

## Nobody's Fool: "Outis" vs. "Polyphemus" in *Odyssey*, Book 9

Few readers of the *Odyssey* will forget the efficacy of Odysseus' pseudonym "Outis" when famously uttered by the Cyclops Polyphemus (9.408): ὧ φίλοι, Οὐτίς με κτείνει δόλω οὐδὲ βίηφι ("Friends, Outis/no one is killing me by deceit and not by might"). A difference in accent between name and word (Οὐτίς vs. οὔτις) proves to be no obstacle as the Cyclopes misunderstand Polyphemus and abandon him. While this instance of wordplay has been treated by scholars as early as Eustathius, Polyphemus' three other (apparently untreated) uses of the pseudonym participate in similar wordplay, the name "Outis" in each case transforming a threat by Polyphemus into a good omen for Odysseus. Furthermore, through this very series of auspicious utterances, Odysseus as narrator appears to offer his Phaeacian audience a mocking gloss on the name "Polyphemus": "He Of Many *Phēmai*."

The first use of *Outis* by the Cyclops occurs just after he asks Odysseus' name. When the hero instead gives him a pseudonym (both the nominative and accusative: Οὐτίς...Οὔτιν, 9.366), Polyphemus responds brutally (9.369-70): Οὔτιν ἐγὼ πύματον ἔδομαι μετὰ οἷς ἐτάροισιν, | τοὺς δ' ἄλλους πρόσθεν ("I will eat Outis last of all among his comrades | and the rest beforehand"). He of course means to say he will eat them all, but hearing οὔτιν' (with acute accent and elided alpha) instead of Οὔτιν yields quite another meaning: "I will eat no one among his comrades last, and the rest beforehand." The result is an unintended paradoxical assertion implying that the Cyclops will in fact eat no one at all. How can one eat anyone without eating *someone* last?

The two other times Polyphemus utters the pseudonym occur in his speech to the ram. In the first instance, the Cyclops names (he thinks) the man who blinded him (9.455): ...Οὐτίς, ὄν οὐ πώ φημι πεφυγμένον εἶναι ὄλεθρον ("...Outis, who, I say, has not escaped death yet"). To the

hearer, however, Polyphemus unwittingly refers to his adversary as “...no one who, I say, has not escaped death yet.” Polyphemus again plays the fool, his boastful assertion of Odysseus’s death transformed into a veritable guarantee of the hero’s survival.

The Cyclops’ final, climactic use of the pseudonym draws attention to itself as the last word of this same speech. He imagines killing Odysseus might bring him relief from the evils “that worthless Outis brought me” (τά μοι οὐτιδανὸς πόρεν Οὔτις, 9.460). The audience, however, primed now to look for the “Outis” joke, will hear Polyphemus refer to those evils “that no one worthless gave me.” Through a case of unintended litotes, Polyphemus’ own attempt at name play (οὐτιδανὸς...Οὔτις) proves pathetic, transformed into emphatic praise for Odysseus, the joke on Polyphemus coming with the last word of his own speech.

Scholars (e.g., Ahl and Roisman, 109; Bakker, 135-136, n. 2; Basset, 59; Bergren, 49; Burkert, 23; Higbie, 21; Louden, 41-43) have offered various interpretations for the name “Polyphemus,” but this series of four unwitting auspicious utterances by the Cyclops recommends another possibility, one derived from the word φήμη. This word occurs only three times in the *Odyssey* (never in the *Iliad*), of utterances taken as auspicious by the listener but whose significance goes unrecognized by the speaker (on such “cledonomanacy” in the *Odyssey*, see Peradotto 1-4). When Aegyptus prays that Zeus grant the assembly’s convener whatever he desires, Telemachus rejoices at the omen, a φήμη (2.35) delivered by a suitor’s father who is unaware that young Telemachus convened the assembly. Later, when Odysseus intends to slaughter the suitors, he prays for a φήμη (20.100), and he receives that φήμη (20.105) when he overhears an exhausted slave offer an unintentionally ominous prayer: that today’s meal will be the suitors’ last.

In Book 9, the narrator Odysseus uses the name “Polyphemus” only twice, first to introduce the Cyclops’ famous “Outis” response to his fellow Cyclopes, and then to introduce the ram-speech featuring two final cases of unwitting “Outis”-play, both φῆμαι. Given this, Odysseus seems to recommend that his adversary’s name be understood in light of his woeful misuse of the pseudonym “Outis” and the good omens that come of it, that is, mockingly, as “He Of Many *Phēmai*.”

#### Works Cited

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