

Odysseus' "Winnowing-Shovel"
(Hom. *Od.* 11. 119–37) and the Island of the
Cattle of the Sun

S. DOUGLAS OLSON

When Odysseus encounters Teiresias in the Underworld in *Odyssey* 11, the blind prophet does not give him detailed instructions for making his long way home, as Kirke had said he would (10. 539–40). Teiresias clearly knows what sort of information Odysseus is after (11. 100). All the same, he concentrates on only two things, one of them seemingly unconnected with the hero's return-voyage to Ithaka: the danger posed by the cattle of the Sun (11. 104–13) and the pilgrimage Odysseus must eventually make inland to sacrifice to Poseidon (11. 121–31).¹ To Teiresias, the decisive problem in Odysseus' future is clearly the wrath of the sea-god, to which the entire crew of the hero's one surviving ship is subject due to his blinding of Polyphemos (11. 100–03; cf. 9. 526–36). Whether all the men come back to Ithaka together or only Odysseus returns depends on whether they manage to leave the Sun's cattle unmolested (11. 104–13), as they ultimately prove unable to do (12. 339–65). Poseidon's anger guarantees a difficult journey home in any case (11. 100–04, 111, 113–15), however, and after Odysseus has somehow got rid of the Suitors (11. 115–20), he is accordingly to take an oar on his shoulder and make his way into the mainland on foot until he comes to people unacquainted with the sea (11. 121–25).² There he is to sacrifice to Poseidon (11. 129–34), thus introducing the god's cult into a spot where it did not exist before and so presumably winning his favor, and then return home a second time to await a "sleek old age" and a mysterious but easy death ἐξ ἁλός (11. 132–36).³

¹ For the extraordinary complexity of Teiresias' prophecy and its role in Homer's story, see J. Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey*, Martin Classical Lectures n.s. 1 (Princeton 1990) 59–93.

² For the problem of the relationship between the twin wraths of Poseidon and the Sun, cf. B. Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey*, Hermes Einzelschriften 30 (Wiesbaden 1974) 208–30, esp. 209–16; S. D. Olson, *Blood and Iron: Stories and Storytelling in Homer's Odyssey*, Mnemosyne Supplement 148 (Leiden 1995) 205–23.

³ Odysseus repeats the final portion of the prophecy to Penelope on Ithaka near the end of the poem (23. 267–84 ~ 11. 121–37). For the significance of the hero's gesture and the sacrifice that accompanies it, see W. F. Hansen, "Odysseus' Last Journey," *QUCC* 24 (1977)

Teiresias' remarks to Odysseus thus have their own internal logic, even if they do not answer the specific questions the hero has come prepared to ask, and the prophecy in fact has other features which help make it a single intellectual whole. The mark that Odysseus has reached the end of his travels inland, Teiresias tells him, will be that another wayfarer who meets him will call his oar an ἄθηρηλοιγός (lit. "chaff-ruin"), i.e. a winnowing-shovel (Il. 12.6–28).⁴ The surface point of this confusion is that Odysseus will at last have come to a country whose inhabitants know nothing of ships, so that the man the hero meets will fail to recognize the object resting on his shoulder (cf. Il. 12.122–25). At the same time, however, the anonymous traveller's remark can be taken as a significant comment on what happens on the island of the cattle of the Sun. We know from numerous ancient sources that after beans or wheat were harvested, they were trampled by animals on a threshing-floor (X. *Oec.* 18.4–5) and then—provided a sufficiently strong breeze was blowing—thrown up into the air with a winnowing-shovel (Il. 13.588–90), which caused the grain or seeds to be separated from the chaff (Il. 5.499–502; cf. Hes. *Op.* 597–99; X. *Oec.* 18.6–9).⁵ So too on the island of the cattle of the Sun, Odysseus and his men are put to the test by the appearance of high winds (12.313–14, 325–26), and when he goes apart from them (12.333–37), they are quickly marked out for destruction (esp. 12.374–88, 417–19). That Odysseus' oar is mistaken for a winnowing-shovel is thus a sign not only of how far from the sea he has come but also of the scrutiny he has undergone: He alone of all the crew has in the end been saved.⁶ That this is part of the point of Teiresias' prophecy is confirmed by a further peculiarity of the blind seer's language. ἄθηρηλοιγός (Il. 12.6) is a kenning, i.e. a riddling word that stands in for and thus points to some other, more pedestrian term familiar to the poem's audience.⁷ Eustathius and Σ^{QBHV} gloss ἄθηρηλοιγός with the word πτύον ("shovel"), which is the name used for a winnowing-shovel in the description of threshing at *Iliad* 13.558 (cf. A. fr. 210 Radt). What

27–48, esp. 38–42; C. Segal, "Teiresias in the Yukon: A Note on Folktales and Epic (Odyssey 11, 100–144 and 23, 248–287)," in R. Pretagostini (ed.), *Tradizione e innovazione nella cultura greca da Omero all'età ellenistica: Scritti in onore di Bruno Gentili I* (Rome 1993) 61–68, esp. 62–66. For the storytelling tradition to which the tale belongs, see W. F. Hansen, "Odysseus and the Oar: A Folkloric Approach," in L. Edmunds (ed.), *Approaches to Greek Myth* (Baltimore 1990) 241–72.

⁴ For the similarity between the two objects, cf. the deliberately metaphorical language at Opp. *H.* 4.498–99 (of winnowing grain) πνοιῆς χερσαίοις τε διακρίνοντες ἔρετμοῖς / καρπῶν.

⁵ For further discussion and bibliography, see S. B. Pomeroy (ed.), *Xenophon. Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary* (Oxford 1994) on 18.4–9.

⁶ Theoc. 7.155–56 suggests that sticking the winnowing-shovel into the heap of clean grain may have been a ritual signal that the harvest was complete; cf. Σ ad loc., citing [Call.] fr. 799 Pf². For possible connections between this signal and Odysseus' gesture, see J. E. Harrison, "Mystica Vannus Iacchi (continued)," *JHS* 24 (1904) 241–54, at 246.

⁷ For images of this sort, see I. Waern, ΓΗΣ ΟΣΤΕΑ: *The Kenning in Pre-Christian Greek Poetry* (Uppsala 1951). For ἄθηρηλοιγός (not discussed by Waern) as a kenning, see A. Heubeck, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey II: Books IX–XVI* (Oxford 1989) ad loc.

seems never to have been pointed out is that a πτύον can also be called a θρίναξ,⁸ and a θρίναξ is quite specifically a wooden shovel with three or five short teeth and used for winnowing grain.⁹ The word is first attested in the fifth century (Ar. *Pax* 567; *IG I³* 422.134), but there is no reason to think that it was not in use hundreds of years before that, and θρίναξ in fact appears to be the root of the name Θρινακία, which is how Teiresias refers to the island of the cattle of the Sun when he mentions it for the first time at 11. 107.¹⁰ The spot where the winds separate Odysseus from his worthless crew, in other words, is precisely “Winnowing-Shovel Island,”¹¹ and it accordingly comes as no surprise that the sign which will mark the moment when the hero can at last make his peace with Poseidon will be an oar mistaken for a “destroyer of chaff.”

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

⁸ Hsch. Θ 756 Latte θρίναξ· πτύον σίτου; Cyr. p. 342 Schmidt θρίναξ· σκεῦος γεωργικόν· ὃ καὶ λέγεται λικμητήριον . . . ἢ πτύον τοῦ σίτου; *Suda* Θ 498 θρίναξ· τὸ πτύον· ὄργανον γεωργικὸν ὀδοντικόν; cf. Σ^{bAT} Hom. *Il.* 13. 588.

⁹ Nic. *Th.* 113–14 with Σ; Antiphil. *AP* 6. 95. 4 = *GPh* 874; Philipp. *AP* 6. 104. 6 = *GPh* 2762. Early in this century, a similar tool was still in use in Crete, where it was called a θυρνάκι, i.e. a θιρνάκι, diminutive of θίρναξ/θρίναξ; cf. J. E. Harrison, “Mystica Vannus Iacchi,” *JHS* 23 (1903) 292–324, at 301–05. “Winnowing-fan” is an unfortunate term for the tool, which is not used to produce a breeze; cf. Harrison 310–12.

¹⁰ Thrinakia was sometimes identified with Sicily, which according to Thucydides was originally called Τρινακρία (Th. 6. 2. 2; cf. Call. fr. 40 Pf²; Nic. *Th.* 529), presumably because the island has three capes (τρία ἄκρα), as Timaios of Tauromenion (*FGrH* 566 F 37 ap. Σ A.R. 4. 965; cf. Eust. p. 1675.6 ~ Σ^{BV} Hom. *Od.* 11. 107; Str. 6. 265; Σ Lyc. 966; Σ Nic. *Th.* 529; St. Byz. p. 635.11 Meineke) explains. Cf. J. Bérard, *La colonisation grecque de l'Italie méridionale et de la Sicile dans l'antiquité: L'histoire et la légende*, BEFAR 150 (Paris 1941) 319–38. Naturally this tells us nothing about the significance or origin of the name in Homer.

¹¹ St. Byz. p. 635.13–14 Meineke, followed by H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* I (Heidelberg 1954) s.v. θρίναξ, and P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* II (Paris 1970) s.v. θρίναξ, notes the likely connection between θρίναξ and Θρινακία, but does not explore the tool's actual function or draw any larger conclusions. Cf. also *Suda* Θ 499 Θρίναξ· ἡ Σικελία.