

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: Polyphemos' Dionysian Exclusion in Euripides' *Cyclops*

Euripides' *Cyclops* is the sole complete extant satyr-play and features Polyphemos as the titular character in a satyric rendering of book nine of the *Odyssey*. I argue that a closer look at inversions of sacrificial rules and practices that accompany Polyphemos' eating of Odysseus' companions furthers our understanding of Dionysian rituals and fleshes out their potential connections with the generic conventions of satyr drama.

The satyric Polyphemos is presented as performing his *anthropophagia* in the form of a Greek animal sacrifice rather than in the Dionysian mode (involving *omophagia* and *sparagmos*); I propose that the performance of ritual sacrifice both distances the satyric Cyclops from his epic counterpart, and serves to separate him from the Dionysian community. I will argue that such distancing sets Polyphemos apart from the other Dionysian characters of the drama (Silenus, the satyrs, and Odysseus who allies himself with them), making him a non-participant in Dionysian worship. His casting as an enemy of the god, as we will see, serves well the adaptation of his satyric performance as well as the Dionysian character of the genre and its performance setting. To reiterate, Polyphemos' gruesome ritual performance resembles none of the corresponding Dionysian practices of *sparagmos* and *omophagia*, which we find in *Bacchae*. The Cyclops' *anthropophagia* is instead performed through a perversion of standard sacrificial norms. A central issue in discussing the adaptation of the Homeric depiction of cannibalism has been to compare the different ritual modes in which human flesh is eaten. Key interpretations of the play (Konstan, 1989; O'Sullivan, 2005; Seaford, 1984) have addressed Polyphemos' culinary practices and his blasphemous speech as signifying his otherness, in relation the other characters in the play. While, as Carol Dougherty acknowledges, eating raw flesh is a paradigmatic marker of the savage, it is the Cyclops' cooking of human flesh that defines the satyric Polyphemos as

uncivilized. This, however, also gives rise to the complexities that defy easy categorization of his standing as a uncivilized, barbaric, and savage Other. While Polyphemus' *anthropophagia* is in itself transgressive, the description of the slaughter of Odysseus' companions in terms that evoke Greek ritual sacrifice alter the brutality of his barbarous actions.

Polyphemus' performance of sacrifice in the standard mode of this ritual adds a layer of sophistication to his *anthropophagia*, while the perversions implicit in his deviant ritual performance undermine the gods. Walter Burkert details the various procedures of the standard Greek sacrificial program, including prayer, slaughter, division, roasting, and distribution of meat. The satyric Polyphemus partially upholds this model, but he repurposes the sacrifice, to serve himself rather than the gods. The satyric Polyphemus boils and roasts his game over a well-lit fire, another mark of his sophistication, which directly contrasts with the series of transgressions he undertakes, notably his sacrificing to what he calls the greatest divinity, his belly (γαστρί, 335). Homer's Cyclops perverts the rules of *xenia* by eating Odysseus' comrades; the satyric Cyclops, in addition to his cannibalism, affronts the gods through his culinary endeavor.

The characterization of Polyphemus in *Cyclops* then reflects an aversion towards the gods at large; his religious impieties, as detailed above, further sustain his portrayal as an adversary of Dionysus and his worship. First, Polyphemus' command that Odysseus stand around his cauldron-altar (ἄμφι βωμὸν, 346), Odysseus despairs at docking at the heart of an impious man (ἀνοσίου, 348). Polyphemus next emphatically rejects elements of Dionysian worship when he is introduced, stating that there is no Dionysus on the island of Sicily (64). Finally, his anti-Dionysian behavior is exemplified by his solitary non-communal lifestyle, to which his perverted ritual sacrifice attests. After he has been given wine, Polyphemus is eager to include other

Cyclopes in his sympotic revelry, but he is prevented from gathering his fellow Cyclopes by Odysseus since the traditional myth necessitates his injury and isolation. This isolation is dramatized as an exclusion from the Dionysian celebrations and the civic and religious festival of the god who presided over the theater in Athens.

Bibliography

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