

2023

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Recommended Citation

Lazarro, Eliana (2023) "Peering Behind the Veil: Death and Enlightenment in the *Aethiopica*," *Articulāte*: Vol. 28, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol28/iss1/6>

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Peering Behind the Veil: Death and Enlightenment in the *Aethiopica*

Eliana Lazarro

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What happens to us after we die? It is a question shrouded in uncertainty, but the Ancient Greeks believed they had an answer: after a proper burial, the souls of the dead would descend to the underworld to face their final judgement. The ferryman Charon would row them across the river Styx, separating them from the world of the living. However, this was not an enduring boundary, and under some circumstances, the spirits of the dead were able to return. A *nekyia* is a magical rite by which ghosts were called up and summoned, often to be questioned about the future.¹ This mystical process is repeatedly visible in Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*. Over the course of the novel, its central characters repeatedly receive messages from the dead, who provide them with prophecies and advice. Through Charikela, Kalasiris, and Theagenes's interactions with these spirits, Heliodorus depicts the dead as enlightened beings, who are released from the bounds of the mortal world and see the truths behind the proverbial veil.

Before examining the prophetic dead of the *Aethiopica*, we need to understand the Homeric blueprint for these scenes. As R. W. Garson says, "Heliodorus' indebtedness to Homer is conspicuous at many points,"² and his references to necromancy draw straight from Homer's *Odyssey*. Book XI of the *Odyssey* is the *nekyia*: Odysseus's summoning of the dead. At Circe's advice, he goes to the boundary of the underworld in order to seek directions home to Ithaka. To call upon the spirits, Odysseus "poured libations for all the dead: first honey-mix,

¹ *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (1940), s.v. "νεκυία."

² Garson, R. W. "Notes on Some Homeric Echoes in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*." *Acta Classica* 18 (1975): 137.

sweet wine, and lastly, water,” and sprinkled barley on top (*Odyssey* 11.25–27). Finally, he adds the “black blood” of several sheep (*Odyssey* 11.36). Through these ritual actions, Odysseus enables the prophet Tiresias to speak of the trials which lay ahead. Odysseus’s purpose in performing these rituals is to revitalize the spirits, so that they may have “any meaningful interaction with the

living.”³ These ghosts are part of a different world; only after drinking blood, a symbol of the life they have departed, are they able to interact with the living Odysseus. However, once they are enabled to speak, the spirits provide Odysseus with wisdom beyond human means. This scene is the blueprint for the appearances of the dead in the *Aethiopica*. In both texts, the restless dead can be summoned to offer knowledge, though their answers may always be straightforward.

In the *Aethiopica*, the most Homeric example comes in Book VI, when Charikleia and Kalasiris watch a woman reanimate the corpse of her son. The woman pours libations of milk, honey, and wine into a pit and creates an effigy from wheat flour. Finally, “she picked up a sword and... drew the blade across her arm” (Heliodorus 6.14). The ingredients offered by this woman—honey, wine, grains, and blood—directly reference the mixture Odysseus provides for the dead. Not only are their procedures similar, but so are their motives: the old woman also seeks supernatural knowledge. She wishes to know whether her other son will perish in battle, but this information is beyond her grasp as a mortal. When her son is reanimated, he chastises her: “These are forbidden mysteries, cloaked in secrecy and darkness, but you have had the audacity to perform them... and you even parade the secrets of the dead before witnesses such as these” (Heliodorus 6.15). The protest of the dead man reveals one key truth—the practice of necromancy can reveal “the secrets of the dead.” The dead man has been imbued with greater knowledge than when he was alive through his disassociation with the mortal world.

³ Johnston, S.I., *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 1999), 8.

Though her son is distressed at his reanimation, he does provide the knowledge his mother seeks, though not the outcome she wished for. Not only will her son die in battle, but the woman “shall not escape death by the sword” (Heliodorus 6.15). Almost immediately after, the woman impales herself on a spear stuck in the ground and dies (Heliodorus 6.15). Incidentally, the doom-filled words of this spirit are likely a reference to another tale of necromancy: the summoning of Darius’s spirit in Aeschylus’s *Persians*. In the wake of a devastating naval defeat, Darius informs his people that “They have not plumbed the depths of their disasters—more troubles will keep flowing yet... the corpses heaped in piles, will still be there when three generations have come and gone” (Aeschylus 815–820). Here, Darius speaks of the future fate of his son Xerxes’s armies—though his people sought reassurance, Darius has seen the darkness which lies in the future, and thus has none to give. For Aeschylus’s audience, the Persian loss would have been a notable historical event, lending credence to Darius’s words. Here, he acts as “the raised dead, prophetic and quasi-divine, but not a true god.”⁴ Just as the dead man, Darius speaks words of doom upon his summoning, casting a shadow over those who raised him from the grave. Both of these characters demonstrate the dangers of communing with the dead: the truths they have to share may not be the ones we wish to hear.

In addition, the prophecy of the necromancer’s son comes to pass with a remarkable swiftness. This serves a key purpose: it instantly proves to the reader that the words spoken by the dead man are true. This revelation features prominently in our minds, as the corpse had not only spoken of his mother’s fate, but of Kalasiris and Charikleia’s as well. According to the dead man, Kalasiris’s sons are on the verge of battle, but “his arrival will stay their hands,” and Charikleia “will pass her life at [her loved one’s] side in glorious and royal estate” (Heliodorus 6.15). Because we have just witnessed one of the corpse’s

⁴ Kennedy, Rebecca Futo. “A Tale of Two Kings: Competing Aspects of Power in Aeschylus’ *Persians*.” *Ramus* 42, no. 1-2 (2013): 75.

predictions play out, we are incentivized to take these prophecies seriously and to keep them in mind as we continue reading. Through these prophecies delivered by a corpse, Heliodorus emphasizes the knowledge the dead gain beyond the grave. Additionally, these messages are explicitly delivered by a dead man—literally a body puppeteered by necromancy. The clarity of this scene primes the reader’s mind to keep an eye out for the messages of the dead in future books. We have learned that the dead speak the truth; now, we can use that knowledge to make predictions about the story ahead.

Kalasisir, a witness to this act of necromancy, also had a prior experience with the power of the dead. In Book V, Kalasisir tells the story of how he, Charikleia, and Theagenes made their journey from Greece to Egypt. During this tale, he mentions that after sailing from Greece, he had a dream in which an old man in a cloak and helmet appeared. The man was withered with age, “and his expression was one of cunning and many wiles; he was lame in one leg, as if from a wound of some kind” (Heliodorus 5.22). A wily man in a helmet with one injured leg: this is Odysseus, here to scold Kalasisir for neglecting to pay him tribute when he passed Ithaca. The fact that Odysseus is elderly in Kalasisir’s vision is relevant. This is not the young, strong Odysseus of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but an Odysseus far from his prime, soon approaching death. As punishment for Kalasisir’s disrespect, Odysseus predicts that Kalasisir will suffer as he did: ““Ordeals like mine shall you undergo; land and sea you shall find united in enmity against you”” (Heliodorus 5.22). Similarly to the old woman necromancer of Book VI, here we see the displeased spirit of a dead man delivering a vengeful prophecy to the person who has wronged them. Additionally, just as the dead son’s judgment did not only extend to his mother, so too do Odysseus’s statements apply to others outside Kalasisir. Unlike Kalasisir, Charikela has something in her favor: Penelope has taken a liking to her. Because of this, Odysseus says that ““her story has a happy ending”” (Heliodorus 5.22). Although Odysseus had spoken forebodingly to Kalasisir, this part of his message brings good news.

Through this, we see that the enlightened knowledge of the dead does not only bring negative consequences in the *Aethiopica*, but also positive ones: the dead can also bring forward messages of care and affection, which will positively impact our protagonists.

Another key example comes through the dreams Charikleia and Theagenes discuss during their time in prison under Arsake's wishes. At the peak of their suffering, they each receive a dream of Kalasiris, who has since died of natural causes. Charikleia says that Kalasiris told her: "If you wear pantarbe fear-all, fear not the power of flame" (Heliodoros 8.11). Charikleia had carried a pantarbe stone with her when Arsake sent her to the pyre, and she was spared from the heat of the flames. Through this, we see Kalasiris's prophecy was carried out, though Charikleia was not purposely attempting to follow it. Theagenes has also received a message—Kalasiris told him that "Ethiopia's land with a maiden thou shalt see: Tomorrow from Arsake's bonds shalt thou be free" (Heliodoros 8.11). Theagenes initially takes this as a prediction of his demise, with "Ethiopia's land" representing the underworld, and his freedom from bondage resulting from his death. However, this prophecy comes true in a different way, as Theagenes and Charikleia are rescued from prison and taken to *Aethiopia*. In this way, both predictions delivered by Kalasiris are shown to be accurate. Though Kalasiris claimed the powers of magic in his lifetime, we know that this was not always true; to Charikles, Theagenes, and Charikleia, he often claimed to have performed spells and enchantments which did not exist. Additionally, although he interpreted dreams during life, these were omens supplied by other powers. Therefore, the knowledge he presents results from his residence in the underworld, not from any power he possessed in life.

Kalasiris's case differs from those we have seen so far: unlike Odysseus and the necromancer's son, Kalasiris is not a vengeful soul. He returns from the underworld for purely positive reasons, wishing to assure his foster-children of their fate and guide them to safety. His motives are comparable to Penelope's in Book V—each of them feels

an attachment for a living person and delivers a beneficial prophecy as a result of this care. In fact, the Greek literary tradition includes many examples of spirits using their powers to help the ones they loved. As stated by Sarah Iles Johnston, “the dead might be frightening and vengeful, but they were also expected to provide help to the living who treated them well, or to those with whom they had a link based on affection.”⁵ This obligation was especially compelling in the cases of family members. Though Theagenes and Charikleia do not fit the traditional definition of blood relations, they had a close bond with Kalasiris, and each mourned him as a father. This degree of care and regard enables Kalasiris to return to them after his death, providing his children the advice and hope they need to carry on. None of this would be possible without the wisdom he achieved in the underworld—his death forced him to leave his children behind, but allowed him to help them in a unique way.

Through the otherworldly messages of three different spirits, Heliodorus depicts the enlightenment of the dead in the *Aethiopica*. Though these people have departed the world of the living, they now possess the power to affect it in a way they never could before death. With the obstructions of the material world removed, the dead are able to step outside their bounds as mortals and view the twists and turns of fate itself. However, their messages are ultimately for the living. Surrounding Theagenes and Charikleia, these phantoms contribute to their journey and to the happy ending which was written out for them by the gods.

⁵ Johnston, S.I., *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 1999), 28.

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