

Goat “I”sland and Imaginative Eremetic Spaces

In *Odyssey* book 9 (116-141), Odysseus describes an island stopover “neither near nor far” (οὔτε σχεδὸν οὔτ’ ἀποτηλοῦ, 115) from the land of the Cyclopes. The island is uninhabited (οὐ μὲν γὰρ πάτος ἀνθρώπων ἀπερύκει, 117), and is wooded (ὕληεσσ’, 116) and populated by uncountable goats (αἴγες ἀπειρέσiai, 116). The island is perfect for human habitation: it produces crops continuously, is well-irrigated, and has the ideal harbor for sea-farers—yet it is desolate. Why would that be the case, and why would Odysseus spend so many lines describing this stopover in meticulous detail? In this paper, I will show that Goat Island is an extended imagination of an ermetic space (see Rehm 2002: 114ff for the term in Attic tragedy) that offers an imaginative playground for the audience, while also providing the narrator an opportunity to distract his audience from the unflattering aspects of the Cyclops episode to follow. In what sorts of circumstances, and for what purposes, are islands thematic in literature? This presentation will explore goat island in conjunction with other islands depicted in fictional accounts, including the desolate Lemnos of *Philoctetes*, and in conversation with Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope: why is goat island seemingly outside of time, and not subject to seasonal or climate vicissitudes? Ultimately, I will argue that goat island functions as a counterfactual space of exploration both for Odysseus and for the Phaeacians’ benefit as Odysseus’s audience.

Clay (1980: 261-262) has argued that goat island was inhabited by the Phaeacians before they emigrated to Scheria. In this piece, Clay also claims that the word χηρόω implies a factitive “widowing” or “making bereft” and cannot simply mean that humans are absent from the island—the island was once occupied and cultivated but has been left by its inhabitants. This view has its detractors (Bremmer 1986 and Alden 2017 222n3), but the length of the description and its

function still require explanation. If, as Segal writes (1994: 18; cf Vidal-Naquet 1994), the Phaeacian episode is a transitory period for Odysseus between his break from self on Ogygia and full reintegration with his psychological and mental powers on Ithaca, we can read his description of goat island as a counterfactual space that he experiments with as an individual trying to understand how to move from the surreal world of Calypso to the actual world of Penelope and Ithaca. Bakker (2013: 60-64) writes of goat island as an “otherworldly paradise,” a “colonist’s dream,” and focuses on the consumption of abundant meat as a marker of a possible ritual perversion, or, at least omission, as there is no mention of sacrifice or sharing with the gods. Ahl and Roisman (1996:102-103) read Odysseus’ description of both goat island and the Cyclopes as subtly comparing the Phaeacians with the Cyclopes and through his description, “adding barbs” at the Phaeacians’ expense—according to the authors, because of their lack of bravery in standing up to the Cyclopes. The authors also conjecture that the island is a “narrative fabrication” since he at once says the ship does not need cables because the harbor is so inviting, but also mentions loosening the cables when he and his men depart.

In this passage, and throughout the apology, Odysseus leverages the sorrow he is feeling to create emotions in his hearers. This is another manifestation of what Minchin (2019: 354-358) calls Odysseus’ “emotional intelligence.” Since the Phaeacians have connections to both the Cyclopes and the gods, Odysseus crafts a fantasy land that will directly appeal to their needs as a ship-faring, hunting-deficient, and isolated people, providing a counterfactual world to imagine possibilities, both for himself and his audience. Odysseus thus masterfully employs the use of counterfactual utopian imagination in his description of Goat Island to manipulate his audience and demonstrate how spatial imagining can create a useful cognitive space.

Works Cited

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