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Odyssey 11: the power of sight in the invisible realm

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By common consent, *Odyssey* 11 is one of the most fascinating books of the Homeric epics, yet it has puzzled scholars since antiquity. It has long been noted for instance that it is not perfectly clear why Odysseus has to visit Hades; and that we cannot be sure about what he actually does there. Does he stand next to the pit throughout his visit, as he claims he does,[1] or does he venture deep into the Underworld as his viewing of Minos, Orion, Tityus, Tantalus, Sisyphus and Heracles suggests?[2] Other issues too have seemed problematic: for example, we are told by Teiresias at lines 146-9 that the dead are powerless shades in need of blood in order to recover their wits, but in some instances Odysseus describes them as fully functioning: thus, Orion pursues his hunting habit even after death (572-75), while Minos settles the disputes of the dead (568-71). Does it matter that we find these seemingly incompatible views of the afterlife in one single episode of the *Odyssey*?

Many scholars thought it did matter, and sought to clarify the text. Already Aristarchus athetised part of the book as later interpolation, arguing that it was impossible for Odysseus to see the interior of Hades from where he was standing and that the description of the dead, whom the poet himself describes as *ἀμενηνὰ κάρηνα* (*Od.*11.49),[3] having their disputes settled by Minos was irrational.[4] In modern scholarship, *Odyssey* 11 often provided ammunition for analysts such as Wilamowitz, Kirchhoff, Page and others, in their bid to prove multiple authorship of the epics.[5] It was the breakthrough research of scholars like Reinhardt, Segal and

[1] *Od.* 11.628-9: *αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν αὐτοῦ μένον ἔμπεδον, εἴ τις ἔτ' ἔλθοι*
ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων, οἳ δὴ τὸ πρόσθεν ὄλοντο.

[2] In lines 568-71, 572-5, 576-81, 582-92, 593-600, 601-626 respectively. Note that the above statement of Odysseus that he stayed fixed in one place follows after he has narrated all of the above meetings.

[3] Citations of Greek are taken from Allen, 1920.

[4] Cf. Dindorf 1885: vol.II, 520f. On Aristarchus' *athetesis* see Tsagarakis 2000: 11 who cites Gardback 1978: 1ff. and others.

[5] Wilamowitz 1927: 79. See also Kirchhoff 1879, Wilamowitz 1884 and later Page 1955: 40.

recently De Jong that helped reclaim the *Nekyia* as an integral part of the *Odyssey*.[6] Still, the problems associated with the book remained: Sourvinou-Inwood, Crane, Clarke, Tsagarakis and many others have struggled to come to grips with Homeric beliefs about the afterlife.[7] By contrast, surprisingly little work has been done on the poetic implications of the *Nekyia.* In this paper I argue that *Odyssey* 11 can be read in a very different way, one that illuminates the bard's power over the tradition which he helps preserve with his song.

Before going into detail, let me first of all clarify what I mean when referring to the 'power of the (Homeric) bard'. In book 8 of the *Odyssey* the blind bard Demodocus is introduced in what many have seen as an allusion to Homer himself. Demodocus, we are told, was blind but had been granted by the Muses the gift of *sweet song* (*ἡδεῖαν ἀοιδήν*).[8] What exactly that means becomes clearer once the bard starts to sing for his Phaeacean audience. Suddenly, the blind old man who needs help even to find his own seat takes us to the bed chamber of Aphrodite, and is able to display in front of our eyes the most carefully hidden secrets of the gods.[9] Demodocus is able to see every detail of what happens or has happened on Olympus, because of the gift he has received from the Muses: we might say - and Homer almost says - that the goddesses removed the bard's mortal vision and replaced it with another, more powerful one.[10] And just as Demodocus can see the gods, so Homer himself, who, we recall, was thought to have been blind from early on,[11] is able to present to us with every detail what happens on Mount Olympus among the gods.[12] There are many examples of this; we may only recall the passage in *Iliad* 1 (493-611) where Zeus makes his secret pact with Thetis. The poet easily transfers us from the

[6] Reinhardt 1948 was the first to defend the integrity of the apologue as we have it. See also Segal 1962: 17-64 and De Jong 2001: 271-3. Stanford too thought that the book was authentic but had his doubts for vs. 565-627, Stanford 1948: 380-2. See also Heubeck-Hoekstra 1990: 75-7 and Northurp 1980: 150-9 for a response to Page 1955. Finally Doherty defended the *Intermezzo* and demonstrated its organic function in the book, Doherty 1991, 1992.

[7] Sourvinou-Inwood 1986, 1995: 10-106 and 108-279, Crane 1988, Clarke 1999: 129-225, Tsagarakis 2000. For the motif of blood drinking in the book see Heath 2005.

[8] *Od.*8.64.

[9] *Od.*8.266-365.

[10] *Od.*8.62-64: *κῆρυξ δ' ἐγγύθεν ἦλθεν ἄγων ἐρίηρον ἀοιδόν,*
τὸν πέρι μοῦσ' ἐφίλησε, δίδου δ' ἀγαθόν τε κακόν τε·
ὀφθαλμῶν μὲν ἄμερσε, δίδου δ' ἡδεῖαν ἀοιδήν.

[11] Cf. the τυφλός ἀνῆρ reference in *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* vs.165-178. See Graziosi 2002: 126-32 and also Graziosi and Haubold 2005: 21-7.

[12] Graziosi and Haubold 2005: 81-3.

Achaean camp to Olympus and displays in front of our eyes what his poetic vision allows him to see: a secret meeting of the two gods taking place at the highest peak of Olympus; surely no other mortal would possess the ability to *see* such a scene.

Homer's special power of vision is prominent throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The bard takes us with ease from the battlefield of Troy to the most remote parts of the world, and from the depths of the sea to the assembly of the gods on Mount Olympus. But there seems to be a place which even the almighty gods cannot penetrate with their immortal sight, a place that poses the greatest challenge of all to the bard's poetic gaze. That place of course is none other than Hades, the remote land of the dead which is shrouded in absolute darkness. The name Hades is etymologically unclear, but in the popular imagination it was always associated with vision. This is certainly how Homer himself, and his ancient audiences, understood it: they heard in it the verb *ἰδεῖν*,[13] thus interpreting the Underworld as being literally the invisible realm: A-ides. Throughout the *Iliad*, the poet alludes to Hades' role as a place where there can be no vision. For example, he lets Hector wish that he might see, *ἰδεῖν*, Paris go down to Hades, the *a-ides*: the pun makes Hector's impossible wish seem all the more ironic (Paris of course will see him die first).[14] Homer also hints at the obliterating force of Hades when he describes how Athena tricks Ares by putting on the cap of Hades, *Ἄϊδος κυνέην*, at *Iliad* 5.844-5. A normal disguise would not have worked here since gods can recognize other gods even when they are camouflaged. But the cap of Hades provides a cover that even the immortal sight cannot penetrate.

Now, although Homer exploits the theme of the Underworld's invisibility in the *Iliad,* he only uses its full potential in the 11th book of the *Odyssey*, as I now want to show.

[13] Cf. Graziosi and Haubold 2010: 157 on the noun *Ais*. For the origin and etymology of the name see Thieme (1968, 137-8) and Beekes (1998).For the etymology of Hades in classical times see *LFgrE* on Ἄϊδος, Plato's interpretation in *Grg.*493a – *Phd.*80d and Burkert (1985, 196).

[14] *Il.*6.284. On the pun see Graziosi and Haubold 2010: 157-8. Similar wordplay elsewhere in the *Iliad* suggests that Homer and his audience are aware of such an etymology, see for instance *Il.*24.244-6. For Hades as a place of concealment see *Il.*22.482-3; Eustathius (III, 661, 10-1) comments on these lines regarding Hades invisibility that: *διὸ καὶ Ἀΐδης λέγεται, ἤγουν ἀὴρ ἀφανής, ὃν οὐκ ἔστιν ἰδεῖν.*

In book 10, Circe informs Odysseus that before setting course for Ithaca he needs to travel to Hades to consult the soul of the seer Teiresias, who will give him instructions about his journey home.[15] Odysseus obeys and after receiving advice from the dreadful goddess, sets sail for the land of the dead. On approaching Hades, Odysseus informs us that darkness surrounds him and his companions: the light of the sun never visits the Cimmerians who live in immediate proximity to the realm of the dead.[16] After Odysseus and his men have landed and completed the appropriate sacrifices, the dead begin to appear from Erebus. The first close encounter that Odysseus has is with the soul of Elpenor, the young companion who lies as yet unburied back on Circe's island. After a short exchange with Elpenor, Odysseus spots his dead mother but has to keep her away from the pool with the sacrificial blood as he must wait for Teiresias to drink first.

This is the first time that Odysseus uses the verb *ἰδεῖν* in this episode (lines 55 and 87), but from here on it becomes increasingly prominent.[17] Thus, when Teiresias' soul approaches Odysseus, the very first thing he asks is why he left the *light* of the sun in order to *see* the dead and their joyless land.[18] The verb that the seer uses is once more *ἰδεῖν*, which creates a striking contrast with the phrase *λιπὼν φάος ἠελίοιο* of the previous line. A few lines later, while delivering his prophesy, Teiresias refers to Helios as the one who *sees* and hears everything, *ὃς πάντ᾽ ἐφορᾷ καὶ πάντ᾽ ἐπακούει*.[19] We have seen already that the sun cannot reach the land of the dead, not even the shores around it. The land of the Cimmerians is shrouded in darkness because the sun never looks at them *οὐδέ ποτ᾽ αὐτοὺς/ἠέλιος φαέθων καταδέρκεται ἀκτίνεσσιν*;[20] and Odysseus had to leave the domain of the sun in order to be able to *see* the dead and their land. The logical conclusion is that the Sun sees and hears everything that happens on earth and in the sky, the residence of the gods included, but has no power when it comes to the domain of the invisible Hades. And yet, Odysseus (and with him the poet) has been able so far to *see*, and will retain this ability for the whole of his visit.

[15] *Od.*10.488-95.
[16] *Od.*11.14-19.
[17] A full list of the occurrences of the verb is contained in the table at the end of the paper.
[18] *Od.*11.92-4.
[19] *Od.*11.109.
[20] *Od.*11.15-6.

After conversing with the soul of Teiresias, Odysseus is at last given the chance to talk to his deceased mother. Again he introduces her with the same verb *ὁρόω ψυχὴν*[21] reminding us that his vision has not been affected at all by the fact that he is standing in the gloomy darkness (*ὑπὸ ζόφον ἠερόεντα*).[22] Interestingly enough, Antikleia addresses him in a manner very similar to Teiresias: '*My son how did you come in the gloomy darkness while being alive? It is very difficult for the living to see those things.*'[23] Again, the theme of total darkness is contrasted with the ability of Odysseus to *see*, despite the fact that the living do not normally manage to set eyes on the underworld and the dead. Before she disappears, Antikleia reminds her son that he should desire to return to the light as soon as possible since this is where he belongs.[24]

So far in these three encounters we have seen that the poet utilizes the contrast between light and darkness to distinguish the realms of the living and the dead, while at the same time making it clear, through frequent use of the verb *ἰδεῖν* and by emphasising that mortals are not usually able to see the dead, that Odysseus' viewing of Hades is exceptional. The so-called catalogue of Heroines further strengthens that impression since the verb *ἰδεῖν* or *εἰσιδεῖν* is used a total of 10 times by Odysseus in order to introduce every single heroine. What the catalogue seems designed to showcase, above all, is Odysseus' power of visual perception.

Indeed, the poet continues in the same fashion until the end of the book. Odysseus 'sees' his former companions Agamemnon, Achilles and Aias and has long conversations with the first two.[25] Odysseus is convinced that he could have made even Aias talk but decides to let him go because he wants to *see* more souls *τῶν ἄλλων ψυχὰς ἰδέειν* (567), including those of Minos (*ἴδον*, 568), Tityus (*εἶδον*, 576), Tantalus (*εἰσεῖδον*, 582), Sisyphus (*εἰσεῖδον*, 593) and finally Heracles. Although in the case of Heracles the verb *ἰδεῖν* is not used, Odysseus describes in great detail the belt that Heracles is wearing (610-14), a task of course that would require him to

[21] *Od.*11.141.
[22] *Od.*11.155.
[23] *Od.*11.155-6.
[24] *Od.*11.223.
[25] *Od.*11.387-561.

be able to see clearly. After this tour-de-force of *ekphrasis* in the underworld gloom Odysseus fears that Persephone will send Gorgo's head against him: here, finally, is a sight that even he cannot abide. He must leave but not without informing us that if he had stayed he would have seen even older heroes than the ones he saw: *προτέρους ἴδον ἀνέρας* (630).

It should be clear by now that the constant use of the verb *ἰδεῖν* in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey* is not due to coincidence or even metrical convenience. But what should we make of the poet's insistence on this verb and what exactly is the point of Odysseus *seeing* the *invisible Hades*? In order to answer those questions we should cast a quick look at a group of singers who have often been compared with the epic Muses. In *Odyssey* book 12, the Sirens possess the same knowledge as the Muses since they know everything that has happened in Troy and indeed upon the earth *ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ*.[26] Now, what I would like to stress here is the fact that the Sirens' knowledge is limited specifically to what happens *on* the earth, which of course rules out the domain of Hades. The underworld remains hidden from them and presumably from the Muses too, since even the gods cannot see through the gloom of Hades, as I have shown. If this is true then how can the ability of Odysseus to see the underworld be explained? The answer, I would argue, lies in the bard's special power over his tradition, a power which in the *Odyssey* goes beyond the Muses as a direct source of knowledge about all things on earth. Here, in the underworld scenes of *Odyssey* 11, the bard seems to be drawing his information from elsewhere. But from where? Well, we might say that the divine knowledge of the Muses is mediated by the human gaze of the traveller Odysseus. And that gaze brings with it a shift in poetic emphasis: through Odysseus' journey to Hades Homer is able to bring his audience, and of course his hero, face to face with the epic tradition *qua* tradition, that is to say, as an archive of quotable text; for what Odysseus does, in *Odyssey* 11, is to quote with his eyes, as it were: 'and then I saw Tyro …', 'and then I saw Agamemnon'. We contemplate the Hesiodic tradition of women's catalogues in what reads like an extended quote from this type of poetry.[27] We also see the Homeric tradition of the Trojan War, traditions about Sisyphus,

[26] *Od.*12.191.

[27] See Rutherford 2005: 99-117 and 2011: 152-167 for a discussion of the development of catalogue poetry; also West 1985 and Hirschberger 2004 on Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* more generally.

Heracles, etc. Rather than singing about the deeds of men 'upon the earth', the stuff of the Muses' (and Sirens') song, the bard by taking us to the land of the dead allows us to encounter face to face, as it were, the poetic traditions about those deeds, enabling us to reflect on their relationship to one another, and to the *Odyssey*. My suggestion, then, would be that the bard's special power of sight, the gift of the Muses which gives him access to the past, is re-interpreted in *Odyssey* 11 as the even more remarkable power of contemplating the murky realm of tradition itself.

Hades forms the poetic counterpart to Olympus as the seat of the Muses, and the ultimate source of the bard's special vision: whereas the Muses are immortal and forever 'present' (*Il*. 2.484-6), Hades as a storehouse of the epic tradition suggests the remoteness of the past *before* it is illuminated by epic song. Homer demonstrates the power that his poetic gaze holds even in this domain of invisibility, and in so doing invites us to reflect on what epic tradition is, and how it presents itself to us. The underworld thus becomes a treasure trove of tradition, a huge archive or database, as it were. To linger here is tempting: Odysseus, for one, cannot get enough of seeing as many souls of heroes as possible. And yet, there is a price to be paid if he is not careful. The living are not supposed to linger among the dead, and if Odysseus prolongs his visit he might never leave and complete his *nostos* (the image which Homer uses to describe this eventuality is that of the Gorgon turning Odysseus into stone). And so, Homer withdraws his hero from Hades. What counts, ultimately, is not the poetic archive but the living song: Odysseus must return home to Ithaca, and Homer, even though he is able to look into Hades, must resume his song.

TABLE

- **Occurrences of the verb *ἰδεῖν* in *Odyssey* 11:**

Line	**Quote**	**Speaker**
55.	*τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ δάκρυσα <u>ἰδὼν</u> ἐλέησά τε θυμῷ*	(Odysseus of Elpenor)
87.	*τὴν μὲν ἐγὼ δάκρυσα <u>ἰδὼν</u> ἐλέησά τε θυμῷ*	(Odysseus of Antikleia)

93-4.	*τίπτ' αὖτ', ὦ δύστηνε, λιπὼν φάος ἠελίοιο* *ἦλυθες, ὄφρα ἴδῃ νέκυας καὶ ἀτερπέα χῶρον;*	(Teiresias to Odysseus)
109.	*Ἠελίου, ὃς πάντ' ἐφορᾷ καὶ πάντ' ἐπακούει*	(Teiresias of the Sun)
141-4.	*μητρὸς τήνδ' ὁρόω ψυχὴν κατατεθνηυίης·* *ἡ δ' ἀκέουσ' ἧσται σχεδὸν αἵματος, οὐδ' ἐὸν υἱὸν* *ἔτλη ἐσάντα ἰδεῖν οὐδὲ προτιμυθήσασθαι*	(Odysseus of Antikleia)
155-6.	*τέκνον ἐμόν, πῶς ἦλθες ὑπὸ ζόφον ἠερόεντα* *ζωὸς ἐών; χαλεπὸν δὲ τάδε ζωοῖσιν ὁρᾶσθαι*	(Antikleia to Odysseus)

Catalogue of Heroines

Line	Quote	Speaker
235.	*ἔνθ' ἦ τοι πρώτην Τυρὼ ἴδον εὐπατέρειαν*	(Odysseus)
260.	*τὴν δὲ μετ' Ἀντιόπην ἴδον, Ἀσωποῖο θύγατρα*	
266.	*τὴν δὲ μετ' Ἀλκμήνην ἴδον, Ἀμφιτρύωνος ἄκοιτιν*	
271.	*μητέρα τ' Οἰδιπόδαο ἴδον, καλὴν Ἐπικάστην*	
281.	*καὶ Χλῶριν εἶδον περικαλλέα*	
298.	*καὶ Λήδην εἶδον, τὴν Τυνδαρέου παράκοιτιν*	
305-6.	*τὴν δὲ μετ' Ἰφιμέδειαν, Ἀλωῆος παράκοιτιν* *εἴσιδον, ἣ δὴ φάσκε Ποσειδάωνι μιγῆναι*	
321.	*Φαίδρην τε Πρόκριν τε ἴδον καλήν τ' Ἀριάδνην*	
326.	*Μαῖράν τε Κλυμένην τε ἴδον στυγερήν τ' Ἐριφύλην*	
328-9.	*πάσας δ' οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὀνομήνω,* *ὅσσας ἡρώων ἀλόχους ἴδον ἠδὲ θύγατρας*	

End of the *Catalogue*

Line	Quote	Speaker
363-6.	*ὦ Ὀδυσεῦ, τὸ μὲν οὔ τί σ' ἐίσκομεν εἰσορόωντες* *ἠπεροπῆά τ' ἔμεν καὶ ἐπίκλοπον, οἷά τε πολλοὺς* *βόσκει γαῖα μέλαινα πολυσπερέας ἀνθρώπους,* *ψεύδεά τ' ἀρτύνοντας ὅθεν κέ τις οὐδὲ ἴδοιτο*	(Alkinoos to Odysseus)

371. *εἴ τινας ἀντιθέων ἑτάρων ἴδες* (Alkinoos to Odysseus)

395. *τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ δάκρυσα ἰδὼν ἐλέησά τε θυμῷ* (Odysseus of Agamemnon)

522. *κεῖνον δὴ κάλλιστον ἴδον μετὰ Μέμνονα δῖον* (Odysseus of Eurypylus)

528. *κεῖνον δ᾽ οὔ ποτε πάμπαν ἐγὼν ἴδον ὀφθαλμοῖσιν* (Odysseus of Neoptolemus)

567. *τῶν ἄλλων ψυχὰς ἰδέειν κατατεθνηώτων* (Odysseus of the souls of the heroes)

568. *ἔνθ᾽ ἦ τοι Μίνωα ἴδον, Διὸς ἀγλαὸν υἱόν* (Odysseus of Minos)

576. *καὶ Τιτυὸν εἶδον, Γαίης ἐρικυδέος υἱόν* (Odysseus of Tityus)

582. *καὶ μὴν Τάνταλον εἰσεῖδον κρατέρ᾽ ἄλγε᾽ ἔχοντα* (Odysseus of Tantalus)

593. *καὶ μὴν Σίσυφον εἰσεῖδον κρατέρ᾽ ἄλγε᾽ ἔχοντα* (Odysseus of Sisyphus)

615. *ἔγνω δ᾽ αὖτ᾽ ἔμ᾽ ἐκεῖνος, ἐπεὶ ἴδεν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν* (Odysseus of Heracles)

630. *καί νύ κ᾽ ἔτι προτέρους ἴδον ἀνέρας, οὓς ἔθελόν περ* (Odysseus)

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