

## Traces of Greco-Roman mythology in classical Turkish literature: The Thread of Life

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### Abstract

It is wholly acknowledged that prior to the Turks' conquest of Anatolia, this land was inhabited by diverse cultures and civilizations. Following its conquest, however, large segments of the various populations living in Anatolia continued to reside in their native homelands, indicating that the Turks lived together with these indigenous cultures for centuries. Greeks and Romans made up only one aspect of these various cultures. Although nowhere near as pervasive as their Persian and Arab counterparts, the cultures and mythologies of both the Greeks and Romans are discernible in Turkish culture, which is only natural after having shared the same homeland for many years in Anatolia and Europe. One such example is the occasional likening of a beloved's hair to snakes in classical Turkish literature, reminiscent of Medusa's own snake-like hair in Greek mythology. Indeed, the poems written in Greek by Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and Ahmed Pasha demonstrate that Turkish poets were not complete strangers to Western sources. After providing information about the three Moirai sisters known as the goddesses of fate in Greek and Roman mythology, this article will move on to address how they indirectly appear in classical Turkish literature.

**Keywords:** Greek and Roman Mythology, Moirai, Goddesses of Fate, Three Sisters, Thread of Life, Classical Turkish literature

## Klasik Türk edebiyatında Yunan Roma mitolojisinin izini sürmek: (Rište-i Ömr) Ömür İpi örneği

### Öz

Türklerin Anadolu'yu fethederek yerleşmesinden önce bu coğrafyada farklı kültürlerin farklı medeniyetlerin yaşadığı, bilinen bir gerçektir. Anadolu'nun fethiyle birlikte daha önce burada bulunan halkların önemli bir kısmı da yerlerini terk edip başka coğrafyalara gitmemişlerdir. Dolayısıyla Türklerin daha önce ikamet eden bu insanlarla uzun yıllar iç içe yaşadığı söylenebilir. Yunanlılar, Romalılar da bu halklardan sadece bir kısmıdır. Türklerin Anadolu'da, Avrupa'da Yunanlılar ve Romalılarla uzun yıllar iç içe yaşamaları onların kültürlerinden, mitolojilerinden İranlılar, Araplar kadar olmasa da etkilendiklerini göstermektedir. Klasik Türk edebiyatında sevgilinin saçının yer yer yılanla benzetilmesi Yunan mitolojisindeki Medusa'nın saçlarının da yılan şeklinde olması bu durumu örneklendirecektir. Bununla birlikte Mevlânâ Celaleddin-i Rumî, Ahmed Paşa'nın Rumca yazdıkları şiirler de Türk şâirlerin batılı kaynaklardan tamamen bigâne olmadıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu makalede Yunan ve Roma mitolojisinde kader tanrıçaları olarak bilinen üç kız kardeş Moiralar hakkında bilgi verildikten sonra bunların klasik Türk edebiyatında dolaylı olarak nasıl yer aldıkları üzerinde durulacaktır.

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**Anahtar kelimeler:** Yunan ve Roma Mitolojisi, Moira, Kader Tanrıçaları, Üç Kızkardeş, Ömür İpi, Klasik Türk edebiyatı

### Introduction

Covering the longest period of time of all Turkish literary currents, classical Turkish literature was inspired from a wide range of sources. “The literary period that we now call old Turkish literature is commonly acknowledged to have modeled itself, both in terms of verse and prose, on Islamic Persian literature, whose own theoretic and æsthetic foundations are based on Arab literature” (Saraç, 2011: 6). Accordingly, the first sources that come to mind when discussing which currents influenced classical Turkish literature are Persian and Arab literature. The species, forms, mythological elements, heroes, historical events, characters, symbolic world, literary arts, *Qur’an*, *hadith*, and Islamic rituals ubiquitous in Persian and Arab literature frequently have exact parallels in Turkish literature. Despite being a literately current that initially emerged through translation and imitation, authors and poets eventually began to cultivate their own originality. Whereas divan poets sought to emulate Persian poets during the current’s infant stages, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century they had begun to regard themselves as equal, if not superior to their Persian counterparts.

Notwithstanding the truly profound impact of Persian and Arab literature and culture on classical Turkish literature, it would be inaccurate to claim that this influence was restricted solely to these two literary and cultural giants. Indeed, the steady westward and eastward expansion of political borders controlled by Turks, their acquaintance with increasingly diverse cultures, and the resulting political and cultural interactions and exchanges all had an enormous effect on classical Turkish literature.

The direct and indirect influence of Urdu-Hindi literature, stories appearing in the *İsrailiyyat* literature, and pre-Islamic Turkish, Egyptian, Roman, and Greek mythology on classical Turkish literature is also visible.

Turks lived together with Greeks and Romans in Anatolia and Europe for many years, and even if the resulting impact of Greek and Roman culture and mythology on Turkish culture is not as pervasive as their Persian and Arab counterparts, it is still evident. One such example is the occasional likening of a beloved’s hair to snakes in classical Turkish literature, an image reminiscent of Medusa’s own snake-like hair in Greek mythology. The poems written in Greek by Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and Ahmed Pasha demonstrate that Turkish poets were certainly not complete strangers to Western sources.

After providing information about the three Moirai sisters, known as the goddesses of fate in Greek and Roman mythology, this article will address the nature of their otherwise obscure existence in classical Turkish literature.

*Moira* means a share, distributor, divider, sharer, fate, and a person’s destiny (Erhat, 2006: 207; Fink, 2004: 283). “Moira properly signifies ‘a share’ and as a personification ‘the deity who assigns to every man his fate or his share,’ or the Fates.” (William Smith, vol. II, 1867: 1109). Not only does the Arabic word *qadar* mean predestination and divine determination, it also refers to the allocation of sustenance. The daughters of Zeus and Themis and the sisters of the Horae, the Moirai in Greek mythology are described in Hesiod’s work as three sisters who “regulate our sustenance” (Erhat, 2006: 207), whose names are Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos (Yorgun, 2018: 68), and who being spinning each person’s thread of life upon his or her birth. Whereas Lachesis is charged with spinning the

thread upon a person's birth, Clotho is charged with determining the thread's length, and therefore that person's life, and finally Atropos is charged with cutting the person's thread when the time of death comes (Hamilton, 2015: 27). These three sisters represent the past, present, and future, respectively (Platon, 2010: 363) and their equivalents in Roman mythology are the three sisters named Nona, Decima, and Morta.

Although the Moirai are alluded to in both *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* of Homer, their names are not clearly mentioned.

"Then was Amarynceus' son, Dioces, caught in the snare of fate; for with a jagged stone was he smitten on the right leg by the ankle." (Homer - *The Iliad*, vol. I, 1946: 191).

"All we are come down from Olympus to mingle in this battle, that Achilles take no hurt among the Trojans for this days' space; but thereafter shall he suffer whatever Fate spun for him with her thread at his birth, when his mother bare him." (Homer - *The Iliad*, vol. II, 1947: 379-381).

"Nor shall he meanwhile suffer any evil or harm, until he sets foot upon his own land; but thereafter he shall suffer whatever Fate and the dread Spinners spun with their thread for him at his birth, when his mother bore him." (Homer - *The Odyssey*, vol. I, 1946: 247).

"But when, as the seasons revolved, the year came in which the gods had ordained that he should return home to Ithaca, not even there was he free from toils, even among his own folk." (Homer - *The Odyssey*, vol. I, 1946: 3).

Although several of the characteristics of the Moirai are depicted in *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey*, it is Hesiod who actually informs us of their names in *Theogonia*. However, in Hesiod's work they are introduced as the daughters of Zeus and Themis and as the sisters of the Horae.

"Next he married bright Themis who bare the Horae (Hours), and Eunomia (Order), Dike (Justice), and blooming Eirene (Peace), who mind the works of mortal men, and the Moerae (Fates) to whom wise Zeus gave the greatest honour, Clotho, and Lachesis, and Atropos who give mortal men evil and good to have." (Hesiod, 1914: 145)

### The thread of life in classical Turkish literature

Similar to both *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* of Homer, allusions to the thread of life are frequently made in classical Turkish literature. Like Homer's works, however, classical Turkish literature foregoes any mention whatsoever of the three goddesses of fate.

Although classical poets made piercing observations into nature, they refrained from depicting nature as it was in their poems, filtering it instead through their poetic luster before putting it into verse. Similarly, instead of taking the mythological stories, legends, and historical events belonging to other cultures verbatim, they would extract their essence while whittling them down of their external details to the greatest extent possible. Although the names and characteristics of the Moirai in Greek and Roman mythology are completely absent in classical Turkish poetry, their essence—that life may be envisioned as a thread whose severance translates into life's coming to an end and the death of a person—is still very much present.

In this article, we will look at how Turkish poets of different periods incorporated the thread of life in their own poetry.

Yunus Emre, one of the pinnacles of Turkish poetry who lived during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, makes the thread of life into a personification of himself in the following verses. He expresses that his good and bad deeds will be recorded as long as he lives, that the contour of his face will change as he ages,

and that his own thread of life will eventually be cut. For Yunus Emre, the cutting of the thread of life is a metaphor meaning that one's worldly life has come to an end.

Hayrum řerüm yazılısar  
 'Ömrüm ipi üzüliser  
 Gidüp sûret bozılısar  
 Âh n'ideyin 'ömrüm seni

384/5 – (Tatcı, pp. 314)

(My good and evil deeds written down / My life's thread severed / My countenance lost in oblivion /  
 Alas! What shall I do with you, o life? )

That a poet of Anatolia in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the foundations of classical Turkish literature were being laid, likens life to a thread whose cutting symbolizes the end of life demonstrates that Greco-Roman mythology had been actively recounted until that period in Anatolia or that the poets of that period had access to Western sources.

A lover's union with his beloved is not a frequently encountered theme in classical Turkish poetry. One of the founders of classical poetry, Şeyhî, expresses that he was deprived of being reunited with his beloved because the thread of his life had been cut and laid on the ground, a clear metaphor for his death.

Niçe ire visâli va'desine  
 'Ömrümüz ipi kim güsiste yatur

g. 29/6 – (Biltekin, 2003: 127)

(How shall they ever reach the valley of reunion? / When our lives lie prostrate like threads severed)

Forced to flee first to Egypt, then to the Knights of Rhodes, and finally to Europe after losing his struggle for the Ottoman thrown against his brother Bayezid II, Jem Sultan lived a life of exile. Although reproaching one's beloved was a rarely encountered theme in 15<sup>th</sup> century classical Turkish poetry, Jem Sultan rebukes his beloved after having failed to seize the thrown, which resulted in his exile. Comparing his life to a candle's wick, he laments that after slowly burning for years, his life's end is near and yet he has yet to see a single strand of charity or kindness from the long hair of his beloved.

Riřte-i 'ömrüm dükendi gerçi nâzundan senün  
 Kılca eyelük görmedüm zülf-i dirâzundan senün

(Şentürk, 1999: 102)

(Consumed was the thread of my life by your coyness / Yet not a strand of charity did I see from  
 your flowing locks)

In this couplet, Jem Sultan likens his life to a candle's wick. Despite there being no explicit mention of a candle in this couplet, the notion of being consumed suggests that life is actually the wick inside a candle. This imagery of long hair and of still not seeing a strand of charity is a paradox. Whereas in Greek mythology, Atropos ends each mortal's life by cutting his or her thread, in this couplet, this same thread is slowly consumed over a long period of time. While a quick snip reinforces the notion of death's abruptness, the image of a wick being slowly consumed by the very flame it feeds represents a life full of troubles coming to an end. It is through this imagery that Jem Sultan depicted his troublesome life and its imminent end.

In *Bulbul-nâmah* (Mathnawi to the Nightingale), Rifâ'î ignites the thread of his life with the love of his beloved in an act of altruistic sacrifice for his beloved. Whereas the candle had originally been whole, its metaphorical head and foot eventually attained equal height after the fire of love for his beloved had taken hold and melted his life away. The metaphor of a candle's head prostrating to its foot is an allusion to Rifâ'î's sacrificing his life for his beloved, which results in his being completely consumed. Unlike Jem Sultan, however, Rifâ'î does not lament his fortune.

Âteş-i 'ışkı ile yakam bu 'ömrüm riştesin  
Şem'a gibi pây ü ser yolında yeksân eyleyem

b. 220 – (Ayan, 1981)

(Might I set ablaze this life thread of mine with the fire of her love / Like a candle, might I make  
prostate my head to my foot in my sacrifice to her)

Mentor of a great many poets in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the poetic genius Bahkesirli Zâtî resembles his life to a candle wick in the following couplet full of sublime symbolism. Seeing its wax dripping down its sides as it burns, the candle realizes that its life is coming to an end and cannot help but shed tears of blood at its impending death. In this couplet, life is likened to a wick whereas bloody water shed from the candle's eyes conjures up tears of blood in the reader's mind. Here, it is important to remember that individual candles were made of different colors in the past.

Rişte-i 'ömrün ucu gördi fenâya irişür  
Döker anun-çün gözinden 'âkıbet hûn-âb şem'

g. 625/6 – (Tarlan, 1970: 129)

(Seeing the thread of life stretch toward annihilation / The candle duly shed from its eye tears of  
bloody water)

There are couplets in classical poems in which life is expressed in the form of a thread with some sort of a relationship with hair. Lovers yearn to give their own lives in sacrifice to their beloved by grasping on to the hair of their beloved, by hanging themselves from their beloved's hair as if it were a noose, or, since its end is shaped like a hook, by desiring to hang themselves from the end of their beloved's flowing locks. This way the lover might finally realize his longing to be reunited with his beloved. Moreover, because long hair represents long life, the person who holds on to the long hair of his beloved is, by extension, bestowed with long life. Indeed, the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Sehâbî lamented that his own life had been shortened when his beloved cut the locks that would fall over her cheeks.

Kesdi Sehâbî zülfini ruhsârı üzre yâr  
Kûtâh kıldı rişte-i 'ömr-i dirâzumı

g. 376/5 - (Bayak, p. 158)

(O Sehabi! Our beloved has cut the lovelock hanging o'er her cheek / Shortening thereby the long  
thread of our life)

The life of the lover unable to clutch the black hair of his beloved is short. Moreover, the notion that clutching onto the hair of one's beloved extends his life evokes the image of a person who drinks from the Fountain of Life (âb-ı hayat, bengisu).

İtmedin cân riştesin peyvend târ-ı zülfüne  
Cân üzüldü 'ömr azaldı geçdi devrân hayf hayf

g. 248/3 – (Çakır, 2008: 712)

(Failed did I to fasten my spirit's thread to the darkness of her hair / My spirit cut, life shortened,  
and fortune forlorn. Woe is me!)

The most criticized archetype in classical Turkish poetry is that of Sufis. In contrast to lovers who sacrifice their own lives for their beloved, Latîfî attributes the reason that Sufis live such a long life in his work *Tazkirah al-Shuara* (تذكرة الشعراء) to the fact that they make the mole (black spot) on their beloved's face into a bead and her hair into the string that holds the beads together on their rosary, which they never put down.

Rište-i zülfünle hâlün dânesin tesbîh idüp  
'Ömrin anunla geçürür zâhid-i sad-sâleler

g. 1182/4 – (Köksal, 2017: 440)

(With the thread of your hair and your mole a bead, you make a rosary / With it, you spend your  
life, o ascetic of a hundred years of age)

Even if not to the extent that Sufis and ascetics (zâhid), doctors also receive their share of criticism in classical Turkish poetry. The reason for this is because although they are able to treat a wide variety of illnesses, they have yet to find no solution for lovesickness. The poet in the following couplet asks a doctor to find him a cure to his heartache before he dies, beseeching him to do so before the thread of his life is cut. However, this request made to doctors by classical poets never actually materializes.

Üzüldi rište-i zer-târ-ı 'ömrü 'âşık-ı zârün  
Yetiş gel ey tabîb-i derd-i 'aşk vakt ü zamânınca

g. 79/7 – (Zülfe, 1998: 141)

(Cut was the sorrowing lover's golden strand of life / Come! O doctor who treats the affliction of  
love, save me while there still be time)

In classical Turkish literature, the lover is jealous not only of other people but of anything and everything that shares proximity with his beloved. Bâkî, whose poetic excellence continues to be recognized today just as much as during his own time, protests that the thread of his own life must now be cut when a comb dares to reach out and touch his beloved's hair.

Zülf-i nigâra şâne-veş olursa dest-res  
Mikrâz gibi rište-i peyvend-i 'ömri kes

g. 209/1 – (Küçük, 1994: 228)

(If, like a comb, one reach out to touch her elegant hair / Cut then, like shears, the thread fastening  
me to life)

In Azmî-zâde's couplet below, the flow of time is likened to a sorcerer. As this sorcerer seeks to bewitch the beloved with hex upon hex, the thread of her lover's life shortens. Assuming that time, represented in this couplet as a sorcerer, is performing the duties of the three Moirai, the one who determines the length of the thread of mortal's life is Clotho in Greek mythology, or Decima, as she is known in Roman. Even though these mythological characters are not mentioned explicitly by name in the couplet, they are alluded to indirectly. That sorcerers were known to tie knots out of strands of a beloved's hair and to cast different hexes on her by blowing into them lends further support for this conclusion.

'Ukdelerle yâri teshîr eylerin âhir diyü

Rişte-i 'ömrüm ider kûtâh sehâr-ı zamân

g. 677/5 - (Kaya, 2003: 275)

(Saying "I shall soon beguile the lover with knots" / The sorcerer that is time seeks not but to shorten the thread of my life)

Likening his life to a thread and death to a pair of scissors, Yahya Bey Dukagîni (Taşlıcalı Yahya Beg) asserts that since he has died, he no longer has any inclination toward this world. Here, the responsibility of executing one's death is an indirect reference to Atropos, as she is known in Greek mythology, or to Morta, as she is known in Roman.

Rişte-i 'ömrümi mikrâz-ı ecel kesmişdür

Kalmadı meyl-i dilüm 'âleme kat'â şimdi

g. 509/3 - (Çavuşoğlu, 1977: 590)

(The thread of my life did the shears of mortality cut / Left now and forever has my heart's desire for the world)

In the ode that 15<sup>th</sup> century Mollâ Ashkî presents to Fatih Sultan Mehmed, he likens death to a knife and his own life to a thread, and is found praying for the Sultan's continued well-being. The poet reveals his desire that the life threads of those burning in enmity toward Sultan Mehmed be diced like tutmac soup (a dish of stewed mutton in gobbets with chick-peas) with Allah's knife of mortality.

Sana 'adû olanun 'ömr riştesin Hudâ

Ecel bıçağı-la togradı nite kim tutmac

k. 7/40 (Şentürk-Boşdurmaz, 2012: 92)

(The life thread of he who is swollen in enmity toward you / did God dice with mortality's knife like tutmac)

In the supplications section of his 87-couplet ode that he presented to Grand Vizier Ahmed Pasha, 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Sherif Nehdî states that the grand vizier's life is nearing its end and without mixing words, implores him to pray for his continued authority, prosperity, and life. Both the thread and the ode itself are nearing their end by this point in the poem, a fact that the poet uses to remind his addressee of the need to beseech God. Considering that couplets would be written side by side instead of one verse above the other in classical Turkish poetry, these lines also form a rope in their written design.

Uzatma Nehcî sözi yitdi rişte pâyâna

Devâm-ı devlet ü ikbâl ü 'ömre eyle duâ

k. 4/82 - (Koç, 2003: 81)

(Mix not your words, o Nehdî, for the thread has reached its end / Pray instead for the perpetuation of sublimity and prosperity and life)

A statesman and poet during the reigns of both Fatih Sultan Mehmed and Bayezid II, Djazarî (Cezerî) Kasım Pasha likens love to a sultan and life to a tent-rope (tendon). Just as tent-ropes hold the foot of a tent in place, the sultan of ecstasy depicted in the follow couplet is indebted to those lovers who sacrifice their lives for his very existence.

Sultân-ı 'ışk haymesini dilde kurмага

Cân riştesinden eyledi 'ömrüm ana tınâb

g. 491/6 - (Köksal, 2017: 227)

(To establish in the heart the pavilion of the sultan of ecstasy / Did my life make the spirit's thread into a tendon)

In Dervish Hayâlî's mathnawî titled *Rawdah al-Anwar* (روضة الأنوار), one's body is likened to a building and his life to a thread that will inevitably be cut, leading, in turn, to the decimation of his bodily integrity.

Bu 'ömrün riştesi âhir üzülür

Binâsı 'âkabet cismün bozulur

b. 851 – (Köksal, 2003)

(This life thread will yet be cut / The body's masonry then will rot)

## Conclusion

Instead of taking verbatim the mythological stories, legends, and historical events belonging to other cultures, classical poets would extract their essence while whittling them down of their details to the greatest extent possible. Although the names and characteristics of the three goddesses of fate in Greek and Roman mythology are completely absent in classical Turkish poetry, their essence—that life may be envisioned as a thread whose severance translates into life's coming to an end and the death of a person that life may be envisioned as a thread whose severance translates into life's coming to an end and the death of a person—is found in several couplets. In short, it is necessary to keep in mind different cultures, literatures, and mythologies beyond those of the Arabs in Persians while interpreting works of classical Turkish literature.

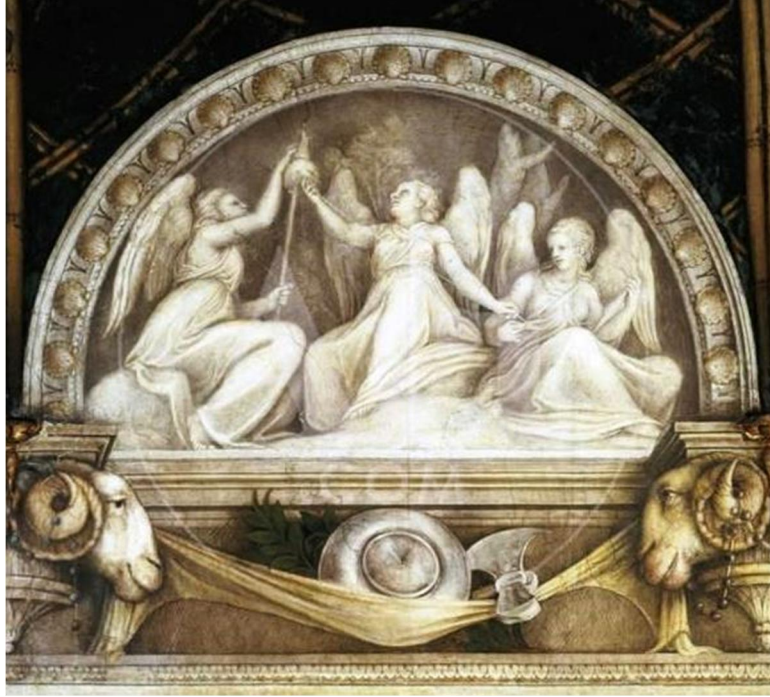
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- <https://christianwery.blogspot.com/2019/05/les-parques-farceuses.html> (3rd May 2020)
- [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bernardo\\_Strozzi\\_Le\\_tre\\_Parche.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bernardo_Strozzi_Le_tre_Parche.jpg) (2nd May 2020)
- <https://www.art.com/products/p28131461010-sa-i8587936/antonio-allegri-da-correggio-lunette-of-three-fates-detail-of-decoration-from-st-paul-s-chamber-or-abbess-chamber-1519-1520.htm> (1st May 2020)
- [http://www.artnet.com/artists/felice-giani/le-tre-parche-aeq-MaTYeoq\\_cICtuN5VUQ2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/felice-giani/le-tre-parche-aeq-MaTYeoq_cICtuN5VUQ2) (3rd May 2020)
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Atropos-mythological-goddess> (3rd May 2020)
- <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-P-OB-31.384> (1st May 2020)

**Attachments:**



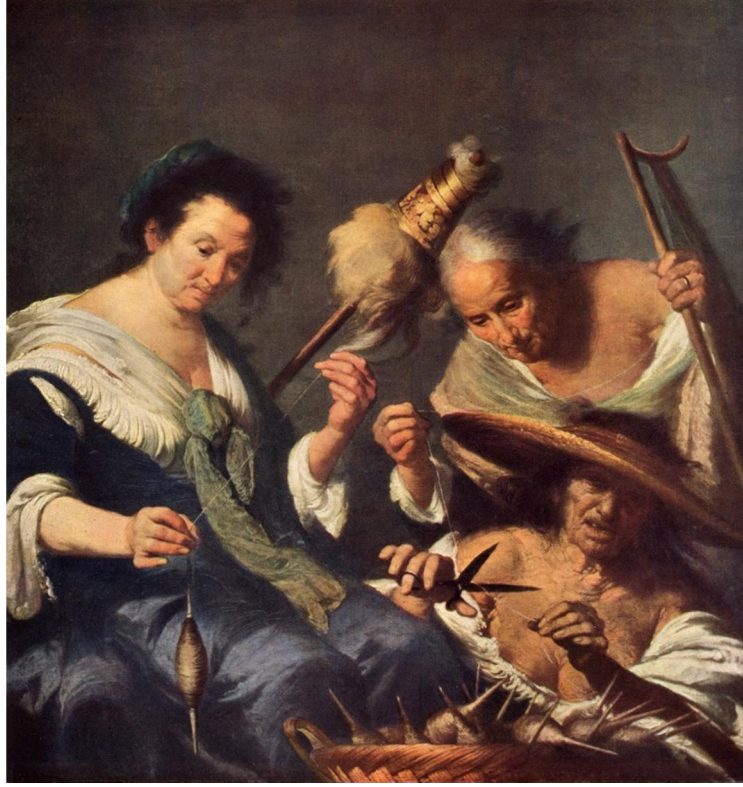
Lunette of Three Fates, Detail of Decoration from St. Paul's Chamber or Abbess' Chamber, 1519-1520. by Antonio Allegri Da Correggio.

Retrieved from: <https://www.art.com/products/p28131461010-sa-i8587936/antonio-allegri-da-correggio-lunette-of-three-fates-detail-of-decoration-from-st-paul-s-chamber-or-abbess-chamber-1519-1520.htm> (1st May 2020)



The Fates, The Parcae (Moirae), Theodor de Bry, 1596.

Retrieved from: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-P-OB-31.384> (1st May 2020)



Le tre Parche by Bernardo Strozzi (Italian, 1581–1644)

Retrieved from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bernardo\\_Strozzi\\_Le\\_tre\\_Parche.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bernardo_Strozzi_Le_tre_Parche.jpg) (2nd May 2020)



Gottfried Schadow: Fates sculpture

The three Fates spinning the web of human destiny, sculpture by Gottfried Schadow, 1790, part of the tombstone for Count Alexander von der Mark; Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Atropos-mythological-godess> (3rd May 2020)





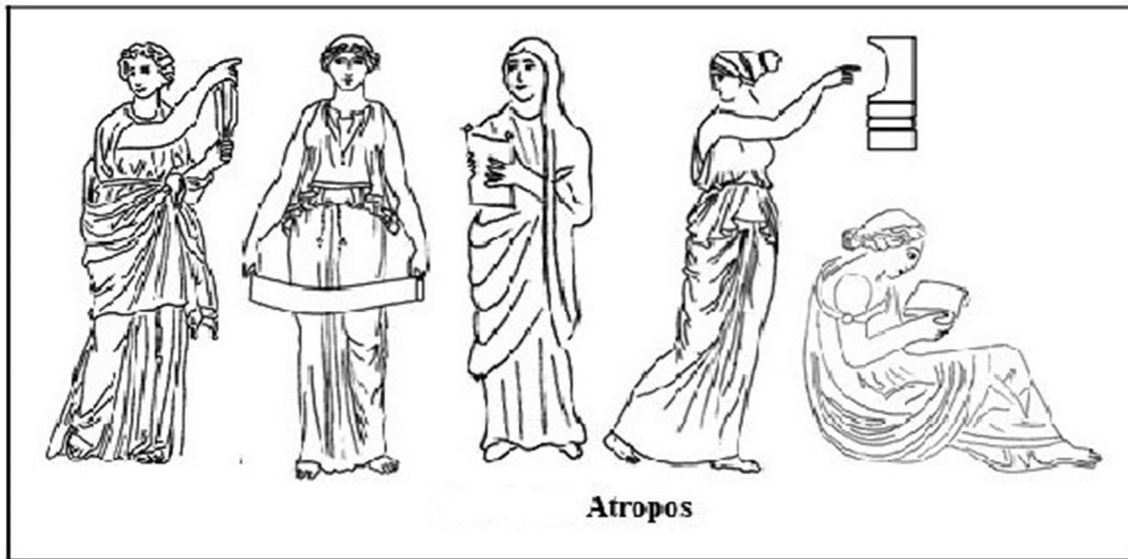
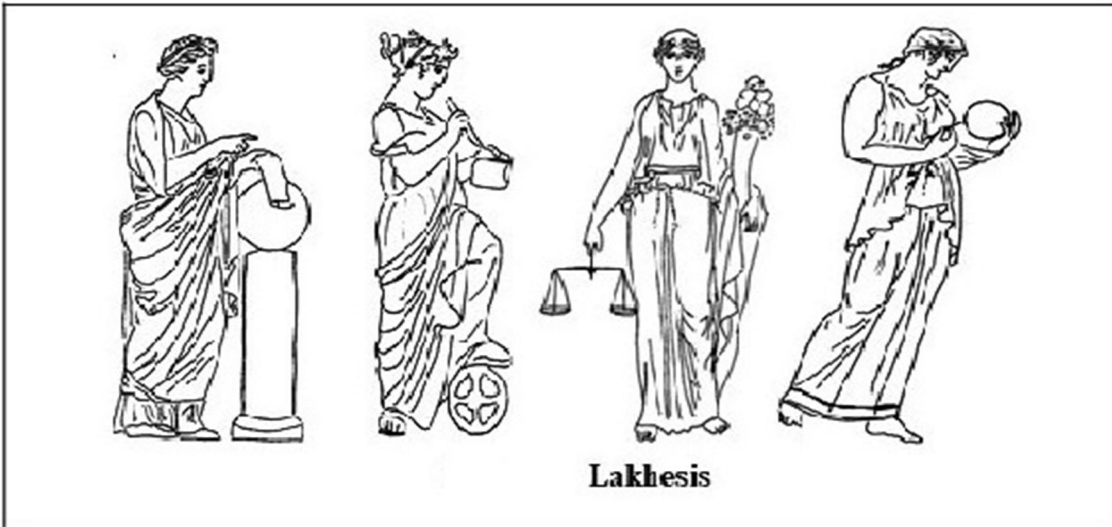
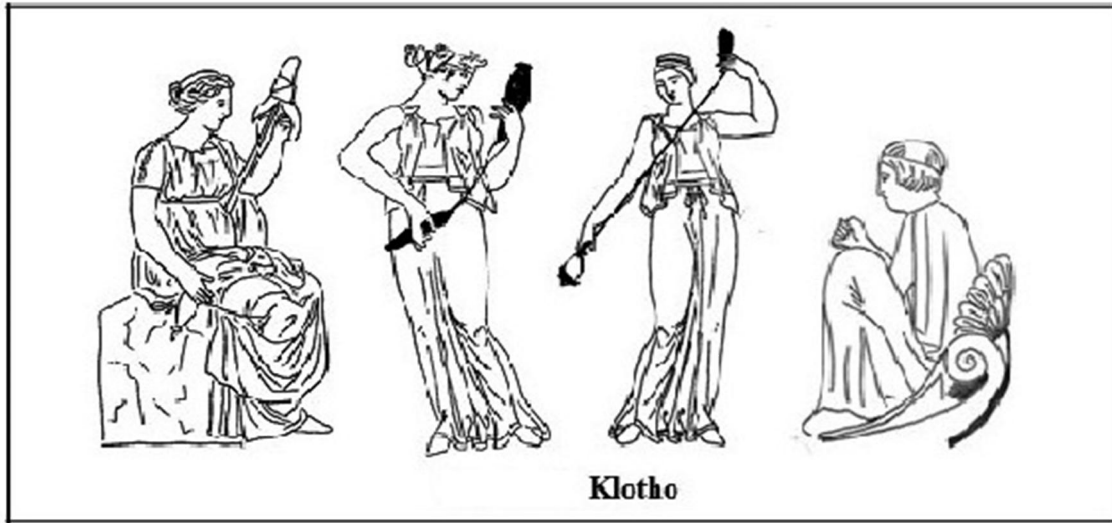
Le tre parche - by Felice Giani (Italian, 1758–1823)

Retrieved from: [http://www.artnet.com/artists/felice-giani/le-tre-parche-aeq-MaTYeoq\\_cICtuN5VUQ2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/felice-giani/le-tre-parche-aeq-MaTYeoq_cICtuN5VUQ2) (3rd May 2020)



Les Parques (The Fates, The Parcae) by Alfred Agache, 1885.

Retrieved from: <https://christianwery.blogspot.com/2019/05/les-parques-farceuses.html> (3rd May 2020)



Retrieved from: (Yıldırım, 2019: 719)