

BOOK REVIEW

Homer and the Poetics of Hades. By GEORGE ALEXANDER GAZIS. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 253. Hardback, \$80.00. ISBN 9780198787266.

*H*omer and the Poetics of Hades is a revised version of Gazis' doctoral thesis held at Durham University in 2015. This book examines Homer's use of Hades as a poetic resource. By portraying Hades as a realm where vision is not possible, Homer creates a unique poetic environment where social constraints and divine prohibitions are not applicable. Gazis offers a unique survey about Hades' ominous presence in the *Iliad*, as well as the famous *katabasis* of Odysseus and the fascinating "Nekyia" in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Ancient Greek and Roman viewers were well aware that representation of death or dying (how funerals, tomb and myths envision, embody and negotiate the continuing presence of the dead for the eyes of the living) offered a world not only of possibilities but also of limitations: it would be too risky to take the dead at face value. The question of what the dead look like, no doubt, always carries an unearthly fascination for the living.¹ The book is divided into two main parts: one (Chapters 1–2) for Hades in the *Iliad* and the biggest part (Chapters 3–7) is devoted to "Nekyia." It also contains a brief introduction, some conclusive remarks in the end, a detailed bibliography, a general index and an index of the passages used in the text.

In his introduction (1–21), Gazis briefly explains that Homeric poetry is not only heard, but also seen by its audience as some sort of spectacle: it is precisely this vividness of Homeric narrative that ancient readers attempt to describe with the term *enargeia*. The Muses possess a vivid mental image of past and present events, and seeing signifies for the Homeric hero the main source of knowledge about the world and his surroundings. However, Gazis argues that Hades in Homer is understood not only as the Underworld realm but also as the invisible realm (cf. the name of Hades as *A-ides*). Homer insists on Hades' absolute invi-

¹ S. Turner, "Sight and Death: Seeing the Dead Through Ancient Eyes" in *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, ed. M. Squire (London and New York, 2016), 143–160.

bility and the inability of mortals and gods to see through its darkness. It is important to note that the alleged invisibility of Hades creates a poetic paradox within the Homeric epics, since by definition the Underworld's impenetrable darkness and Homeric *enargeia* cannot easily be reconciled (14). However, Gazis notes that Homer overcomes this invisibility in order to explore the poetic opportunities offered by this realm.

In Chapter 1 ("Hades in the *Iliad*") Gazis examines Hades, the realm of the dead and a place of darkness, in the *Iliad*, which is a poem of light, meaning a poem about events that occur in the world of the living. Indeed, the vividness of its description has been renowned from antiquity to our own day. Gazis examines Hades' attributes in the *Iliad*, starting from the first mention of Hades in the poem as the destination for a whole generation of heroes (cf. *Il.* 1–5). It is crucial for the poetic role of Hades that it act both as a place of confinement and acquire strong associations with fate and gaining *kleos*. By sending a hero to the Underworld that glory is gained for the victorious warrior (cf. *Il.* 12.309–28).

In Chapter 2 ("The Dream of Achilles"), Gazis offers us a unique opportunity to reconsider the dream scene of Book 23, which is entirely devoted to the two heroes, Achilles and Patroclus' shade, and allows us to observe them reflecting on their relationship. Achilles' dream serves a very important purpose on both a poetic and metapoetic level: through the dream scene, Homer explores on a poetic level the relationship between the two heroes and signifies that acceptance of his companion's death leads Achilles to accept his own mortality. This, in turn, prepares the way for the closure of the *Iliad* in the next and final book with Priam's successful supplication for the return of Hector's body. On a metapoetic level, the dream scene serves the important purpose of allowing the audience the brief moment of contact with the realm of the dead. When Patroclus' shade speaks, it offers us a rather different and much more personalized take on the epic past than that of traditional Muse narrative.

Chapter 3 ("The *Odyssey* and the "Poetics of Hades") explores the "Nekyia," which stands for Odysseus' symbolic death and his subsequent rebirth. That is, it allows the hero to return from the anonymity of his wanderings to his true identity as Odysseus of Ithaca. The narrator of Book 11 is Odysseus himself, who experiments with different forms of storytelling as the protagonists of the epic tradition, already dead and secluded in the Underworld, look back at their lives without the social, poetic and religious constraints that affected them while still alive. Thus, Homer was fully alert to the profound poetic implications for his "Nekyia," as Gazis rightly claims (83). It is important to note that in the Homeric epics

omnipresence and omnipotence are thought of in spatial terms, and that in at least two cases (Helios and the Sirens) they apply only on or above the earth, never underneath it, where Hades allegedly lies. In general, Gazis concludes that what Odysseus finds in Hades differs from the conventional song of the Muses in that it is not an epic re-enactment of the past, but instead an evocation of the protagonists' own memories, as they relate to the eyewitness Odysseus.

Chapter 4 ("The Nekyia") describes Odysseus' meeting with Teiresias, who will provide him with details concerning the rest of his journey: the point in Teiresias' prophecy is that the seer points the way for the hero's final return, and this is precisely what is needed since the other information can and indeed will be given by Circe. Then, Odysseus' meeting with his mother will provide him with crucial information about his past. The meeting with Antikleia is significant because it provides us with an exploration of the intimate relationship of mother and son, thus revealing a side of Odysseus not as a king, or hero, or wanderer, but as a son who converses with his mother at a deeply emotional level (116).

Chapter 5 ("The Catalogue of Heroines") covers the catalogue of famous women telling their stories with their own perspective (*Od.* 11.235–332): this catalogue has a vital role in enabling poetic experimentation and metapoetic reflection. Gazis argues that the text self-consciously experiments with the conventions and limitations of epic storytelling (cf. resonances with the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*). Odysseus meets Tyro, Antiope, Alcmene, Megara, Epicaste, Chloris, Leda, and Iphimedeia along with Ariadne, Phaedra, Procris, Maira, Clymene, and Eriphyle: the hero, instead of telling their stories as a bard might have done, reproduces their own very partial narratives, full of personal longing and regret. In order to access the past without the aid of the Muses, Odysseus literally needs to visit its representatives in Hades, to see them, hear their stories and then relate them to his audience. The "intermezzo" that follows the catalogue in Chapter 6 is important because it demonstrates the unique effect that Odysseus' narrative has on his audience and the Phaeacians, especially Alcinous and Arete, who accept it as true because they accept that it is a well-shaped narrative, and as such has to be true.

Finally, in Chapter 7 ("The Catalogue of Heroes"), Gazis analogously introduces to us Odysseus' meeting with Agamemnon, Achilles and the silent Ajax: when they reflect upon their lives in the Underworld, the things they consider important are very different from what we might have expected. Agamemnon's silence about anything to do with his heroic past and his regret at not having the

chance to see his son amply demonstrate that point. The meeting with Achilles presents us with a complete re-evaluation of those heroic ideals by which Achilles led his life: he would prefer to be a dishonored serf on earth than to rule over the dead in Hades. We explore a division between the world of the living and the dead, where *kleos* and *timē* have no more value. The meeting with Ajax examines the danger that comes with remaining silent in Hades when one is given the chance to speak: the hero is not interested in *timē*, instead preferring to constrain himself in Hades and insisting on it with his silence, which is essentially his own way of retelling his story (cf. here Odysseus' "apology", where Odysseus narrates a story that deviates from the tradition of the judgement in such a way as to suggest that there never was a quarrel, thus cancelling the very need for an apology).

Overall, Gazis clearly explores the vivid scenes of the invisible realm of Hades in the Homeric epics. There is much more in this book to provoke further thoughts and reflections about the Underworld and Homeric *enargeia*. It is a well structured and easily read survey, as it requires less time and concentration fully to appreciate and assimilate the wealth of information, variety of themes and subtlety of the many interpretations of specific passages. There is a coherence and power to the method in general, and it is a valuable source not only for scholars, or students, but also for anyone who wants to enjoy, by Gazis' narrative, a "journey" to the omnipotent Hades, as Odysseus did.

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