

## Where Poets Fear to Tread: Defining Gender at the Limits of Homeric Language

My paper illustrates the significance of gender to a Homeric formula that describes the limits of language. The formula, “I could not tell nor name all” (πάντα δ’ οὐκ ἄν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ’ ὀνομήνω) appears four times in Homeric epic. It begins the Catalogue of Ships (*Il.* 2.488) and Helen’s speech about Odysseus’ spy mission at Troy (*Od.* 4.240). It also appears twice during Odysseus’ journey to Hades as he speaks with the souls of women (*Od.* 11.328) and men (*Od.* 11.517). Scholars often remark on the concern with poetic composition in each passage. For example, Ford (1992) describes the inability to tell all as a crisis of selection, arguing that the making of epic language depends on the exclusion of outside material; Martin (1989) reads the formula as a type of *recusatio* that exemplifies heroic language; Race (1982) calls the formula a “summary priamel” which elevates the speaker’s chosen topic above all others. While these treatments of the formula effectively illustrate how epic language operates at the limits of storytelling, none account for the curious antagonism between male and female characters in every instance. By shifting the focus to acts of communication, my paper shows how the inability to tell all defines gender roles in conversations between the poet and Muses, Odysseus and Helen, Arete and Alkinoös, and the dead souls of women and men.

But why does the poet link the limits of language to the division between women and men? In a revealing counter-example, Odysseus tells everything to Penelope in the marriage bed during the culminating reunion scene (πάντ’ ἔλεγ’/καταλέξει ἅπαντα, *Od.* 23.308-309). Noting the contrast between telling all in *Odyssey* 23 and the inability to tell all elsewhere, I show how this formula anticipates open communication between genders as the narrative concludes. For example, Odysseus “cannot tell nor name all” (*Od.* 11.328, 517) of the women and men he

describes in Hades, encountering a limit in each gendered group. The souls of Antikleia and Agamemnon meanwhile provide conflicting advice: Antikleia says to tell Penelope everything (*Od.* 11.224), while Agamemnon cautions against revealing too much (*Od.* 11.441-43). This evidence supports my view that the inability to tell all distinguishes gender roles in search of the narrative limit. Similarly in Book 4, Helen uses the formula (*Od.* 4.240) as she and Menelaos recall stories of Odysseus at Troy (*Od.* 4.244-64, 266-89). Helen and Menelaos offer incomplete memories of Odysseus in contrast to the reunion scene: Helen cannot tell all, meanwhile Odysseus retells all things (ἅπαντα) to Penelope. Finally, the *Iliad* offers another example of communication between male and female figures as the poet admits he could not tell all without the help of the Muses (*Il.* 2.488). In this passage, the harmonious relationship between goddesses and mortal man allows the poet to approach the limits of storytelling. With these examples, I illustrate how Homeric language models boundaries of propriety between women and men.

In support of this connection, I highlight the Pythagorean Table of Opposites as an ancient comment on the link between gender and limit. As Aristotle writes (*Met.* 986a22-b2), the Pythagorean Table organizes a set of binaries as “first principles” (ἀρχαί) of the universe, linking “male” (ἄρρεν) to “limit” (πέρας) and “female” (θηλυ) to the “unlimited” (ἄπειρον). This set of ancient cultural views suggests that the entire framework of Homeric poetry operates toward a perceived harmony between male and female characters in the act of telling all. Furthermore, since the scholia to *Od.* 23.296 (Dindorf 1855) famously indicates the reunion scene between Odysseus and Penelope as “the end” (πέρας) of the *Odyssey*, I advance the interpretation that the *Odyssey* seeks a teleological conclusion by modeling the limits of language in conversations between women and men.

## Bibliography

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