

Wether or Not: Gender and Ovines in the Cyclops' Cave

The contest between Odysseus and Polyphemus in Book Nine of the *Odyssey* not only sets the tone for later encounters with inhabitants of other islands, but the struggle also catalyzes the character of the eponymous hero evident in the rest of the poem. Scholars have established the varied significance of the episode. Rainer Friedrich explored the relationship between the tricks used by Odysseus in the cave with the attainment of his epithet *polymetis* and the qualities implied by it. Denys Page (1-20) demonstrated how Homer distinguished his telling of “The Ogre Blinded” from international folkloric versions, and Seth Schein, building upon Page’s study, explained how the differences are indicative of the Homeric worldview. Jan Bremmer, delving into the background of the telling, has argued that the heroes’ emergence from the cave relates to archaic Greek rites of passage: the characters, clinging to the sheep in their escape, are reborn as new individuals. Brent Shaw (21-23) has shown that Polyphemus and Odysseus represent a cultural struggle between an older pastoral model and new technologies of the polis.

One detail related to the last issue, that of pastoralism and agriculture, has gone largely ignored by the commentaries, but this element bears significantly on the other issues above, particularly to the character of Odysseus and his masculinity. Odysseus as narrator describes the deception he employed to slip past the blinded Cyclops and escape from the cave, distinguishing between the sheep that carried his companions and the single animal under which he hid. The former are termed ἄρσενες ὄϊες “male sheep” (9.425), while Odysseus’ ride is more definitely called a “ram” ἀρνειός (9.432). The ram is the Cyclops’ favorite (447-60), and its role in the escape and its later sacrifice are indicative of the complete humiliation of the Odysseus’ pastoral foe. To a modern, overly-urban audience the difference in terms may seem one without meaning, but to those with a knowledge of pastoral techniques, the distinction is important. The

crew's sheep are wethers, castrated male sheep, while Odysseus rides on the only sexually-active male in the herd, the alpha male, the ram. The practice of castrating most males in a herd is common even today and seems to date to the Bronze Age in Greece, if the Linear B records from Knossos and our interpretation of them are accurate (Killen). Castration prevents struggles over dominance in the herd, and wethers, as larger animals, provide a better quality and greater quantity of wool and meat. Indo-European languages lack standard cognates for castrated, domesticated animals; as a consequence euphemisms and semantic phrases must be used for the most part (Buck, 152-171). Thus wethers in Homeric and later Greek are "male sheep," where sheep stands for the female sex of the species, just as oxen are "male cows," οἱ βόες (*Od.* 18.371) semantically in Greek.

The recognition of this small point in the practices of animal husbandry has larger significance for the construction of gender in the epic. Just as Odysseus' ride is the dominant male in the herd, the hero himself is the dominant male in the crew, and with this dominance comes the opportunity for sexual activity in the encounter with Circe soon to follow in Book Eleven. Moreover, this distribution of males foreshadows the fight with the suitors to come, a bloody and animalistic fight over the control of women in Odysseus' household. Melanthius the goatherd is, in fact, castrated for his insubordination and implied threat (22.476), and the women of the house who did engage in sexual activity with males other than Odysseus are killed horribly by hanging (22.465-73).

The contest with the Cyclops not only establishes Odysseus' mental skills and the defeat of the old pastoral and folkloric world by the new Homeric civilization, but it signals the main character's dominance over the other males in the epic, both friend and foe. He comes out of the cave as the alpha male of the human domestic herd, a ram among wethers.

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