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Panel 5

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*Nekuia*, Inside and Out: Odysseus's Exemplary Underworld

This paper proposes a new relationship between Odysseus's tale of the Underworld in *Odyssey* 11 and the greater narrative of the poem. Focusing on the series of encounters with various shades, and in particular on the critically controversial Catalogue of Women, my reading not only builds on earlier suggestions of the episode's significance to the internal audience, but also demonstrates its elaborate thematic resonances with major motifs of the poem. Ultimately, my analysis reveals the poetic representations of the Underworld and its inhabitants as ideally suited for the rhetorical exploitation of both internal and external audience expectations.

Many critics have ignored the thematic significance of the mythological figures listed by Odysseus in the Underworld. Yet the poem itself provides ample internal evidence that such significance should be expected. The characters within the *Odyssey* on many occasions view their present experience in terms of mythological exempla of the past (cf. Antinous at 2.115-22 and Penelope at 19.517-25). This mode of comparison is available to the audience of the *Odyssey* as well, which, as critics like Laura Slatkin have argued, has the capacity to add crucial meaning to the narrative through its familiarity with a greater body of myth. My reading shows how the *Odyssey* fosters several suggestive connections between the mythological exempla in the Underworld and the greater mythological milieu. Moreover, I show how Odysseus himself orders the encounters in the Underworld into a sequence that capitalizes on their exemplary power, a tactic which heightens both the dramatic tension of the Phaeacian episode and furthers Odysseus's own purposes vis-à-vis his hosts.

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