POOR POLYPHEMUS: EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE IN *ODYSSEY* 9 AND 17

It is commonly acknowledged that the Homeric Cyclops-story related in *Odyssey* 9 leaves the reader—or listener—with an ambivalent feeling toward the actions (*praxeis*) and sufferings (*pathê*) of both Odysseus and Polyphemus. Admiration for the Ithacan hero's cunning and cleverness is clouded, if only for a moment, by reservations about his folly and arrogance. As for Polyphemus, abhorrence at his cannibalism is accompanied by a feeling of sadness and even pity. Indeed, in a recent study of Homer's version of the Polyphemus tale, Justin Glenn demonstrates that Homer departed from his traditional material in certain details in order to heighten respect for Odysseus' *mêtis* and *polytropia* as well as to enlist a degree of sympathy for Polyphemus.[1] The purpose of this paper is to explore the ramifications of such emotional ambivalence and to address the question: *Why* does Homer enlist *any* of the audience's sympathies on behalf of Polyphemus? It is possible, of course, to attribute the poet's motives to the "Homeric eye", which views all things with equal depth and clarity.[2] But it is also possible to discover Homer's aim in another specific section of the poem.

Foremost among Homer's innovations designed to enlist respect for Odysseus' resourcefulness is the hero's use of the name *Outis*. The intricacies of this wile have been examined by others; it is unnecessary to rehearse them here.[3] It suffices to say that Odysseus' use of trickery is but one of the numerous manifestations of his superior intellect. Yet, as much as one might admire the hero's cleverness, such a ruse inevitably evokes a sense of pity for his opponent. For in the end Polyphemus is abandoned by his neighbors, who, upon hearing that "Nobody" is hurting him and "Nobody" is stealing his sheep, return to their caves and leave the Cyclops to suffer in isolation (9.403-414). This isolation, as Glenn has observed, becomes devastating when the blinded giant tearful-

[1] Justin Glenn, "The Polyphemus Folktale and Homer's *Kyklôpeia*," *TAPA* 102 (1971) 133-81 (hereafter cited as "Glenn"). For collections of other versions of the folktale, see Wilhelm Grimm, "Die Sage von Polyphem," in *Kleinere Schriften* 4 (Gütersloh 1887) 428-62; Oskar Hackmann, *Die Polyphemsage in der Volksüberlieferung* (Helsinki 1904); and the appendix in Sir James G. Frazer's Loeb edition, *Apollodorus: The Library*, Vol. 2 (London 1921) 404-55.

[2] For a lucid interpretation of Homer's "paratactic" vision, see John H. Finley, *Four Stages of Greek Thought* (Stanford and London 1966) 1-28.

[3] See Glenn, 162-63; Anthony J. Podlecki, "Guest Gifts and Nobodies in *Odyssey* 9," *Phoenix* 15 (1969) 125-33; Dietrich Mülder, "Das Kyklopengedicht der *Odyssee*," *Hermes* 38 (1903) 414-55; Seth L. Schein, "Odysseus and Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*," *GRBS* 11 (1970) 73-83; Norman O. Austin, "Name Magic in the *Odyssey*," *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 5 (1972) 1-19. For Odysseus' cleverness in intoxicating the giant, see Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Valeurs religieuses et mythiques de la terre et du sacrifice dans l'*Odyssée*," *Annales (ESC)* 25 (1970) 1278-97.

ly explains to his pet ram that "Nobody" put out his eye (9.447-460).[4] Indeed, in the ram-scene there is a perfect example of the ambivalent emotional state Homer has engendered: we may applaud Odysseus' cleverness in stealing the animal from under the very nose of the giant, but we also feel pity for the Cyclops. Already abandoned by his neighbors, Polyphemus now loses the only living creature to which he feels an attachment.

Admiration for Odysseus and pity for the Cyclops is also elicited by the elaborate description of Polyphemus' blinding. As Odysseus whirls the glowing *rhopalon* into the eye of the monster, it is likened to a drill which a carpenter twirls as he bores a ship's mast (9.383-388).[5] The hissing blood recalls the sound of heated metal which a smith plunges into cold water (9.391-394). The standard interpretation of these similes, and indeed a valid one, is that in using his wits and technological prowess against the uncivilized brute strength of Polyphemus, Odysseus draws comparisons from the technological and civilized worlds of carpentry and metallurgy.[6] Once again, therefore, we are impressed by the *mêtis* of our hero. But the similes allow another interpretation. For Odysseus employs these comparisons not to describe the mere blinding of the monster: in order to extinguish Polyphemus' sight, he has only to destroy the pupil. The similes describe, rather, the excessive thoroughness and brutality with which Odysseus destroys the giant's entire forehead: "So did we spin the fiery pole in his eye, and hot blood gushed all around it. The

[4] See Glenn, 169-71.

[5] It is interesting, in this context, to speculate on Homer's motives for choosing the wooden stake as the blinding instrument. In the pre-Homeric account it appears that the hero blinds the giant with a metal spit which the Cyclops himself had used earlier to roast his victims: see Denys L. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955) 10-11. The selection and preparation of the stake (unlike the ready-made spit) requires a heroic intelligence, such as Odysseus alone possesses. The choice of the *rhopalon*, therefore, increases our admiration of the hero's cunning: cf. Glenn, 164-67. But in dispensing with the metal spit, Homer is also eliminating an important feature from the original account. For if Polyphemus were blinded by the very instrument he had used against the men, we would feel that justice had been properly meted out: the monster would receive tit for tat, his eye extinguished by his own weapon of torture. As it is, Polyphemus is blinded not by a weapon he had turned against his victims but, rather, by a piece of wood he was planning to carry as a shepherd's staff: cf. *ophra phoroiê*, 9.320. In replacing the metal spit with the wooden staff the poet removes the element of "poetic justice" which must have existed in the original account. For other discussions of the significance of the wooden stake, cf. Seth L. Schein (note 3, above) 74-75; Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1979) 31-34.

[6] See George Dimock, "Crime and Punishment in the *Odyssey*," *Yale Review* 60 (1971) 204; A. J. Podlecki, "Some Odyssean Similes," *G&R* 18 (1971) 82-83. Throughout the Cyclops-episode there is a distinct tension between the forces of civilization and savagery, between order and disorder. This tension applies most obviously to the conflict between the civilized Odysseus and the brute Polyphemus. But these polar forces are at work also within the two characters individually. Polyphemus, for all his monstrous savagery, betrays certain tendencies toward order and even *technê* as a dairy-farmer: cf. Norman Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1975) 143-49; G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1970) 162-71. Similarly, Odysseus, for all his civilized wit, reveals savage impulses within his own character as he protracts with relish the description of the violent blinding.

steam from his burning eye singed all his eyelashes and eyebrows, and the roots snapped in the heat" (9.387-390). The similes draw out the description of the violence. There is a stark contrast between the violence performed against the Cyclops and the productive, civilized acts described in the similes. The effect of such "violent juxtaposition" is to sharpen the audience's perception of the savagery of the blinding itself and to elicit pity for Polyphemus.[7]

In the case of Odysseus, admiration for his superior intellect and courage is accompanied by reservations about the folly of some of his actions, especially, in this episode, his rash and hybristic taunting of the blinded giant while he and his men are sailing away from the island.[8] Refusing to heed the urgent pleas of his comrades, Odysseus boasts to Polyphemus that it was not *Outis* who blinded him, but "Odysseus, sacker of cities and son of Laertes, inhabitant of Ithaca" (9.504-505). It is this act of foolish arrogance which, besides being morally questionable, reveals Odysseus' name to his enemy, thus enabling the giant to invoke a curse against him.[9]

It is true that Odysseus' major act of hybris comes at the end of the episode. But from the moment he sets foot into Polyphemus' cave Odysseus behaves in a manner far from praiseworthy. He is the first to violate guest hospitality. His comrades suggest that he steal the sheep and cheeses and sail away. But Odysseus rejects the proposal, for he wants to see the master of the cave and receive guest-gifts (*xeinia*, 9.229):[10] Odysseus clearly expects to be welcomed and entertained according to the traditions of Homeric hospitality. Yet, immediately upon announcing his intention, he acts in defiance of the Zeus-sanctioned ritual: "Then we lit

[7] This use of Homeric similes is well attested in the *Iliad*: cf. David H. Porter, "Violent Juxtaposition in the Similes of the *Iliad*," *CJ* 68 (1972) 11-21.

[8] For interpretations of the episode which discuss Odysseus' culpability, cf. Karl Reinhardt, *Tradition und Geist* (Göttingen 1960) 47-112; Edward M. Bradley, "The Hybris of Odysseus," *Soundings* 51 (1968) 33-44; Edwin Dolin, "Odysseus in Phaeacia," *Grazer Beiträge* 1 (1973) 273-82.

[9] Odysseus' behavior in this part of the episode also evokes an ambivalent response from the audience. On the one hand, an epic hero is expected to assert his identity to those he meets, especially if he can boast about a particular exploit of heroic prowess. In declaring his real name to Polyphemus after the blinding, Odysseus is following the traditions of the heroic code: cf. Douglas Stewart, *The Disguised Guest: Rank, Role, and Identity in the Odyssey* (London 1976) 37-43 and 50; Howard W. Clarke, *The Art of the Odyssey* (Englewood Cliffs 1967) 57. On the other hand, laughing and boasting after an act of violence is considered improper and "unholy" (*ouch hosion*), even in the *Odyssey*: cf. Odysseus' own warning to Eurycleia not to exult in the death of the suitors, *Od.* 22.411-412. For the hybris, in general, of laughing and boasting after a crime or act of violence, see Donald Lateiner, "No Laughing Matter: A Literary Tactic in Herodotus," *TAPA* 107 (1977) 173-82; cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1372-1400 (Clytemnestra's boast after the murder of Agamemnon and the Chorus' disapproval not so much of the murder as of the boast); Soph. *Ant.* 482-483 (Creon's assessment of Antigone's double hybris in burying Polyneices *and* boasting about it). Odysseus' boast to Polyphemus, therefore, elicits a combination of admiration and criticism, not unlike the description of the brave but cruel blinding. For Odysseus' foolishness in revealing his name, cf. Calvin S. Brown, "Odysseus and Polyphemus: The Name and the Curse," *Comparative Literature* 18 (1966) 193-202.

[10] Cf. W. B. Stanford's assessment of Odysseus' "inquisitiveness and acquisitiveness" in his text and commentary, *The Odyssey of Homer* [2] (London 1965) 356.

a fire, sacrificed, took the cheeses, ate (*pur kêantes enthusamen . . . kai . . . phagomen*, 9.231-232), and waited for his return from the pasture." In slaughtering, sacrificing, and eating one of the Cyclops' sheep in the absence of the host, Odysseus commits a breach of the *xeneia*-ritual.[11] His offense becomes all the more pronounced when he later asks the Cyclops to provide guest-gifts, and intimates that Zeus, protector of suppliants and *xenoi*, will be displeased if Polyphemus does not honor the request (9.266-271).[12] Odysseus feels at liberty to exploit the ritual for his own profit, himself disregarding protocol but demanding compliance from his host. If Odysseus' behavior here does not strike us as hybristic, it surely impresses us as improper and arrogant. This is not to argue that Polyphemus is justified in devouring six of Odysseus' men in retaliation for the offense. But it must be conceded that, viewed in such light, Polyphemus' aggression is presented as another in a long series of breaches of the *xeneia*-ritual, a series initiated not by Polyphemus but by Odysseus himself. According to the archaic concept of justice it is the first offender that must be punished, regardless of the extent of the crime.[13]

The subtler aspects of Homer's presenting Polyphemus and Odysseus in an ambivalent light emerge later in the poem. In Book 17, which opens the third and final octad in the *Odyssey* (just as Book 9 begins the second), a number of events take place which recall the Cyclops-episode. In this book Odysseus, a *rhopalon* in hand (17.195-199), walks with the swineherd Eumaeus toward the town of Ithaca. On their way they are accosted by Melantheus, who is driving Odysseus' best goats to the palace to be slaughtered for the suitors (17.212-214).[14] After verbally assaulting Odysseus and calling him a worthless beggar, Melantheus kicks him. In reaction, "Odysseus pondered whether to attack him with his *rhopalon* and kill him straightway or to lift him from the ground and smash his head against the earth" (17.235-237). This brief scene contains a number of features which recall the episode of Polyphemus. Most noticeable is Odysseus' thought of attacking Melantheus with his staff. Odysseus' alternate plan is equally arresting: the suggestion that he smash Melantheus' head on the ground recalls Polyphemus' violent attack on Odysseus' men in the cave. In Book 17 Odysseus merely ponders these actions,

[11] We can be certain that Odysseus lights the fire in order to cook and eat the sacrificial victim. The suggestion of W. W. Merry, *Homer: Odyssey*, Vol. 1 (Oxford 1899) 106, that Odysseus offers a burnt offering of cheese, is highly improbable. Odysseus glosses over his crime by calling it a "sacrifice," in hopes that his Phaeacian audience will not find fault with him.

[12] It is interesting to note that Polyphemus' breach of the ritual in asking Odysseus' name before inviting him to eat (9.252-255) is actually no breach at all. For Odysseus has already eaten by the time Polyphemus arrives. For a study of the *xeneia*-ritual and its role in the *Telemacheia* and the wanderings, see David E. Belmont, *Early Greek Guest-Friendship and its Role in Homer's Odyssey* (Diss. Princeton Univ. 1962).

[13] For the guilt incurred by the first offender, cf. *Od.* 20.394 (*proteroi gar aeikea mêchanoônto*); Archil. 66D, 79D; Hes. *Op.* 265-272.

[14] Homer prepares the audience for the allusions to Book 9 by having the opening of the Melantheus-scene recall the end of the Cyclops-episode: Melantheus' driving off Odysseus' best goats recalls Odysseus' own stealing of the Cyclops' choice (9.425-426) sheep and magnificent (9.432) ram.

but executes neither. Still, in conceiving such vengeance Odysseus reveals that he has something in common with Polyphemus.

If Homer is preparing the audience for a situation in which Odysseus will become a Polyphemus of sorts, one might expect to have his earlier feelings of pity for the Cyclops aroused again and transferred, this time, to Odysseus. The subsequent action in Book 17 fulfills these expectations. When Odysseus and Eumaeus finally arrive at the door of the palace, Odysseus spies his old dog Argus and asks the swineherd about the animal. A description of the dog follows which resembles Polyphemus' address to his pet ram (17.311-323). In each case the animal which before had always exhibited a high-spirited nature is described as sad and sluggish. Just as Argus always led the hunt and ran at great speeds, so, too, Polyphemus' pet was the leader of the flock, the first to leave the cave in the morning and the first to return in the evening. Now each animal has lost its spirit and is taken from its master, the one by thievery, the other by death. If the effect of the ram-scene in Book 9 is to evoke pity for the isolated Polyphemus, we can surely say the same for Odysseus in Book 17.

Shortly thereafter Odysseus returns home to face abuse from the suitors, those supreme offenders of *xeneia*. This abuse will be keenly felt by the hero because it must be endured alone.[15] He encounters the suitors and, like Polyphemus, endures taunts and physical abuse. For while Odysseus is begging food from the suitors, Antinous picks up a footstool and hurls it at him. After such outrage Odysseus suffers in silence, "devising evils" (*kaka bussodomeuôn*, 17.465) for Antinous. Homer employs the same phrase to describe the evils which Odysseus, upon spying the stake, devised against the Cyclops.[16] Once again, if there is a sense of pity for Polyphemus when he is wounded in his own house, the same pity must be present when Odysseus suffers at the hands of the arrogant Antinous.[17] The effect of such poignancy in Book 17 is to involve the audi-

[15] Homer is intent on presenting Odysseus as one who suffers in isolation. In 17.324-327 Odysseus is left alone not only by Argus, who dies, but also by Eumaeus, who now leaves Odysseus' side and enters the palace ahead of his master. Near the end of the book (17.566-568) Odysseus complains that no one in the palace, not even Telemachus, helped him after Antinous struck him with the stool.

[16] The formulaic phrase *kaka bussodomeuôn* occurs four times in the *Odyssey* (9.316, 17.465, 17.491, 20.184) and the verb *bussodomeuô* twice (4.676, 17.66). In every instance, save the Cyclops-episode, the verb or phrase describes a situation in which the suitors (including Melantheus) are involved: either they are plotting to kill Telemachus, or Telemachus and Odysseus are plotting against them. When Homer employs the phrase in Book 9, therefore, he recalls the earlier plots of the suitors and foreshadows Odysseus' treachery against them.

[17] In establishing a parallel between the Odysseus of Book 17 and Polyphemus, Homer is careful to present Antinous, who corresponds to the Odysseus of Book 9, as supremely arrogant, but without any of Odysseus' impressive cunning. Like the earlier Odysseus, Antinous taunts his opponent against the warnings of his comrades (17.477-488). In each case, furthermore, a curse is invoked against the offender: Penelope's prayer to Apollo against Antinous (17.492-494) provides a parallel to Polyphemus' curse of Odysseus (9.526-535). But Antinous' attack against Odysseus is bereft of any sort of intelligence: Antinous knows of no puns with his name and does not inebriate Odysseus before injuring him. Nor does

ence in Odysseus' plight. But by arousing the readers' sensitivities the poet succeeds in transforming expectation of the suitors' slaughter into a personally felt desire for their punishment.

By the end of Book 17, therefore, Homer finally demonstrates his reasons for a partially sympathetic portrayal of Polyphemus. For in this book Odysseus becomes himself a metaphorical Cyclops: he returns, a poor man, to his home and finds it occupied by uninvited guests who have been devouring his livestock and who heap verbal and physical abuse upon him. Like Polyphemus, Odysseus suffers the pain and humiliation in isolation from his friends and even from his pet animal. In making the Ithacan palace a Cyclopean cave, Homer sets the stage, emotionally and ethically, for the slaughter of the suitors. Odysseus has paid for his folly with Polyphemus by wandering the seas for ten years. Now that the suitors have committed the same crime, their punishment cannot be far off.[18]

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Antinous' selection of the footstool from under the table impress us as an ingenious choice: it certainly cannot compare with Odysseus' selection of the *rhopalon* (see note 5, above). In *Od.* 20.18-21 Homer brings the Cyclops-episode full circle: Odysseus himself will summon those very wits which he had employed in the Cyclops' cave and utilize them against the suitors.

[18] A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the November 1979 convention of the Ohio Classical Conference at The Ohio State University in Columbus. My thanks are extended to the anonymous *CW* referee who reviewed this paper and offered suggestions for its improvement.