace, Cerberus possessed one hundred heads. Hesiod wrote that he had fifty, while most sources agree to only three. The center head was in the shape of a lion, while the other two were in the shape of a dog and a wolf, respectively. His shape was that of the dogs who haunted the battlefields in the dark of the night, feasting on the bodies of the fallen warriors. He also had a dragon's tail and a thick mane of writhing snakes.

Cerberus' father was Typhon, a huge dragon-like monster. His mother, Echidna, had the head and torso of a beautiful woman, though the lower part of her body was that of a speckled serpent. She dwelled in a cave where she ate men raw. With her husband Typhon she raised a monstrous brood which included the Hydra, the Chimaera, Orthrus, and, according to some sources, the Sphinx.

Cerberus was the watchdog of hell. There he lay, chained to the gates of Acheron, harassing the spirits entering Hades and devouring those who tried to escape. His Egyptian incarnation was Anubis, the dog who guarded the tombs and conducted the souls to the underworld. Virgil described him by saying:

'No sooner landed, in his den they found the Triple porter of the Stygian sound, Grim Cerberus, who soon began to rear His crested Snakes, and armed His bristling hair.'

And another passage:

'Orcus' warder, blood-besmeared, Growling o'er gory bones half-cleared Down in his gloomy den.'

According to Homer, Heracles' last and most difficult labor was to bring Cerberus up from Hades. He was told he could take Cerberus (Pluto) if he could do so without using weapons. When he found Cerberus on the shore of Acheron, he seized hold of Cerberus' throat. Cerberus' barbed and poisonous tail whipped the air but, unable to pierce the lion pelt, the monster soon choked and yielded. Heracles bound him with unbreakable chains and dragged him to the upper world to show Eurystheus, who then took Cerberus back down to Hades.

Also of note, as Cerberus vehemently resisted Heracles, barking furiously, his saliva dripped on the ground, giving birth to a poisonous plant called aconite; thus named because it flourishes on bare rocks. It is also known as 'hecateis,' because Hecate were the first to use it. Medea tried to poison Theseus with it, and the Thessalian witches used it in preparing the ointment which enabled them to fly. In medieval times, French witches concocted a similar ointment. Its main ingredients were aconite, abortifacient parsley, bat's blook (to assist nocturnal vision), belladonna, hemlock, and cowbane. The modern name for aconite is wolfsbane.

In the Aeneid, the Trojan hero, Aeneas descends to Tartarus to visit his father Anchises. He is escorted by the Bybil of Cumae, and upon encountering 'huge Cerberus barking from his triple jaws, stretched at his enormous length in a den that fronts the gate,' she throws him a cake seasoned with honey and poppy seeds. Now Cerberus, 'his neck bristling with horrid snakes, opening his three
mists in the mad rage of hunger, snatches the offered morsel, and spreads on the ground, relaxes his enormous limbs, lies now extended at the vast length over all the cave. Aeneas, now that hell’s keeper is buried in sleep, seizes the passage and swiftly over-passes the bank of that flood whence there is no return.

In another legend, Orpheus makes the same journey to the underworld to bring back his lover, Eurydice. He manages to soothe Cerberus with his lyre. Ancient Greeks and Romans placed a coin and a small cake in the hands of their deceased. The coin was meant as payment for Charon who ferried the souls across the river Styx, while the cake helped to pacify Cerberus. This custom gave rise to the expression 'to give a sop to Cerberus,' meaning to give a bribe or to quiet a troublesome customer.

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In Dante’s Inferno, Cerberus was the tormenting genius of the third circle. There the gluttonous and incontinent souls could be found immersed in turbid water. Hail and snow poured down through the dark air upon their grimacing faces. Cerberus took care to see that each soul received its due share of torment:

‘Cerberus, a monster fierce and strange, with three throats, barks dog-like over those that are immersed in it. His eyes are red, his beard greasy and black, his belly wide, and clawed his hands; he clutches the spirits, flays and piecemeal renders them. When Cerberus, the great Worm, perceived us, he opened his mouth and showed his tusks: no limb of him kept still. My guide, spreading his palms, took up earth; and, with full fists, cast it into his ravening gullets. As the dog, that barking craves, and grows quiet when he bites his food, for he strains and battles only to devour it: so did those squalid visages of Cerberus the Demon, who thunders on the spirits so, that they would fain be deaf.’
Medieval authors report that Cerberus openly stalks the surface of the earth, mingling with mankind. He is described as possessing a violent and hurtful nature, and is known to plot and endeavor brutal and sudden mischief. As one commentator says: 'When he makes incursions sometimes he lies hidden and sometimes he offers open violence; he is much delighted in all things done wickedly and mischievously.' He is also said to be a marquis in the demonic hierarchy of hell, a rank which puts him at the head of nineteen legions of demons.

http://mythman.com/
Residents of Hades

Getting to Hades wasn’t difficult. Hermes accompanied dead souls to the banks of the River Styx, and Charon ferried them across for a fee. (Paupers buried without a coin under their tongues had to wait a hundred years before crossing over.) Inside the infernal regions, the dog-headed, snake-haired furies, who drove mortals mad on earth, tortured the dead; three judges arbitrated any disputes that might arise; and the three-headed watchdog Cerberus did his best to make sure that no one escaped. And yet, most of the dead don’t have it so bad. Though they lack energy and have to spend eternity wandering around mindlessly in a depressing place, that’s the extent of the torture. The misery of it all is nonetheless indisputable. As Achilles tells Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, he would rather be a slave on earth than king of the dead. Still, compared to the sadistic, vividly imagined terrors we know from, say, Hieronymous Bosch or Dante’s *Inferno*, Hades doesn’t sound so terrible—except for the unlucky few. Consider what happened to these poor sinners:

- Tityus the giant. He tried to rape Leto while she was conducting a ritual in a grove of trees. Her children Apollo and Artemis heard her scream, let loose a flurry of arrows, and killed Tityus, who descended into the underworld. Given the frequency of rape among the gods, it’s surprising that this particular crime would demand an

THE JUDGES OF HADES

- Aeacus, son of Zeus and Aegina. Aeacus was such a superb athlete that his brothers killed him out of jealousy;
- Rhadamanthys, son of Zeus and Europa. Before he died, he was the king of Crete;
- and his brother, Minos, who ruled Crete before being scalded to death in his bath by his former employee, Daedalus. In the underworld he presided over the most troublesome cases.
into a new little horror, he would send rich gifts—something he could afford to do, for the treasures of the earth belonged to him.

As our story begins, which is not long after the world began, Hades was still organizing his kingdom. It must be understood that this realm was not pure hell; it was also a place of rewards for those who had pleased the gods. The Underworld also held a vast zone known as Limbo, where wandered the shades of those who had neither pleased nor displeased the gods. There were no torments here, nor pleasures either—just a faceless horde of gray, vaporous ghosts pressed so thickly together they seemed like a mist rolling over the plain. Occasionally, a faint wailing sound arose, not weeping but a muted lament as if they realized that they had been condemned, not by Hades but by habit, to spend their deaths as they had spent their lives.

One day Echidne laid a curiously lumpy egg. It hatched into a three-headed dog. Its middle head was wolfish, with stand-up ears and great, glowing dark eyes. The right head was skull-like and popeyed, a bull terrier’s head. And the left head was that of a hound with flap ears, mournful eyes, and quivering nose. All three heads had huge jaws with teeth like daggers. Though only a pup, it was already the size of a calf, and everyone looking upon it knew that, if allowed to live, it would grow as large as a bull.

The monster family was gathered in an enormous undersea cave. No water entered it, but it was part of the sea and filled with wet, sapphire light. All who had been born there and drawn their first breath of its salt-strong air returned from time to time, no matter how far they roamed.

The three-headed puppy stood blinking as he gazed about him. Newly hatched creatures always look about eagerly to see what kind of a world they have entered. And this pup had six eyes to peer out with. The three heads turned, the six eyes rolled, searching every corner of the dark cavern, trying to read the shadows.
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It hatched into a three-headed dog.

His middle eyes fixed on a pair of huge feet. Tall columns of muscle sprouted upward . . . up . . . up . . . and the rest of the body was lost in darkness. The side heads swiveled to fix their eyes where the middle head was staring. The dog saw huge, bolsterlike toes planted too near his mother. Three necks felt hackles rising. Three muzzles wrinkled. The single, untried heart, already fearless, began to race with wild rage.

With a triple snarl the pup flung himself on the foot. Each pair of jaws snapped off a toe. A tremendous yell split the shadows. The other foot swung in a savage kick. But the puppy leaped out of the way. He scuttled off to a corner and began chewing on a toe. They were Typhon’s toes he had bitten off. He didn’t know that the giant was his father, didn’t know what a father was, and wouldn’t have cared if he had known. All he knew was hunger and rage and a wild joyous curiosity about this place so much more exciting than the egg—this new place with its dancing shadows and sudden voices and flailing feet and tasty lumps of gristle.
He crouched in the corner, chewing happily, ignoring Typhon who stamped about, toe stumps spouting blood, as he tried to find the pup and crush him underfoot. His dragon-head dipped down, spitting fire, chasing shadows.

Typhon saw the pup in a corner and lifted his good foot. But Echidne, for all her great size, could move as swiftly as a garden snake. She slithered across the cave floor and cast her coils about the pup, enclosing him in a tower of leather. The woman-end rose out of the serpentine loops to face her raging husband. She held a rock in one hand and a sword in the other.

“I’m going to strangle that little monster!” roared Typhon.
“All three necks at once.”
“You’ll have to strangle me first,” said Echidne. “And that may be difficult.”
“You mean to say you care for that misshapen cur?”
“He’s mine,” said Echidne. “I shall call him Cerberus. Now run off and start an avalanche or something.”

By this time Typhon’s mutilated foot had sprouted three new toes, for he was the kind of monster that could replace itself. But his foot still hurt; he was in a foul temper, and yearned to murder his latest offspring. Nevertheless, he knew what Echidne could do when aroused. So with a final growl, he departed, vowsing never to return. This hardly bothered his wife. She had heard such pronouncements for a hundred years and expected to hear them for a hundred more.

Thus it was that the three-headed dog, Cerberus, was born. Echidne, that dread serpent-woman, treated her pup most tenderly, and he adored her.
Word reached Hades in the Underworld that the monsters he most admired had bred again and that their latest offspring was showing early promise.

"Just what I need," he said to Hecate. "A three-headed dog to guard the gates of Hell. I'll pay them a visit immediately. For beasts of that line grow to full size in seven days, and I want to see this one while he's still a pup."

Black-robed, driving a black chariot drawn by six coal-black stallions of enormous power and speed, Hades charged up from Tartarus through rocky chambers and out of the mouth of a cave called Avernus. His great black stallions galloped so fast that the road seemed to smoke behind them. They came to a strip of golden beach at the edge of the sea. Here Echidne had swum ashore with her pup. Hades had sent her a message, asking her to meet him there, and even monsters do not ignore a summons from the Lord of the Land Beyond Death.

Hades never traveled unattended. Two demon outriders clung to the back of his chariot. They sprang off now and began unloading gifts for Echidne. The presents were all opulent—gold hoops as big as chariot wheels, set with diamonds big as onions.
Hades, ruler of the hereafter and master of torment, was not easy to surprise.

Echidne liked to slide her long, serpentine body through such hoops when she performed her hunting dance before a shark chase.

"You are generous, my lord," said Echidne. "If these gorgeous hoops are meant as another birthing gift, then I accept them with thanks. But if they are offered as a purchase price for this pup, I must refuse. I doubt that he'll go underground to serve you, Hades, or ever serve anyone anywhere. All my children have independent spirits, as you know. But none of them are as willful and stubborn as this one, young as he is."

Before Hades had a chance to reply, Cerberus began to prove his mother's words. The pup had been seized by an immediate loathing for the tall, black-caped figure standing before him. But he knew that his mother would be displeased if he attacked Hades while she was speaking to him, so he dashed at the horses instead.

Instinctively cunning, Cerberus avoided being crushed under their great hooves. He sprang to the shafts of the chariot and bit through the harness, then whirled faster and faster, his three pairs of jaws becoming a circle of teeth. The sight was so ghastly that the stallions kicked themselves free of the shafts and bolted down the beach, trailing their reins behind them. Cerberus scampered after them, barking furiously.

Hades, ruler of the hereafter and master of torment, was not easy to surprise. But now he stood stupefied, watching his gigantic black stallions being chased across the beach by a four-day-old puppy. The horses had disappeared in a cloud of sand, and the pup came racing back, muzzles wrinkled, not barking now, but uttering a triple snarl. He charged over the sand and launched himself through the air, straight at Hades' throat.
It was only Echidne’s swiftness that saved the god from an unspeakable affront. Quick as the flick of an eyelid, she flipped her tail, catching the pup in mid-air and knocking him to the sand. Swiftly, she curled her serpent’s tail about him, binding him fast.

“'My lord, I beg your forgiveness,’” she said. “'But he’s very young. Too young still to distinguish friend from foe.'

“I bear no grudge,” said Hades coldly. “Let us hope that his judgment ripens with age.”

“In the days to come,” said Echidne, “I shall explain to him how much your favor has meant to our family. In the meantime, my lord, I observe that your demons have caught the horses. I think it best if I leave you now, and cool this young one off with a long swim.”

“Take these golden baubles with you,” said Hades. “They are yours. I shall leave it to you, Echidne, to convince the brave little fellow of the advantages that will accrue to anyone entering my employment at the highest level—and I mean highest. He would rank with Charon and Hecate as my chief aides.”

Echidne reached down, lifted Cerberus from her coils, and held him tightly in her arms as she wriggled through the golden hoops, and slithered into the water.

“Farewell,” she cried. “Thank you again.”

“Farewell to you,” said Hades. “But I shall reserve my thanks until a later date.”

“You’re a wicked, wicked, reckless pup,” Echidne murmured to Cerberus, as she glided through the water. “But I love you more than all my other children combined. And you shall never go underground to work for that arrogant fiend as long as I live. Still, we must beware. His disappointment can curdle into hatred—and his powers are vast.”

Cerberus did not answer. He was fast asleep in his mother’s arms.
Decoy and Death

It was a sunny morning. Cerberus was sullenly prowling the beach. Delia had gone to the tidal pool, bidding him not to come, for she knew he was jealous of the attention she paid her father's animal patients.

The shadow of great wings glided over the beach; Cerberus crouched, hackles rising. He goggled in surprise at the creature hovering above him—a female figure with brass wings and a whip curled at her belt. She was tall and stern-looking, white-haired, but with a young face. She landed nearby and came striding toward him. "Greetings, Cerberus," she said.

He had no way of knowing she was a Harpy; he didn't know there was such a thing. But he remembered something his mother had told him. "Are you one of my Gorgon aunts?" he asked.

"Why, yes," said the Harpy, who, like all those who work for the King of Hell, had been taught to lie very smoothly. "That's who I am, an aunt. But I come on a sad errand, dear nephew. Your mother is quite ill."

"Ill? Her?"

"Well, wounded. She chose to take on a shark and octopus simultaneously, both the biggest of their kind. She was almost strangled, and lost much blood before she could dispose of them."


He sped toward the cave called Avernus, that would lead him back through underground chambers to Tartarus.

"Is she dying?" asked Cerberus.

"We hope not, we hope not. But she's asking for you. You're her favorite."

He thought of racing off to inform Delia, but he didn't want to waste a moment. "She'll know," he thought. "She'll understand it's something important that takes me away and that I'll be back as soon as I can."

Without further hesitation he charged into the sea and began to swim as fast as he could toward the underwater cave where he had been born.

The Harpy mounted on the air, cackling, and flew off to report to Hecate that the ruse had worked—that Cerberus had been lured away, leaving the girl unguarded.

Delia was at the saltwater pool, feeding herbs to a seal that had been stabbed by a swordfish and was bleeding to death in the water when her father had rescued it. Glaucus had taken it home, bound its wounds, and put it on a diet of healing herbs. Now it was recovered enough to pass to Delia's care. The seal was a clever, playful animal, and Delia had grown quite fond of it. She was careful, though, not to spend too much time at the tidal pool, for she knew how jealous Cerberus could be of other animals in her care.
Delia fed the seal some more herbs and patted its sleek head. A shadow fell upon her. She thought it was one of her brothers and did not turn around. Her reckless courage had become a kind of family joke, and her big brothers were always jumping out at her, trying to scare her.

Delia reached behind her to give a pinch and touched coarse fur. She turned swiftly and found herself in the grasp of something huge, hairy, and flaming red. Most horrible of all, under its fur it was crawling with eyes. Even the paws grasping her had eyes. And they were all looking at her.

She tried to call for Cerberus. But the creature took her slender throat almost gently between two great, furred fingers, and tweaked the life out of her like someone snuffing a candle flame.

The seal flung itself at the monster, who, as calmly as a horse whisking away a fly, lifted the seal by its tail and shattered its head against a rock. Draping Delia’s body over one arm, he scuttled away like a giant red crab.

Argus climbed a cliff, as Hecate had instructed, and dropped the body onto the rocks below, so that it would appear that the girl, who was always rock climbing, had been killed in an accidental fall. Then he sped toward the cave called Avernus, that would lead him back through underground chambers to Tartarus and his mistress, Hecate.
Huge Hound of Hell

Typhon also left behind an appalling offspring called Cerberus. In many of the Greek myths, Cerberus was a huge, extremely vicious dog—a repulsive monster born of equally repulsive monsters. While Typhon was its father, another horrifying beast, Echidna, was its mother. Most ancient accounts claimed the huge hound had three heads. Hesiod was alone in saying that Cerberus had 50 heads.

Cerberus was said to guard the entrance to the Underworld. The creature carefully watched as the shades of dead people trudged through that portal of no return. If a person attempted to run away and escape his fate, Cerberus seized and ate him.

The most famous myth about Cerberus involved Heracles, who was half human and half god. A king named Eurystheus assigned the hero 12 fantastically difficult tasks. They included slaying the Hydra, a nine-headed monster, taming a herd of man-eating horses, and cleaning a group of unbelievably filthy cattle stables.

Descent into the Underworld

Eventually Eurystheus ordered Heracles to descend into the Underworld, capture Cerberus, and bring the monstrous dog back to Greece. The strongman did not know how to find the shadowy underground kingdom. So two gods—Athena and Hermes—guided him to it. The Styx river marked the boundary between the Underworld and the human world. There was only one way to cross the river's mucky waters. That was to summon Charon. A stern boatman wearing a dark robe and hood, he ferried souls from the land of the living to the land of the dead.

Seeing Heracles waiting on the shore, Charon realized who the man was and that he was alive. The boatman was only supposed to ferry the dead across the river. But he had heard about the hero's enormous strength and did not want to test it. Without raising a fuss, therefore, Charon silently transported Heracles to the river's far side.
Uncle against Nephew

Stepping off Charon’s boat, the strongman soon encountered a much more formidable character than the grim ferryman. As Heracles watched, a large dark shape loomed up and blocked his path. In the dim light, the man recognized that shape as his relative, Hades, lord of the Underworld. (Because Heracles was the son of Zeus, and Zeus and Hades were brothers, Hades was Heracles’ uncle.)

Hades demanded to know why his nephew had intruded into the realm of the dead. The man explained that he had come to get the monstrous dog Cerberus. This was completely out of the question, Hades said. Heracles must immediately turn around and go back to the land of the living. But the burly son of Zeus was not used to taking no for an answer. Without warning he leaped forward and wrestled his uncle to the ground, injuring him in the process.

Hades now changed his tune and agreed to allow Heracles to capture the enormous guard dog. There was one condition, however. The man had to accomplish the task without any weapons, using muscle power alone. Hades evidently thought that it would be impossible to capture Cerberus without the use of weapons. But he was wrong. Heracles was able to seize the monster, lock it in a cage, and cart it up to Earth’s surface.

Finally the strongman presented Cerberus to King Eurystheus. The ruler was astounded that Heracles had been able to accomplish a task that everyone had assumed was impossible. Quite naturally, Eurystheus did not want to keep such a dangerous gift. So he ordered that Cerberus be returned to the Underworld, and Heracles once more obeyed.