

The Monster and the Lion

With cruel bronze and far-shadowing spear, the men of Homer's epics cut bloody paths to glory. Too often, we remember not the way in which these paths were cut, but simply the fact that they were cut at all. No less clearly is this seen than in the *Odyssey*, for we remember Odysseus, beyond his other adventures and deeds on his return home, for his blinding of the cyclops Polyphemus, and for his slaughter of the suitors who had done so much to harm his family. These episodes are replete with a violence and a brutality that should shock us as much as any terrible scene of warfare out of the *Iliad*. Yet between them, and between Odysseus and Polyphemus, there are parallels of action and circumstance that call out for understanding. By uncovering these parallels, we will then begin to see not just the hero's path, but the antecedent principles with which Homer imbued it.

The basic structure of these two episodes is the same, even if the part which Odysseus himself plays in them is inverted. In each, a man returning to his home finds himself confronted with unwelcome guests who have violated the rules of hospitality; both, after a period of preparation, exact a bloody vengeance on the trespassers. Yet despite this congruity, in the general reception of these two episodes the vengeance of Polyphemus is unjust, and that of Odysseus is righteous and deserved.

It is not difficult to see why this might be, simply in the typical portrayal and understanding of the unfortunate cyclops, which is to serve as a contrast between culture and nature (Brown 1996, 18). Neatly exemplified in the Oxford commentary on the *Odyssey*, this common view of Polyphemus is as a man-eating monster, who is said to exemplify all that is low in the human condition: brutality, unsociability, impiety, lawlessness, and ignorance (Heubeck

1989, 20-21). Even the manner in which Odysseus blinds Polyphemus is seen as the final ascendance of tool-using man over a primitive and half-remembered past existence (Heubeck 1989, 31). And in his seaborne arrival, however ill-fated, Odysseus is quite clearly represented as the herald of a more technologically advanced and more complex society (Rinon 2007, 310). In all this, Odysseus is the perfect foil for this comparison: where Polyphemus is alone, Odysseus has companions; where Polyphemus triumphs by brute strength, Odysseus conquers by craft and artifice. He is, moreover, the hero of the story, and not less than the favorite of Athena – herself victorious in *The Eumenides* over primitive chthonic forces as a bringer of rationality through law and intellect. It is no surprise then, wrapped in these associations, that Polyphemus and Odysseus are judged as differently as they commonly are.

However, prompted as we are by their broad similarity of circumstance, the question remains to us to ask whether we should accept these characterizations, and, accepted or not, whether we should allow them to color our perception of the justice of the things done by these two characters. As always, the answer is to return to Homer, where he himself invites deeper and more meaningful comparisons between Polyphemus and Odysseus. Where Polyphemus kills and devours Odysseus' men like so many cattle, Odysseus himself, standing amid the slaughtered suitors, is said to have been αἵματι καὶ λύθρῳ πεπαλαγμένον ὥστε λέοντα, | ὅς ῥά τε βεβρωκῶς βοὸς ἔρχεται ἀγρᾶλοιο (defiled with blood and gore – even as a lion who comes in, having devoured a field-dwelling ox, *Odyssey* 22.402-3, my translation). Homer, by creating these sympathies between the literal and the figurative devourer of men, suggests to us that there is more to be developed from these scenes than the simple approach outlined above.

Through a closer analysis of the events, language, and context of these scenes, we will develop a better understanding of why Homer juxtaposes these two episodes in the way that he

does. Through that examination, we will seek to learn by what right Polyphemus is separated from Odysseus, and in that distinction, with a conventional view cast off, we will be able to say much about the justification of violence, not just in the world constructed by Homer to serve as the setting of his poems, but in our own, and in the world of the ancient past which looked to these epics for so much of its instruction in right action.

Works Cited

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