

From “Cyclops” to “Polyphemus,” and Back Again

This paper explores implications of previously untreated onomastic play in the *Odyssey*'s Cyclopeia.

In recounting his experience with the Cyclops, the narrator Odysseus withholds the giant's name from his Phaeacian audience until the character Odysseus learns it himself. Before that, the giant's identity in Book 9 is simply Κύκλωψ, and Odysseus addresses him as such at each stage of putting his plan into action, first when offering him the strong wine (9.347) and then when declaring his own name (falsely) as Outis (9.364). This paves the way for Odysseus to play on the name Κύκλωψ at the very moment of the giant's blinding, through the simile comparing the hero and his comrades to men drilling a hole through ship timber (9.382-388). By framing this simile with the words ὀφθαλμῶ...δίνεον (9.383-384) and ὀφθαλμῶ...δινέομεν (9.387-388), Odysseus as narrator recommends a fresh meaning for the name Κύκλωψ: “Drilled-Eye.”

While scholars appear to have overlooked this joke, it was not lost on Euripides, who in his *Cyclops* reworked the epic name-play in the heavy-handed manner that a satyr play demands. There, also comparing himself to a shipwright with a drill, Odysseus declares, “just so, I'll twirl the fire-brand in the gleaming eye of the Cyclops!” (οὕτω κυκλώσω δαλὸν ἐν φαεσφόρῳ Κύκλωπος ὄψει, 462). In the *Odyssey*, then, even as the character Odysseus surrenders his identity by taking on the pseudonym “Nobody,” Odysseus as narrator magnifies himself by having his own actions define through name-play the very identity of his opponent.

Odysseus (and the Phaeacians) learn the Cyclops' true name only later, when the Cyclopes call him “Polyphemus” from outside the cave. Bakker (2002, 135-136, n. 2) lists the

various interpretations by modern scholars of this name's meaning, but none seem to have considered it sufficiently in terms of its most immediate verbal context, which implies two possibilities. The Cyclopes question to the giant, “τίπτε τόσον, Πολύφημ’, ἀρημένος ᾧδ’ ἐβόησας” (9.403), perhaps recommends the sense “Much-Uttering,” a mocking reference to the giant's great cries on being blinded, and the potential name-play observed by Louden (1995, 41-42) three lines later (προσέφη κρατερὸς Πολύφημος, 9.406) might support this reading.

Another meaning, however, “Much Spoken Of,” i.e., “Famous,” has been most consistently applied to the Cyclops, whose “fame” is generally understood to derive from the Cyclopeia itself (Bakker 2002, 135). As Bakker (2002 144, and n. 20) notes, however, Odysseus' account places the two names Polyphemus and Outis (an ὄνομα κλυτόν, “name of renown,” 9.364) in proximity with one another here at the very moment Odysseus' “Nobody” trick succeeds (9.407-408): τοὺς δ’ αὖτ’ ἐξ ἄντρου προσέφη κρατερὸς Πολύφημος: / “ὧ φίλοι, Οὔτις με κτείνει δόλω οὐδὲ βίηφι.” In brief, the mighty “Famous” declares that a certain “Nobody” is killing him. Polyphemus' own true name thus participates in the dramatic irony of the episode.

Odysseus as narrator soon highlights this contrast again, this time by framing the Cyclops' speech to his ram with the same names. The repeated formula προσέφη κρατερὸς Πολύφημος (9.446) introduces the speech, which concludes with the words οὔτιδανὸς πόρεν Οὔτις (460). While surely intended by Polyphemus as an expression of power (Louden 1995, 43) the pun οὔτιδανὸς...Οὔτις effectively glosses the name Outis as “One of No Account,” further highlighting the ironic contrast in meaning between the giant's real name and Odysseus' pseudonym as the Cyclops continues not to recognize the name Outis for the pseudonym it is.

After this point, Odysseus as narrator drops the name “Polyphemus” altogether. The character Odysseus, too, when he twice shouts to the giant from his parting ship, addresses

Polyphemus just as before, as Κύκλωψ only (9.475, 9.502), even though he now knows the Cyclops' true name. Through this willful un-naming, Odysseus seeks to make "Famous" Polyphemus a kind of nobody, just another Cyclops. Furthermore, when Odysseus at last ventures a boast, striving (however unsuccessfully: Austin 1971, 14-16; Zoidis 2004, 386-387) to shed his adopted anonymity and reassert his heroic identity (9.502-505), he begins the first two lines with the words Κύκλωψ and ὀφθαλμοῦ, respectively, focusing on the giant's eye and inevitably recalling in his final words to the Cyclops the climactic etymology "Drilled-Eye" that the narrator Odysseus had contrived in recounting the giant's blinding.

Odysseus' Phaeacian audience are surely pleased. The Phaeacians relocated to Scheria because the stronger Cyclopes used to do them harm (6.5-6). Now, thanks to Odysseus, all who identify as "Cyclops" are condemned to recall by that name the harm done their Polyphemus, "the strongest by far" of them all (1.70-71).

Bibliography

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