

Beyond Perception: A New Taxonomy for Invisibility Narratives

A foundational and often-neglected work is A. S. Pease's now more than 75 year-old article entitled, "Some Aspects of Invisibility." In it he explores the topic of human invisibility in antiquity and in doing so divides such scenes broadly into three categories, concluding that humans are portrayed as becoming invisible (1) because of unsought divine intervention, (2) by intentionally and mysteriously disappearing without the use of magic so as to encourage the belief that their invisibility is evidence of their own divinity, and (3) by deliberately procuring invisibility through a variety of "magical techniques." Yet, as he sorts invisibility scenes into each of these categories, Pease never really defines what he means by "magic." Indeed Graf (1997, 14) notes that "theory (regarding magic) remained practically stationary in the sciences of antique religion up to the 1960s." Keeping this critique of Pease's study in mind, the present discussion seeks to take a fresh look at invisibility narratives, but in doing so to shift the focus from magic and instead explore the role that vision or the act of seeing plays. In this regard such narratives seem to be an appropriate topic for the current discussions regarding vision and the senses in antiquity (Squire 2016).

Though we can assume that vision from a physiological standpoint would have been much the same for the Greeks and Romans as for us, what would have been different is how the ancients went about "constructing" what they did (or did not) see. Neis (2013, 26) reminds us how "much of what we call 'seeing' goes on in the brain rather than in the eye; what makes sight meaningful or sensible is largely in our heads. Scientific accounts of vision thus tend not to follow a correspondence theory of representation: the brain does not simply represent the visual world but actively constructs the things that the eye perceives." This "construction" of vision

manifests itself here in a couple of ways. For example, invisibility was construed very broadly in antiquity and we cannot assume that what we call invisibility in the contemporary world is the same as how the ancients defined it. Moreover, there were various mechanisms from antiquity used to explain different kinds of invisibility, including (but not limited to) the perceived role of the gods and divine intermediaries (in distracting attention, causing sleep, etc.), rituals, objects (e.g. rings and caps), natural phenomena (e.g. clouds, mists, night), etc., — mechanisms that continued to shift throughout antiquity as emerging philosophies and worldviews were integrated into ancient Mediterranean societies and their literatures.

I propose that examples of invisibility in ancient literature fall into three rather broad categories related to sight — categories that might be helpful in organizing invisibility narratives:

(1) Invisibility is often viewed as an act of going unnoticed, typically achieved when the senses of others are distracted or altered in some way, thus allowing a person to be in full view of someone else and yet go unnoticed: e.g. Penelope before Odysseus (Hom. *Od.* 19.476-479), Odysseus before Ajax (S. *Aj.* 51-2, 69-70), Jesus before the two from Emmaeus (*Ev.Luc.* 24.16), etc. The passage from Sophocles' *Ajax*, in particular, reveals how an extramissionist theory of vision might even help to explain the act of invisibility.

(2) Invisibility often involves various kinds of covering and clothing of the body, ranging from external environmental factors and the use of mundane clothing and the famed “Cap of Hades” to acts of shape-shifting and transformation. In such cases a person is physically present, but their body is concealed. These scenarios also suggest that vision, as envisioned by extramissionist theories, can be impeded by things like clouds and mists (Hom. *Il.* 14.342–345).

(3) Finally, invisibility often involves a kind of sudden rapture and bodily relocation by divine legerdemain. Thus, a person can be physically present, only to be abruptly removed by a god from the sight of someone else. These instances fall outside the scope of traditional notions of invisibility since an individual disappears, but does not remain in the presence of would-be viewers: e.g. Ganymede (Hom. *Il.* 20.234), Helen (Eur. *Or.* 1494-7), and the apostle Philip (*Act.Ap.*8.39).

By exploring such passages, I hope to initiate a discussion about the ways in which the ancient world “constructed” scenes involving invisibility narratives and the role that vision, broadly defined, plays in them.

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