Homer's 'asphodel meadow' (ἀσφοδελὸν λειμῶνα), 'where the spirits of the dead dwell' (Od. 24.14), has throughout western literary history been envisioned as a pleasant and even desirable place. This was the impression among many of the ancient Greek poets and Homeric commentators, who understood the adjective ἀσφοδελός to mean 'flowery,' 'fragrant,' 'fertile,' and 'lush,' and who even referred to the asphodel meadow as a 'paradise' (παράδεισος). This was all the more so among the post-Renaissance English poets, especially those of the Romantic tradition, who painted colorful pictures of "happy souls who dwell in yellow meads of asphodel." But this is not the picture drawn in Books

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1 'Flowery'—it is the meadow of Persephone (so Herodian, acc. to scholium on Od. 11.539). 'Fragrant'—the asphodel is a 'good-smelling' (ἅπαν εὔοσμον) flower (so Aristarchus, according to Hesychius sub ἀσφόδελος). 'Fertile'—the meadow is rich in all sorts of other fauna (so Hecataeus in his comparison of Homeric ἀσφοδελὸν λειμῶνα in Book 24 of the Odyssey with the 'most beautiful' meadows around Egyptian Memphis, which are full of 'marsh-meadow, lotus, and calamus' [ἄντων περὶ αὐτὴν λειμώνων καλλίστων ἔλους καὶ λωτοῦ καὶ καλάμου—FGrH 264 F 25.96.6a]). 'Lush'—it is a place where a cow would like to graze (so H. Herm. 221, 344, which offers the earliest description outside Homer of an ἀσφοδελὸν λειμῶνα [here in Pieria] as an 'untouched' ἀκηρασίος [72], 'lovely' ἐρατεινός [72], 'soft' μαλακός [198], and 'holy' ζάθεος [503] place). From as early as the Hesiodic scholia (on Works and Days 169) the 'Elysian Plain,' the 'Isles of the Blessed,' and the 'Asphodel Meadow' had begun to be lumped together, and with the rise of Christianity 'Paradise' was a natural addendum: Hesychius sub ἀσφόδελος; Gregorius Nazianzenus, Funeris Oratio in Laudem Basilii Magni Caesareae in Cappadocia Episcopi 23, 7; Nicetas Heracleensis, Fragmenta Commentariorum XVI Orationum Gregorii Nazianzeni, fragment 25. Lucian describes the underworld as a place where the souls pass time comfortably reclining on the asphodel with their friends and relatives (Philopseudes 24.23): "Τί δὲ ἐκπατούν," ὁ Ἰὼν ἕφη, ὁ δὲ ἔκκρυται ὁ δὲ φυγιοῦσα. "Τί δ’ ἄλλο, ἣ δ’ οὐ, ἣ κατ’ φύλα καὶ φρήτρα μετά τῶν φύλων καὶ συγγενῶν διατρήσασιν ἐπί τοῦ ἀσφόδελου κατακείμενοι."

2 Pope's St. Cecilia's Day 74. Cf. Milton's Comus 838 "To embathe in nectar'd lavers strew'd with asphodil." Paradise Lost 9.1039 "And flowers were the couch, pansies, and violet, and asphodel, and hyacinth, earth's freshest softest lap." Browne's Hydriotaphia 37 "The dead are made to eat asphodels about the Elyzian medows." Carlyle's Sartor Resartus I. xi "Is that a real Elysian brightness? Is it of a truth leading us into beatific Asphodel meadows?" Tennyson's Lotos-Eaters 169 "Others in Elyzian valleys dwell, resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel." Longfellow's Evangeline II. iv. 149 "Hereafter crown us with asphodel flowers." The Two Angels 13 "He who wore the
11 and 24 of the *Odyssey*, our earliest extended descriptions of Hades, and our earliest references to an ‘asphodel meadow.’ The three Odyssean passages in which Hades features an ‘asphodel meadow’ (11.539, 573; 24.13) portray a dark, gloomy, and mirthless place. This is not the Elysian Plain, where life is easy, and there ever blows a refreshing west wind (*Od* 4.561–69); nor is it the Isles of the Blessed, where the grain-giving soil bears its sweet fruit for the most distinguished, and carefree, heroes (Hesiod’s *Works and Days* 167–73); this is Hades—dark, dank, and sunless (*Od* 10.512; 24.10; cf. *Il.* 20.65; *H.Dem.* 337)—where disembodied and senseless spirits of the dead weep and wail pathetically (*Od* 11.391, 475–76, 605–6; 24.5–9) and flit about purposelessly like shadows or dreams (*Od* 10.495; 11.207–8, 222).

The regular formulaic description of Hades in early Greek epic as a place of ‘gloomy darkness’ is illustrative of the Homeric view:

\[-\circ \circ / - \circ \circ / - \circ \ \upsilon \delta \zeta \omicron \omicron \omicron \ \eta \iota \rho o \omicron \omicron \tau \alpha \ (3x \text{Homer}, 3x \text{Hymns}, 1x \text{Hesiod}).\]

One should then expect that a metrically useful alternative member of the family of formulas used to describe Hades (i.e., one beginning with a consonant rather than a vowel) would connote something rather more similar than different:

\[-\circ \circ / - \circ \circ / - \circ \ \kappa \acute{a} \tau \acute{e} \sigma \varphi o \omicron \delta \epsilon \omicron \lambda \omicron \omicron \nu \alpha \ (Od. 11.539, 573; 24.13).\]

Had we not been exposed to the post-Homeric usage of the phrase to describe a lovely and fragrant meadow blooming with flowers, we would likely surmise that the adjective meant quite the opposite: ‘dark,’ ‘gloomy,’ ‘dusty,’ ‘infertile,’ or the like—the furthest idea from a ‘paradise.’ Such a meaning would fit aptly the context in each of the three Odyssean passages where the formula occurs: in *Od.* 11.539 the spirit of the dead Achilles, having taken leave of Odysseus, ‘strides through the asphodel meadow’; in *Od.* 11.573 the spirit of the hunter Orion gathers together his slaughtered prey ‘through the asphodel meadow’; in *Od.* 24.13 the spirits of the slaughtered suitors arrive, squeaking like bats in a cave, ‘at the asphodel meadow.’

We do not in fact know for certain whence the adjective *\acute{a}\sigma\phi\omicron\omicron\delta\epsilon\omicron\lambda\omicron\nu* in this Homeric formula derives etymologically, even with recourse to crown of asphodels, descending, at my door began to knock.” Wilde’s *Panthea* 34 “Where asphodel and yellow lotus twine.” Williams’ *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower* “I was cheered when I came first to know that there were flowers also in hell.”