

Folklore and Greek Identity in Book 9 of the *Odyssey*

When Odysseus steps into Polyphemus' cave in book 9 of the *Odyssey*, he finds more than just a Cyclops. Polyphemus is the monster of this part of the story. He eats some of Odysseus' companions and would have finished off the hero himself if Odysseus had not devised their escape. Yet, Polyphemus as a character plays a greater role than just "the bad guy," and ultimately embodies the idea of an uncivilized Other. When Homer constructs the Otherness of Polyphemus, he is at the same time constructing the Greekness of Odysseus. Therefore, the ideals of civilization are represented in the hero Odysseus, born against the uncivilized nature of Polyphemus. This paper argues that the interaction between these constructs is shown both through the lack of hospitality seen in Polyphemus, as well as through the incorporation of the folkloric tradition of *The Ogre Blinded*.

By combining these elements to create the character of Polyphemus, Homer is able to establish what it means to be a Greek by illustrating what it means to be a barbarian. This is especially interesting when considering this episode in the context of the 8th/7th centuries B.C.E. If we consider this as a moment when the Greek identity was being fleshed out and established, then this story - with its very defined social expectations - provides an answer to the question of Greekness.

However, it is not just Odysseus who shows us how to be Greek, but the silent audience of the story – the Phaeacians. The Phaeacians are not the Cyclopes. They are a civilized people, and they show this through their treatment of Odysseus. The sheer difference in his experience of Polyphemus against his experience of the Phaeacians is another way in which this proper identity becomes established. By showing what not to do, Homer teaches us the right way to act.

This examination of the events of Book 9 seeks to consider the different factors that play into the development of Polyphemus. The folkloric tradition that Homer weaves into his story is part of a larger theme of “us vs. them,” with the Greeks on one side and everyone else on the other. The episode with Polyphemus does more than show the trials and pains that Odysseus underwent in his νόστος. It also works to establish a Greek identity in a pivotal moment in time. It amazes the audience with danger and monsters, but at the same time it slips beneath the surface and shows them who they are.

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