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Persephone's Odyssey: *Nature and the Supernatural in the Odyssey and Homeric Hymn 2*

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Abstract

Although *Homeric Hymn 2* (*Εἰς Δημήτραν*) is not often read for its similarities to the *Odyssey*, it is impossible to deny that the two poems have myriad details in common. In this paper, I consider one fairly complex axis for comparison: the poems share a similar view of death, the natural world, and the supernatural. This interrelationship provides one way to examine archaic Greek religion in the pre-philosophic era, proposing patterns that may have been consistent in early Greek thought regarding the danger of divine elements in nature, the dead and consumption in the underworld, and morality and "evil" among the gods. The unifying thread is the interaction between human beings and the supernatural, that is to say, natural elements that go above and beyond their ordinary capabilities.

1. Introduction

Most people are familiar with the story of the *Odyssey*, at least, in the broadest strokes. Odysseus is a Greek soldier (from Ithaca) who took part in the Trojan War as described in Homer's *Iliad*. He spends many years trying to get home following the end of the war, continually thwarted by the god Poseidon, who nurses a grudge against him. In the end, he

makes it back to Ithaca and is reunited with his son, Telemachus, and his wife, Penelope. This journey is told in *The Odyssey*, a poem written in hexameter, divided into 24 books, commonly attributed to Homer,[1] dated to perhaps 750 BC (although parts of the story are likely much older).[2]

Homeric Hymn 2 (titled *Εἰς Δημήτραν* – To Demeter*)* might be less of a household name as a title, but its story is one of the most famous Greek myths: this is the tale of Hades' abduction of Persephone, Demeter's grief and wandering the earth searching for her daughter, and their eventual reconciliation, soured by the knowledge that because Penelope ate some pomegranate seeds while in Hades' kingdom, she is condemned to return for a few months every year. A major caveat here concerns the English title of the piece: it is "Homeric" in the sense that it is written in dactylic hexameter (like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were). Although ancient writers unanimously attributed these poems to Homer, they were probably composed a few hundred years later by a range of different poets, none of whom would have been Homer (if he, indeed, existed). Some of these *Homeric Hymns* were probably recited at festivals, and this poem (*Hymn 2*) has always been interesting to historians of religion because it contains the longest textual depiction of Persephone's abduction, which formed the basis for the somewhat mysterious ancient cult known as the Eleusinian Mysteries.[3]

At first glance, the two poems sound like they should very naturally have some things in common. They share a meter and vocabulary. They share a generic storyline (person wants to get home but cannot due to the machinations of some god, and is trapped in a mock-marriage that they did not consent to) and they share an emphasis on the missing person's family member searching for them (Demeter, Persephone's mother; and Telemachus, Odysseus's son). They feature a *katabasis*, a "journey down" into the underworld, and extol the virtues of hospitality (Odysseus among the Phocaians and Demeter at the house of Celeus). With a wide-angled lens, the poems do indeed seem similar. There are even a few more specific details, such as the fact that Demeter pretends to be from Crete when she wants to hide her divinity from Celeus's family—Odysseus also pretends to be from Crete so as not to reveal his identity to Penelope too early. The strange focus on an "artfully made chair" that Odysseus and Demeter both sit upon during that scene is hard to miss, too.[4]

[1]For what is being elided here, see Fowler 2004, 220-245
[2]West 2005, 39-64
[3]See Keller 1988, 27–54
[4]HH 2. 195-204 and Od. 19. 95-104

On closer inspection, however, these texts are written fairly differently. One of the most obvious distinctions is genre. The *Odyssey* is an epic, it is our only extant *Nostos*, or, story about a hero from the Trojan War finding their way home. This was apparently a very popular genre in Archaic Greece. *Homeric Hymn 2* is, as the name suggests, a hymn, a highly-narrative hymn, perhaps, but a song addressed to the goddess Demeter. Persephone was not a soldier in the Trojan War, nor does the narrative (which, by the way, never names her—instead she is "κόρη," "the maiden") focus on how *she* navigates her homeward journey. The focus is on the grief and actions undertaken by Demeter.

Yet that has an Odyssean precedent too. The bulk of Odysseus's "journey" is primarily confined to books 9-12, the so-called "Apologos of Odysseus," almost certainly the oldest part of the narrative (most likely, much of it is Indo-European in origin).[1] The story opens with Telemachus, searching for news of his father at the prompting of Athena. Odysseus does not properly enter his own epic until book 5. So perhaps there is even an Odyssean parallel for the focus on Demeter: could *Homeric Hymn 2* be simply an "inverted *Odyssey*," where the parent searches for the child instead of the other way around?

Perhaps, but looking for one-to-one mappings of characters, even if it were possible, would not yield a very interesting analysis. What I will do instead is break down a fairly complex relationship within the two poems concerning the "supernatural," in the finality of death, humankind's place within the wider world, and the existence of "magical" or supernatural objects. The similarities between the two poems on this subject point towards a broader trend in Greek religious thought that predates the development of rational philosophy.[2] One of the great challenges in studying Greek religion is how much of it has been filtered through the writings of Plato and Aristotle. The influence of the philosophical outlook of classical Greece has been to obscure the types of thinking in the Archaic period and earlier.

Finally, a word about the "supernatural." Of course the term is not Greek: they would not have distinguished in this period between entities that fall under the scope of scientific understanding and those that do not. Rather, the term is a useful modern catch-all when it comes to ancient religion. The term is not used here in any Christian sense, because it was never believed that the gods, dead, magic, or any such things *transcended* nature, whatever "nature" might have meant at the time. Rather, "supernatural" here means anything *we* understand to be

[1] West 2005, 39–64

[2] Schrodinger and Penrose 1996, 53–68

outside the scientifically-explicable world. The question essentially comes down to whether there exist events, people, places, and ideas in the Ancient Greek understanding of the world that were never observed in nature but believed to exist regardless. Of course, there were. So long as such a group exists, it can be analyzed and interpreted as a group. Aquinas and the scholastics must be left aside; "supernatural" does not imply transcendence outside of medieval philosophy, a fact which is key to understand this argument as a whole.

2. The Divine Danger

The *Odyssey's* proem warns us that the story about to be told will not be an unqualified success. We hear that Odysseus was striving on the open sea "ἀρνύμενος ἥν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἑταίρων"[1] – "to save his own life, and [to secure] the homecoming of his companions," but the next line begins with an immediate backstep: "**ἀλλ**᾽ οὐδ᾽ ὣς ἑτάρους ἐρρύσατο"[2] (emphasis mine) "BUT his companions he did not save." This line finishes with "ἱέμενός περ," "eager though he was," "περ" being an enclitic that adds force to the word before it.[3] The doubling down on Odysseus's failure in spite of his great effort is signaled in three different ways in the text.

The following line explains why it was that Odysseus failed to save their lives: his companions were destroyed because of their "ἀτασθαλία," their recklessness, stupidity, not caring about the consequences of their actions.[4] If that sounds rather harsh, the following line contains another rather jarring interjection with "νήπιοι" or "Fools!" after which one almost has to read a comma (if not an exclamation mark) before the line continues.

The result of this is a strangely bleak proem. These interjections, emphatic reversals, and rather strong moral implications about his crew, set the reader up for a tragedy. And, indeed, the *Iliad's* proem has a similar tone,[5] but then, the *Iliad* is very clearly a tragedy. The *Iliad* is tonally tragic throughout.[6] With the *Odyssey*, it is much easier to lose sight of how out of place these lines really are by books 13-24. The "endgame" of the *Odyssey* is more easily read at first

[1]Od. 1.5 All translations are my own.
[2]Od. 1.6
[3]"πέρ" in Liddell, George, et al. 1996
[4]" ἀτασθαλία" in Liddell, George, et al 1996
[5]Il. 1.1-7 also see Redfield 1979, 95–110.
[6]See Rutherford 1982, 145–160

as a triumph, where the hero returns and is reunited to his wife, son, and father, restoring the kingdom of Ithaca. But the first few lines of the poem promise a story of failure, destruction, and fools as well.

"Fools" is, of course, one translation of νήπιοι, and perhaps the one that makes the most sense in context. But in fact, a νήπιος is just an infant—in book 9 of the *Iliad*, Phoenix's emotional appeal to Achilles begins with (paraphrased) "Peleus first sent me to you when you were a child," for which word he uses νήπιος.[1] There is certainly no connotation there that baby Achilles was deserving of destructing! In the context of the *Odyssey's* proem it seems to mean that the crew were acting childishly, or with child-like minds, but even that does not seem to go far in enough in clarifying their apparently mortal guilt. Why, then, according to the proem, were Odysseus's crew killed by Hyperion Helios?

A remarkably useful comparison comes in the opening lines of *Homeric Hymn 2.* Persephone is introduced in lines 4-5 in the following way: νόσφιν Δήμητρος ... παίζουσαν κούρῃσι σὺν Ὠκεανοῦ"[2] "Far from Demeter ... playing with the daughters of Oceanus." But the participle παίζουσαν, here translated "playing," can have a wide range of meanings, including dancing, hunting, cracking jokes, etc.[3] The reason for this range is the verb it comes from, παίζω, means "to do like a παῖς (child)". Indeed, Persephone's youth is continually re-emphasized throughout the poem. Only a few lines later she is "καλυκῶπις", "flower-faced",[4] and the flower she reaches out to pluck is to be her "ἄθυρμα,"[5] plaything, or toy. Very early in both texts a curious parallel is established: Odysseus's crew ate the cattle of the sun, a childish thing to do, and thus were destroyed, and child-like Persephone plucked the flower that Hades set as bait to be her plaything, and was carried off to the underworld as a result.

Both poems share a metaphysical outlook concerning the correct position to take with regards to the supernatural. The opposite of Persephone's childish impulse to take, grab, seize, eat would be something like "αἰδώς"[6] literally translated as "shame," but perhaps better understood as "respect" or "sober reverence," especially for the things of the gods.[7] This is to

[1]Il. 9.440
[2]HH 2.4-5
[3]" παίζω" in Liddell, George, et al 1996
[4]HH 2.8
[5]HH 2.16
[6] "αἰδώς" in Liddell, George, et al. 1996
[7]*Cairns 2011, 23-41*

be contrasted with the σέβας inspired in Persephone by the flower:[1] that is *also* usually translated "awe," and sometimes religious worship as well, but Persephone fails to act appropriately on that feeling. Indeed, even though she "θαμβήσασ' " "was astounded," looking at the flower, she nevertheless "ὠρέξατο χερσὶν ἄμ᾽ ἄμφω"[2] "reached out with both hands" to take it, the end of the line containing the redundant "ἄμφω," "both" as a way to stress her possessive, child-like clutching of the flower, not the way someone with αἰδώς would behave.

A similar descriptive pattern occurs in the *Odyssey*. The crew have all been warned by Tiresias not to touch the cattle of Helios Hyperion. Odysseus himself repeats the warning to them. The cattle are described with a supernatural glow: they never die, never bear young, and have goddesses as their shepherds.[3] Even the fact that there are 7 herds of 50 cows has long been read as an allegory for the solar year,[4] and parallels have been found in the Vedas to support the idea of divine cattle as an extremely ancient Indo-European symbol.[5] The listener understands that the crew would be acting incredibly rashly to kill them.

When the crew do decide to kill and eat the cattle, "εἶρπον μὲν ῥινοί, κρέα δ᾽ ἀμφ᾽ ὀβελοῖσι μεμύκει, / ὀπταλέα τε καὶ ὠμά, βοῶν δ᾽ ὡς γίγνετο φωνή" "the cows' hides began to crawl, and the meat, both roasted and raw, began to bellow, having been pierced with spits, and a lowing was heard, as if from cows."[6] Persephone's flower is also described in supernatural terms. It has one hundred "heads" above the roots, its sweet fragrance makes the gods happy and the earth and sea themselves smile upon it. But when she picks it, "χάνε δὲ χθὼν"[7] "the earth yawned open."

In both texts, destruction comes from something supernatural in the truest sense of the word. A flower, or a herd of cattle which have the rough appearance of a common, everyday things, but are so filled with the divine they are above (much greater than) and outside of nature (inaccessible, meant to be avoided utterly). Those interacting with supernatural entities, even other deities (like Persephone), ought to know that it is beyond them, and should treat it with reverence and above all, leave it alone. Both of these things might be classified not just as supernatural, but as *uncanny*, they are "the strange within the ordinary."[8] The power of Hades'

[1]HH 2.10
[2]HH 2.15
[3]Od. 12. 125-134
[4]Frame 1978, 75-78
[5] See, for example, "Dawn and the Asvins (1.92)" Doniger 2005 and also Louden 2018, 43-44
[6]Od. 12. 395-396
[7]HH. 2.16
[8]Paraphrasing Freud 1919; Reprinted in Strachey 1971, 1–21.

flower or Hyperion's cattle as literary and religious symbols comes from the fact that they exist in ordinary locations (the plain of Nysa, or Thrinakia) and take the form of ordinary, comprehensible entities (flowers and cows). At the same time, their partaking in the supernatural makes them inherently dangerous, even deadly.

3. Corporealizing the Dead with Blood and Fruit

It might seem strange at first glance that both texts make a point of the utility of food and consumption in the underworld. But they both do: In Persephone's case, as she admits to her mother, Hades compels her (βίῃ)[1] to eat a pomegranate seed—compared with later versions of the myth, it is decidedly singular here: ῥοιῆς κόκκον.[2] The singularity of the pomegranate seed is important. In some other tellings of the story, the number of seeds she ate corresponded to the number of months she would remain with Hades in the underworld. The author of *Homeric Hymn 2* is not at all interested in this sort of calculation: the point is *that she ate anything at all*. Demeter makes this quite explicit when she asks, prior to Persephone giving any of her account, "τέκνον, μή ῥά τι μοι σ … βρώμης; ἐξαύδα … ε ἰ δ' ἐπάσω, πάλιν αὖτις … οἰκήσεις ὡρέων τρίτατον μέρ[ος."[3] Now, this part of the manuscript is badly damaged,[4] but the parts we can reconstruct read as follows: "Child, (tell) me whether you (ate) any food … if you have eaten, back again … you must dwell for a period of three months …" There is not enough space remaining in these hexameter lines to introduce something as complex as a seed-to-month calculation.[5]

So the poem leaves the actual mechanic unresolved: *why* does tasting food in the underworld consign you to stay there? Why for three months? And why a pomegranate? Nowhere in the text are obvious answers provided, but the metaphysics of underworld consumption look quite similar to Odysseus's blood sacrifice during his *katabasis* in Book XI of the *Odyssey*.

The idea of a journey to the underworld comes initially from Circe, and it is worth comparing her description of Hades to the reality Odysseus encounters later on. Circe insists

[1]HH 2. 413
[2]HH 2. 370 and 412
[3]HH 2. 393
[4]See Oliver 2015, 465-469.
[5]Ovid has her eating 7 seeds (Met. 5.537) but then is consigned to "half the year" (Met. 5.565)

that there is something unique about Teiresias's status in the underworld: "τῷ καὶ τεθνηῶτι νόον πόρε Περσεφόνεια, / οἴῳ πεπνῦσθαι, τοὶ δὲ σκιαὶ ἀίσσουσιν,"[1] "To him, although he is dead, Persephone gave a mind / Alone he is in possession of his faculties, but the rest [of the dead] are shadows that flit about." This is not what Odysseus finds when he sails there. Elpenor, for example, comes forward and makes a perfectly coherent speech and request that Odysseus bury his body.[2] In fact, Elpenor does not even need to drink the blood before he speaks.

The question left ambiguous throughout this section is how exactly the sheep's blood factors in to Odysseus's ability to talk to the dead. The poem is consistent in stressing the high *importance* of the blood: Odysseus is frequently guarding the pool with his sword, and would not even let his mother drink from it until he had heard from Teiresias.[3] The prophet himself asks Odysseus to take his sword away "αἵματος ὄφρα πίω καί τοι νημερτέα εἴπω"[4] "so that I may drink the blood and speak to you unerring/infallible truths." The structure of this line, and the fact that Teiresias was capable of speaking to Odysseus before he drank, makes it seem like the blood is useful only in some sort of prophetic capacity. Teiresias himself bolsters this idea when Odysseus asks how he can get his mother's shade to recognize him. He says: "ὅν τινα μέν κεν ἐᾷς νεκύων … αἵματος ἆσσον ἴμεν ὁ δέ τοι νημερτὲς ενίψει"[5] "Whoever of the dead you allow to draw near the blood, he (or she) will speak infallible things." This, confusingly, is not what happens just a few lines later, when Odysseus's mother comes forward: "πίεν αἷμα κελαινεφές: αὐτίκα δ'ἔγνω,"[6] "She drank the dark, cloudy blood, and at once she perceived/knew."

To review some of the complications here: Elpenor and Teiresias identified and spoke to Odysseus before touching the blood, Teiresias required it to prophecy, but his mother needed it to have any perception at all. Ajax, many lines later, is able to see Odysseus and deliberately snub him in a way that Odysseus understands to be an insult:[7] his treatment is distinct enough from the other shades that Odysseus can identify anger and resentment in him. Circe claimed that Teiresias was the only person with a "mind" in the underworld, but Achilles is able to philosophize about the nature of life and death.[8] Despite conventional wisdom, the dead do not

[1]Od. 10. 494-495
[2]Od. 11. 51-80
[3]Od. 11. 84-89
[4]Od. 11. 96
[5]Od. 11. 147-148
[6]Od. 11. 153
[7]Od 11. 544-566
[8]Od 11. 488-492

need this "corporealization" to speak, think, or undertake action. Homer's metaphysics of death are not quite what we would expect them to be.

One possibility is that the literary confusion and vagueness might stem from the prominence of the ritual of libation, perhaps the most basic and fundamental act in Greek religion.[1] Libations would be made most often to the gods, which would have made intuitive sense to the worshipper—this bowl of wine goes to Zeus, and it is possible to imagine, in some hazy sense, Zeus enjoying it. Libations to the dead are slightly harder to understand, since the dead canonically do not take any pleasure in anything.[2] On the other hand, libations here could not easily be interpreted as "necessary supplies for the afterlife," the way other cultures might have viewed grave offerings, because the Greek dead can not, once dead, do anything at all. What would they "need" oil or wine or flour for?

But libations for the dead are, nevertheless, extremely common in Greek culture, probably dating back to the Mycenaean period, where the dead were collectively honored as *dipsioi*, "the thirsty ones."[3] The abundance of white-ground lekythoi, usually only used for grave libations, attest to the popularity of this ritual throughout the Classical period as well.[4] The problem for poets must have been squaring the ubiquity of the act of offering libations with the metaphysical realities of death and the Greek underworld. The sense that the dead spirits "in some way, must gain something from libations" might explain why the act of eating and drinking has a tendency to "corporealize" the dead: Persephone's stay in the underworld was transient and, apparently, reversible until she ate, Odysseus's shades have varying degrees of perception and mental ability until they drink the blood, at which point they can function more or less as normal.

But we should not downplay the difficulties still left over. Libations to the dead were typically wine, oil, or flour: not blood. While blood *is* used in Greek *sacrifices*, it tends to be splattered on altars. The actual "offering" to the gods is the thigh-bones and entrails of an animal.[5] So this Odyssean ritual looks fundamentally disconnected from the rest of Greek religious practice. There is some evidence that the whole procedure, as described in the

[1]Burkert 1985, 70-73
[2]The question is, of course, somewhat more complicated than that. See Garland 2001, 70-77 for one attempt to reconcile libations in the Classical period.
[3] Castleden 2005, 153
[4]Oakley 2004, 9
[5]Ekroth 2020, 15

Odyssey, is Hittite in origin,[1] which might account for some of the discrepancies with later practice. Blood, as a symbol, still suggests vitality, even if the specifics had already become lost to time.

Persephone, of course, does not drink blood—or does she? The Pomegranate is a contested symbol in Ancient Greek art. Sometimes it is explicitly funerary[2] (but this might be *because of* the Persephone myth), other times it represents marriage and life.[3] Other times it is devoid of context: the meaning of the "terracotta pomegranate" in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for instance, believed to have been sculpted around 575 BC,[4] is anyone's guess. No wonder one art historian has tried arguing that the fruit is "a marker of cyclical time (and by proxy, eternity), of the perceived polarity between male and female, and of a shift in the agrarian mode of production."[5] It probably is not, but the attempt to explain how one fruit found itself in so many different artistic contexts is commendable.

Sara Immerwahr had the better phrase when she called the pomegranate a symbol of "life *in* death."[6] (italics mine) She refers to its "blood-red juice," and although it seems like a trivial connection to draw, it is nevertheless an important one. Pomegranate juice looks like blood. There is evidence that an ancient Macedonian ritual commemorating the death and rebirth of Dionysus involved using pomegranates to represent his heart, which Zeus pulled out of his old body and inserted into a new one.[7] That story is, of course, connected to the broader Eleusinian tradition[8] which gives it extra importance when considering Persephone's pomegranate. Is hers a type of agricultural θυσία (blood sacrifice)? What seems to be the case is that the *act* of eating or drinking is what corporealizes the dead: the substance they consume is free to communicate other details about the surrounding story.

4. Hades and Poseidon: How to Hate a God

How does a religious community decide what it means to be a god? There seems to have been something of a conceptual template in Greek culture from the Mycenaeans down until

[1]Ekroth, and Nilsson 2018.
[2]Garnsey 2002, 9
[3]Immerwahr 1989, 408
[4] "Terracotta Pomegranate." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/251537.
[5]Bennet 2011,. 52–59.
[6]Immerwahr 1989, 397.
[7]See Clement *Exhortation to the Greeks* 2.15 and also Roisman and Worthington 2010, 433
[8]Riu 1999, 107

Christianity became the dominant religion, where all divine figures were treated in a fairly similar way. A temple for Artemis and a temple for Zeus are not fundamentally different, and hymns and prayers to Athena sound much like hymns and prayers to Ares. All accepted sacrifices conducted in similar ways: some may or may not have received different species of animal[1] depending on the source, and certainly the individual deities had personalities of their own, developed by the poets and informed by regional practices. This is not to deny the color and richness of Greek religion, but rather to highlight that Hades and Poseidon were treated extremely differently from the rest.

This matters because Hades and Poseidon are the primary "antagonists" of these two poems. Hades is, course, the abductor of Persephone, although the poem takes great pains to point out that she was "δῶκεν δὲ βαρύκτυπος εὐρύοπα Ζεύς," "given [to Hades] by loud-thundering, all-seeing Zeus."[2] A few lines later, he is carrying her away "Διὸς ἐννεσίῃσι"[3] "at the suggestion of Zeus," which is reminiscent of an extremely similar formulation in the *Iliad*, which describes the death of so many men as "Διὸς δ᾽ ἐτελείετο βουλή"[4] "accomplishing the will of Zeus." Aside from Zeus's complicity, Hades does not come across particularly well either in this poem. One might expect the religious nature of this poem to lead to a rather pious characterization of Hades, a major god and son of Kronos, but that is not the case.

Euphemisms are used abundantly: the name "Hades" (Ἀΐδης) is only included a handful of times, usually in direct speech. The slightly more formal, and hence, perhaps respectful, "Aidoneus" (Ἀιδωνεὺς) is used another three times, but for the most part, the taboo on speaking his name seems generally in force here too. (Though the name "Hades" itself might be a euphemism meaning "Unseen One," with his original name being lost[5]) He is called, for example, "πολυδέκτης," "the receiver of many,"[6] or "πολυσημάντωρ," "the ruler of many."[7] Demeter calls him, justified in her position, "στυγερός Ἀιδη,"[8] "Loathed Hades." But perhaps most interestingly, he is called Κρονίδης,[9] "son of Kronos," an epithet also applied to Zeus here and elsewhere.[10] From a literary perspective, the intentional confusion of Zeus and Hades

[1]See, for example, Ekroth 2020, 15–47.
[2]HH 2.3
[3]HH 2.30
[4]Il 1.5
[5]Beekes 2009, 34
[6]HH 2.9 eg
[7]HH 2.31 eg
[8]HH 2.395
[9]HH 2.414
[10]HH 2.21, or Il 6.69 for one example

reinforces Zeus's guilt for allowing/encouraging the abduction, but it also has the effect of subtly enlarging Hades to the size of Zeus, that is, Demeter and Persephone are battling against a supremely powerful antagonist. But this is not purely literary. It does seem to be the case that one of Hades' epithets in the classical period was "Zeus Chthonios," or "Zeus of the Underworld."[1] At the same time, Zeus could also be invoked as "Zeus Chthonios," in the sense that "chthonic" can also refer to the earth.[2]

Hades receives much less cult than other gods. Pausanias believes Elis to have the location of the only temple to Hades in the Greek world[3] and although there is some evidence to support the existence of a few others,[4] he is certainly right that they were highly uncommon. There are only a handful statues identified as being Hades in the entire corpus of Greek art—and some of them may be the syncretistic amalgam Hades-Serapis.[5] He would, in a sense, be "honored" during funerary rites, but he was not a god who inspired devotion in the traditional sense. Indeed, Agamemnon is bold enough to call Hades "θεῶν ἔχθιστος ἁπάντων"[6] "the most hated of all the gods."

Poseidon is another Κρονίδης ("son of Kronos,") although the epithet is not applied to him in this period.[7] He, like Hades, seems to have a somewhat ambiguous position in the Archaic period, although it is not as universally negative as Hades's position was. By the Classical period Poseidon is worshipped more or less as normal, and there are temples dedicated to him—fewer than one might expect based on his status, perhaps, but he still had cult in the usual way.[8] But the early history is more complicated.

Poseidon is named in the Linear B tablets (as *po-se-da-o)* more frequently than any other deity, and he is, in fact, believed to have been the chief Mycenaean god.[9] Whether he had any relevance to the sea (or horses) is impossible to tell from the information at hand. Our earliest written sources for Greek religion, Homer and Hesiod, are divided. Hesiod mentions him only twice, as a builder of walls,[10] and while the *Iliad* asserts that he lives at sea, his most

[1]Aesch. Ag. 1385-7
[2] Scullion 1994, 75–119.
[3]Paus. 6.25.1-3
[4]Burton 2018, 211–227.
[5]Tripp 1970, 257
[6]Il. 9.159
[7]Lucian Epigram 34 is the only one I've found, and he wrote in the 2nd century AD
[8]For an interesting discussion of this, see Robertson 1984, 1–16.
[9]Summarized in Nilsson 1953, 161–168.
[10]Hes. Theog. 733-4

common epithets are Ἐννοσίγαιος (earth-shaker) and Κυανοχαίτης (dark-haired, interestingly, also an epithet of Hades in *Homeric Hymn 2*[1]). He is, in the *Iliad*, essentially a horse-god, though of course this might be because the *Iliad* takes place primarily on land.[2]

Odyssey book I establishes Poseidon as the antagonist quite forcefully, stating that all the gods pitied Odysseus, "νόσφι Ποσειδάωνος: ὁ δ' ἀσπερχὲς μενέαινεν / ἀντιθέῳ Ὀδυσῆι"[3] "Except for Poseidon, who raged unceasingly against Odysseus." A few lines later, at the council of the gods, Zeus openly admits to Athena that he wants Odysseus to go home, "ἀλλὰ Ποσειδάων γαιήοχος ἀσκελὲς αἰεὶ"[4] "But Poseidon, holder of the earth, is ever stubborn." This dynamic strongly implies that Poseidon is an equal to Zeus, and is one of the arguments for an early date for the composition of the *Odyssey's* story. Later on, Zeus says that if all the rest of the gods work together, Poseidon will be forced to let go of his wrath, "οὐ μὲν γὰρ τι δυνήσεται ἀντία πάντων ἀθανάτων ἀέκητι θεῶν ἐριδαινέμεν οἷος."[5] "For in no way will he be able [lit. powerful], against all of the unwilling gods, to continue his quarrel [with Odysseus] alone."

But Poseidon, rather like Hades in *Homeric Hymn 2*, is largely hidden by the narrative. He sends one rather famous storm which nearly kills Odysseus,[6] and he is reported several times as "angry,"[7] but the reality is, in the words of Bernard Fenik, that the poem "contains considerably more smoke than fire. The great trumpeting of [Poseidon's] activity obscures the fact that he actually does almost nothing at all."[8] Rather like *Homeric Hymn 2*'s continual shifting of the blame back to Zeus, the *Odyssey* is unwilling to have bad things happen without also, ultimately, pinning them on Zeus. Yet Zeus avoids the role of overt antagonist in both poems.

The morality of these texts has to be read in light of Achilles' musings to Priam at the end of the *Iliad*. "δοιοὶ γάρ τε πίθοι κατακείαται ἐν Διὸς οὔδει / δώρων οἷα δίδωσι κακῶν, ἕτερος δὲ ἑάων/"[9] "Two jars lie on Zeus's floor / containing gifts. The one

[1]HH. 2.349
[2]Observation borrowed from Maitland 1999, 1–13.
[3]Od 1. 20-21
[4]Od 1. 68
[5]Od 1. 78-79
[6]Od 5. 281-285
[7]Od 5. 339
[8]Fenik 1974, pg 228
[9]Il 24. 527-528

of evils, the other of good things[1] which he distributes/" This passage shocked Plato[2] and runs counter to Classical Greek religious thought, but it just might represent how the *Odyssey* and *Homeric Hymn 2* understand Zeus. He is in some ultimate way, responsible for both good and evil, but his allotment of blessings and curses is semi-random, it is no use complaining about it, cursing one's luck, or really reacting to it in any way (so says Achilles). *The other gods* however do not have this role, and consequently this immunity. Demeter can loathe Hades while (apparently) not faulting Zeus, at the same time as she acknowledges his central role in the plan. Odysseus can blame Zeus in a generic way for his misfortunes, but his anger is truly directed against Poseidon whose one storm can not stack up to the disasters caused, for example, by Odysseus himself. This is a complex theodicy, and it is no wonder it had fallen out of favor by Plato's time. But it works, and Poseidon and Hades are especially reasonable choices to blame: both are sons of Kronos (and thus, epithetically identical to Zeus) both are ambiguous and associated with pitiless natural forces that cause more destruction than blessing, and thus would have been honored with a degree of not only fear but antipathy.

5. Ithaca, Imperfect

One of the most well-known "facts" about the myth of Persephone's abduction is that it was used to explain the seasons.[3] When Persephone lives with Hades, Demeter refuses to allow crops to grow, and it is winter. When they are reunited, she is happy, and it is spring. The original myth is actually much more complex than that. *Homeric Hymn 2* does not quite agree with conventional reading of seasonal allegory. Instead, when, at the end of the poem "ἦρος ἀεξομένοιο"[4] "spring-time arose," the goddess Rhea is only now prompted to ask Demeter to be less angry and allow wheat to grow once more. Spring has already happened, but it is not correlated with good crops. More unusually, when Demeter first begins to grieve Persephone, she is approached after nine days by Hecate who calls her "πότνια Δημήτηρ, **ὡρηφόρε**"[5] "Lady Demeter, season-bearer," as in, one who brings about the change of seasons. So although it may seem a rather fine distinction, this poem cannot be about the seasons in any

[1]For ἑάων as blessings / good things, see book 24, line 527 in Leaf 1900
[2]Plato Rep. 2.379c-380
[3]Stated by Lincoln 1979, 223–23
[4]HH 2. 455
[5]HH 2. 54

abstract way. From these lines, it is clear that seasons had already been occurring long before the start of the poem, and Persephone's abduction and recovery can be related exclusively to the process of agriculture, which also fits with the likely origin of her name as "goddess of the threshing floor."[1] If we were to break this narrative down we would say that Persephone's absence causes the land itself to suffer both because of who she is (a harvest goddess) *and* because of the grief of Demeter. Only the second point is explicitly spelled out in the hymn, but the first should be remembered as well.

Although not quite as dramatic, Odysseus's beloved Ithaca goes through a similar period of decay when he is absent. Eumaeus, in Book XIV, is quick to tell Odysseus how his own life has suffered because of the insolence of the suitors,[2] and it is implied several times in that conversation that they have greatly reduced the wealth held by the palace, Odysseus's own estate. The following day he tells him his father (not that he realizes it) Laertes is alive, but he prays constantly to Zeus that "θυμὸν ἀπὸ μελέων φθίσθαι"[3] "The strength may fade from his limbs [i.e., he dies]". In fact, Eumaeus considers Laertes to be living in an *untimely*[4] old age because of his grief (ἐν **ὠμῷ** γήραϊ)[5] both for Odysseus and the recent death of his wife. Telemachus repeats the economic threat—the suitors are "τρύχουσι δὲ οἶκον"[6] "Wearing out the house," and he fears that they will soon kill him. The suitors in a sense act like a bad winter: they take and take from the palace's store without contributing anything, and much like Demeter's refusal to allow wheat to grow, it is not obvious when it will end. On the one hand, the poet is unwilling to show "Ithaca in decline," because it must, at the end of the day, still be the idealized home Odysseus has been seeking for two decades. This is what is accomplished by his stay at Eumaeus's hut. Odysseus dwells for a few nights in a "symbolic poverty." The night is, fittingly, extremely cold,[7] and Eumaeus does not have enough cloaks to keep to warm.

When Odysseus finally comes face to face with Penelope, he reveals something quite interesting about the way he understands Ithaca. He praises Penelope, first, and then her husband (talking about himself). Odysseus-in-disguise says that he has heard that Odysseus is a "blameless lord," who honors the gods and acts justly, "φέρῃσι δὲ γαῖα μέλαινα /

[1]Beekes 2009, 1179-1180
[2]Od. 14. 55-108
[3]Od. 15. 354
[4]I believe he might be saying "savage, fierce" here, but the Liddell-Scott-Jones gives this very line as the paradigm for ὠμός as"untimely"
[5]Od 15. 357
[6]Od 16. 125
[7]Od 14. 456-462

πυροὺς καὶ κριθάς, βρίθῃσι δὲ δένδρεα καρπῷ, / τίκτῃ δ᾽ ἔμπεδα μῆλα, θάλασσα δὲ παρέχῃ ἰχθῦς / **ἐξ εὐηγεσίης**, ἀρετῶσι δὲ λαοὶ ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ."[1] "And the dark earth bears wheat and barley, and the trees bear fruit, and the flocks are heavy with young, and the sea hands over fish, **from his good leadership**, and the people thrive beneath him." In this passage, Odysseus casts himself as a sort of Ithacan Persephone, when he is around to rule the kingdom prospers not only in human affairs, but the very earth and trees and sea respect him. Of course, this passage is immediately suspect for all the above reasons: Odysseus is broaching the topic of himself for the first time with Penelope while in disguise, but the fact that Penelope finds what he said to be not unreasonable or suspicious in any way indicate that we, as the audience of the poem, are supposed to accept it all as well.

Penelope holds an interesting position in all of this. As the one left behind, her role most closely mirrors Demeter's, but what is her contribution to the state of Ithaca? At first glance her refusal to pick a suitor, condemned in the strongest terms by the suitors themselves,[2] is part of why the palace is so overrun. The logic of the poem states that because she would not make up her mind, the number of suitors is constantly growing, which means more food being eaten, more blasphemy being committed, and more insults being spoken against her and Telemachus. On the other hand, the narrator of the *Odyssey* finds ways to remind us often of the story of Clytemnestra and Aegistheus[3] which has the effect of exonerating Penelope for not deciding to re-marry. The major action undertaken by Penelope is her infamous plan to weave and un-weave Laertes' shroud,[4] an act charged with the symbolism of the seasons. Weaving a funeral shroud, that is, actually finishing it, is a reminder of linear time. The shroud was created, and now it goes to its τέλος (end) in the grave. But *unweaving* the shroud both keeps Penelope safe from having to make a choice, and metaphorically undoes the damage caused by the passage of time. This is the renewal granted by Demeter allowing the crops to grow up again in the spring. Although the text never calls Penelope a sorcerer outright, there is something odd about Laertes' extreme old age[5] which he himself finds unbearable, rather like a Tithonus,[6] and Penelope's act of unpicking his shroud at night. Her ability to subvert the natural order and disrupt the flow of time is only parallel to Odysseus's claim that when he was king, the earth

[1]Od. 19. 111-114
[2]Od 2. 85-93
[3]Od 1. 29 for one example
[4]Od 19. 137-56 and 24. 129-148
[5] Od 24. 226ff
[6] HH 5. 218

bore more crops and the trees gave more fruit, which in turn operates by the same mechanics that cause a preternatural winter in *Homeric Hymn 2*.

The poems are different in their specific applications of this general idea—of course. If they were identical in all ways, we would be talking about one and another copy of the Odyssey. The differences are fascinating: Persephone was later used to symbolize the agricultural year, her going and coming back analogous to the annual death and rebirth of crops. Odysseus never comes to be associated with anything cyclical, if anything, his story is an emblem of linear time: the irreversible passage of time (great amounts of it) is an ever-present but subtle tint in the background of the text. So while Persephone is required to go back, later commentators only *believed* Odysseus would take to the sea again, unable to keep himself away from another journey.[1] This sense of incompleteness in the text is why that myth suggested itself to so many.

6. Homecoming, Tinged with Failure

Both poems end on a fundamentally ambiguous note, which effects what they communicate overall. Above, Persephone's reunion with Demeter has been noted, particularly the fact that Demeter's joy is soured by the fact that Persephone has to go back. After this comes the true ending of the poem, which drops all of these threads entirely. Instead, Demeter teaches her arts to Triptolemus and others, initiates them into her mysteries, then they die and ascend mount Olympus to become gods[2] (this is mentioned in passing, and it's almost unclear who it refers to). Now, the poet says, that man is blessed who is loved by Triptolemus and co., for they will send "Πλοῦτον" from their house. As a generic noun, πλοῦτος simply means "wealth, riches," but Πλοῦτος can also be the proper name of a god, the child of either Demeter or Persephone (and Hades).[3] In this case, since the line is completed with "ὃς ἀνθρώποις … δίδωσιν"[4] "Who gives ... to mortals" we can reasonably assume that Πλοῦτος, the god, is meant here (although it could also be literary). With that, the poem concludes by asking Demeter (and Persephone) to be gracious to the singer, and he promises to remember her in another song too, a formulaic closing for the *Homeric Hymns*.[5]

[1] Based on Od. 23. 248-254
[2] HH 2. 484
[3] Kerényi 1991, 31
[4] HH 2. 489
[5] HH 3.545, 4. 580, 5. 294 etc.

What is so unusual about this is that Persephone's storyline is left only barely wrapped up. Rhea tells Demeter Zeus's decision, that she must stay in the underworld for a third of the year, but we never hear Demeter's response (or Persephone's) to this. Instead, Demeter silently exits the scene and teaches some unknown content to a few mortals ("ὄργια πᾶσι" – "all of her secret rites"[1]) who almost immediately die and turn into gods, in many ways, living the life Persephone *ought to* (spending eternity on Mount Olympus). But even that idea does not last more than a line or two before the narrator has introduced the character Πλοῦτος, possibly meant to be Persephone's son, but not given a proper genealogy here. The vagueness about how he connects to the broader tradition may, of course, have been a non-issue to members of the Eleusinian Mysteries, but since there is some confusion in later writings, it seems like there were at least parallel traditions.

The ending of the *Odyssey* is even stranger. After his Iliadic battle, where Odysseus slaughters all of the suitors and cleanses the palace, he reunites with Penelope, she tests him, he passes the test, and they recapitulate for the listener the previous twenty two books of the *Odyssey*. According to Aristarchus and Aristophanes of Byzantium, two early commentators on Homer, this is where the poem *actually* ends,[2] and although their preference largely betrays the tendencies of Hellenistic literature rather than any particular insight about Homeric poetry,[3] their discomfort with Book XXIV is telling. In it, Hermes leads the souls of the suitors into Hades, Agamemnon meets Achilles apparently for the first time (though *Odyssey* book XI disagrees[4]) and they praise Odysseus for avoiding a fate like Agamemnon. Meanwhile, Odysseus goes to visit his father Laertes, working away at his farm. Laertes is addressed by Odysseus in disguise, who says of him "γῆρας / λυγρὸν ἔχεις αὐχμεῖς τε κακῶς καὶ ἀεικέα ἕσσαι"[5] "You have a mournful old age, you are squalid and mistreated, and wear shameful clothing." This scene is an interesting one. Why would Odysseus hide his identity from his father? And when the reconciliation finally occurs there is still another moment of tension, as Laertes worries quite reasonably that the slaughter of the suitors will turn all the men of Ithaca against them.[6] Odysseus dodges the question outright, neither confirming nor denying that his cleansing of the palace will throw Ithaca into open civil war, but simply telling his father not

[1] HH 2. 476
[2] Moulton 1974, 153–169.
[3] de Jong 2001
[4] Od 11. 465-470
[5] Od 24. 249-250
[6] Od 24. 351-356

to let it worry him either way.

The Ithacans do, in fact, assemble, and Eupeithes blames Odysseus for the death of the suitors. The motion carries and everyone arms, Athena offers Zeus the choice between open war and peace in Ithaca, Zeus chooses peace. Athena comes down to direct Laertes into throwing a spear through Eupeithes' chest, killing him. With that, Athena reveals herself and tells the assembled crowd to go home, no more fighting is to be done.[1]

Book XXIV, then, deals with "what might almost have been," a remarkable strategy to end such an epic. That the final blow is struck by Laertes seems noteworthy too; he has been a peripheral character until this very episode. He is accompanied by Telemachus, who, killing Eupeithes, would show how he had matured into a warrior like his father; and Odysseus, who would be finalizing his *nostos* and restoring peace to Ithaca. But no, Laertes, ancient, barely alive, and almost extraneous to the plot is chosen by Athena for the final heroic act of the story. This sense of confusion is what Aristarchus and Aristophanes of Byzantium noted, but the whole closing is not supremely different from how *Homeric Hymn 2* ends. Both pivot in their final moments to distantly related characters, and go quiet about the actual nature of the return and reconciliation of the ones who had been missing.

Isn't the ending of the Odyssey a triumph? Well, perhaps, but as I noted earlier, the proem argues against this. Odysseus arrives alone: having lost his entire crew, having had to kill an entire generation of aristocratic Ithacans. If not for Athena's *dea ex machina*, he would have been killed. His mother has died, his father is nearly dead, and the palace storehouses have been eaten up.

In both cases, the "restoration of the land" comes at a cost. Persephone must spend about 120 days in the underworld every year, Odysseus slaughters about 110 men[2] and would have provoked a civil war if not for Athena's intervention. The final beat of *Homeric Hymn 2* is a warning that the uninitiated will find no happiness in the underworld,[3] just as Book XXIV shows the unhappy souls of the suitors clustered in Hades' realm. The poems thus comment upon each other that no *nostos*, whether heroic or divine, is ever truly a success. The land, which is linked in a supernatural way to the presence of its patron goddess/king and the emotions of her/his relatives, can heal somewhat, but never completely.

[1] Od 24. 530-532
[2] 108 canonical suitors plus the priest plus Eupeithes (Od 16. 245-254)
[3] HH 2. 480-483

7. Conclusion

There is enough to fill a small book merely in pointing out the ways these two poems are similar, but I have opted to explain a general principle shared by both texts that links the natural and the supernatural—the presence of the divine in nature, we might say—that represents an attempt to link the religious belief in magic with the environment they lived in. The point is emphatically *not* allusion. It matters not one bit which story came earlier (though I have avoided commenting on that topic). What matters is where the two poems overlap and agree. How do you recognize things in the natural world which belong to the gods? A sense of awe, wonder, and *fear* which must be acted on or you risk death. How do natural functions like eating and drinking pertain to the dead? It helps some of them prophecy, some of them perceive, and for others it confirms their presence in the underworld: in other words it corporealizes them, makes it *as though they have a body*, for a brief spell of time. How do disasters and catastrophes relate to the all-powerful gods? It might be Zeus's "fault," but he is ineligible from receiving blame the way a lesser deity would be, even if they are only barely lesser. Finally, the land itself is linked to the deities and people assigned to look after it: it suffers when they are absent, and can only be restored in part when they return.

Of course the poems are different in innumerable ways, and they are similar in many ways not described here. One facet of their overlap—not a conscious allusion, but a convergence—has been described here. All of these points together constitute some broad outlines of what we might consider the Greek view of the supernatural in the centuries before Socrates and a more scientific outlook begins to emerge, which runs the risk of coloring our understanding of Homeric / Archaic religion. When we approach it on its own terms, we find a deeply strange, nuanced, and intriguing set of beliefs that runs through and gives life to some of the most beautiful poetic works ever composed.

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