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John Dayton

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The Negative Banquet of Odysseus and the Cyclops

John Dayton

Abstract

Banquet scenes abound in Homer's *Odyssey* and they contribute significantly to a sense of human community by engendering bonds of guest and host (*xenia*) and the virtues of sharing, equality, and moderation; in the encounters between Odysseus and alien peoples, the type of food and the means of taking it serve as a touchstone for civilized life. Another theme is the conflict of humans with the barbarism of nature, as in the central encounter between Odysseus' men and the Cyclops Polyphemus, which presents a conflict between civilized humanity and a subhuman culture trapped in a primitive pastoral stage, narrated through the medium of a perverted banquet ritual. The conflict is expressed through a set of dichotomies: wine, the beverage of settled life vs. milk, the drink of nomadic barbarism; community vs. antisocial isolation; self-control vs. drunkenness and gluttony; wits vs. brute strength; *xenia* vs. cannibalism. The last theme merits special attention as the cannibalism taboo is strong in Greek culture, as mythology attests, and wherever cannibalism emerges it represents a blasphemous inversion of *xenia* and/or a regression to primal chaos. The Cyclops, a shepherd subsisting on milk and cheese, enacts a parody of the feasting rites in which he dines alone rather than sharing with his visitors, he literally dines on his visitors rather than feeding them, and then makes a mockery of the guest's and host's exchange of gifts. But the Cyclops lacks one crucial quality which distinguishes men from children or savages: self-control, *sophrosyne*. His heedless swillage of the choice wine which Odysseus has given him effectively emasculates him and allows Odysseus and his crew to defeat him by planning and teamwork. In this exemplary clash of mankind with its barbaric negative image, the former has won through community, intelligence, and self-control, all virtues fostered and strengthened by the shared meal, one of the most exemplary scenes in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Key Words: Homer, epic hero, *Odyssey*, Odysseus, feast, *xenia*, Cyclops, Polyphemus.

Indeed it may be doubted, whether Ulysses, who by the way seems to have had the best stomach of all the heroes in that eating poem of the Odyssey, ever made a better meal

– Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*

This presentation is a sequel to that which I delivered at the first Food conference, and so will probably be more meaningful for those who attended it or have read the published version.¹ Let me recapitulate in brief what I presented there about the eminent thematic role of food and banqueting in the Homeric epics, particularly the *Odyssey*, which will be our subject here.

The number of feasts and meals mentioned in this poem is so considerable that Fielding has dubbed it the “eating poem,” as you see in the epigraph. This is not due to culinary interest per se. Meals are models of society, with great symbolic value relating to harmony, or lack thereof, in the human and divine communities. The dining scenes are typical in the Homeric sense: they have repeated phrases, motifs, elements. The only foods specifically mentioned are roasted meat, bread and wine, the civilized foods. The cooking of the meat, as part of a sacrifice, is invariably depicted, and appears important; this is not mere animal blood and flesh, but human food prepared in religious fashion. Since feeding oneself is the most primitive of human acts, one we share with all beasts, we must therefore take the more care to see that food strengthens rather than debases our humanity. Accordingly the banquet cultivates moderation, good sense and good manners - food is shared equally and guests are welcomed. The obligation toward guests merits special mention. Its power is strikingly displayed in the *Odyssey* when Telemachus and company land near Nestor’s palace. The hosts, Nestor’s sons, do not even ask the name of their guest before receiving him to their banquet.² This guest-host bond is the well-known institution of *xenia*, or its Homeric variant ξενίη, a permanent mutually binding friendship between the parties. *Xenia* is the force that makes travel, commerce and benign international relations possible, as it ensures trusted friends abroad, and so is fundamental to civilized life. As Zeus Xenios is the protector of strangers and the enforcer of *xenia*, it is nothing short of a religious law.

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* exploit the literary opportunities afforded by the themes of banqueting and *xenia*. In both, a well-executed feast signifies harmony, while impropriety in eating always warns of danger to come. But between the two, the *Odyssey* perhaps makes fuller use of the theme; the dining and hosting practices of the various peoples encountered in the epic always convey something about the nature of their society and the degree of their civilization.

The famous episode of the Cyclops³ presents the most complete exposition of the hostile dichotomy between civilized life and barbarism, and it does so largely in terms of food. My presentation here aims to highlight the significance of this theme in the narrative incidents, and then interpret a couple of thematic points that seem to me very surprising in a mythical epic.

Most of you are familiar with the one-eyed giants, who have widely differing roles in various myths which we cannot linger on here. This is the portion of the epic called the Apologos, Odysseus’ firsthand narration of his travels after departing Troy. In Book 9, Odysseus recounts that during their return he and his

company land on a small island offshore from a larger one (traditionally Sicily, as Mount Aetna figures as the home of the Cyclopes in other myths, but not identified by Homer). Odysseus takes some trouble to describe that the island, though fertile, lies in its rough natural state, ungrazed and untilled.⁴ He is not an environmentalist, and does not mean us to think it a fine thing that rich land should lie idle. The point is that the inhabitants are savage – as he mentions, the Cyclopes “plant no plants with their hands, nor plow,” among them are “no assemblies bearing counsel, nor fixed laws,” they live holed up in caves and “each one gives the law to his children and wives.”⁵ Lack of agriculture naturally accompanies an absence of social or political institutions; they live solitarily. Moreover, they do not have the technology of seafaring, a fact which ensures their continued isolation.⁶

Planning to scout the main island, Odysseus declares he will go to discover who the inhabitants may be, “whether they are haughtily violent and savage, and unjust, or kind to strangers and of god-fearing mind.”⁷ Again, propriety toward guests is the touchstone both for the state of a people’s culture, and their piety – community must incorporate strangers and the gods as well. Odysseus and a detachment go to scout the cave of the Cyclops Polyphemus, bringing a guest-gift they believe he will appreciate, a jar of wine, the beverage of civilized life, requiring settled agricultural habitations and a complex process. And this is no plonk, but a prized vintage, given to Odysseus by a priest of the Ciconians whom he had protected during their sack of that city recounted earlier⁸ (the narrative of Book 9 is kept twined together by this device). “Whenever they drank the honey-sweet red wine, he filled a cup and poured it into twenty measures of water, and a sweet fragrance wafted from the bowl.”⁹ Thus it is to be consumed with proper moderation, highly watered down. The ancient Greeks of course always watered their wine, and drinking it unmixed was a mark of barbarism; the proportions given here are poetic hyperbole, but make the point – this is a beverage to respect.

Bearing this boon, they enter the cave, a very isolating sort of habitat; the Cyclops is not at home presently. Homer seems to work in deliberate dichotomies in this story, for pretty well immediately after the description of Maron’s wine, we see the Cyclops’ means of sustenance: find plenty of livestock, sheep and goats, and the beverage of barbarism – milk and whey, along with cheese.¹⁰ This is the signature diet of the uncultivated nomadic life, and it is interesting that dairy products are never mentioned at a proper feast. So, civilized people farm/barbarians are nomads; civilized people live in communities, savages in solitary; the former drink wine and the latter milk. But the most important distinction is that civilized humans feed and honor guests out of respect for the gods. They assume that a stranger is a friend rather than an enemy.

When the giant Cyclops makes his appearance, blocking the cave entrance with a great boulder, Odysseus addresses him with proper courtesy: “. . . as for us, we come to your knees, that you may grant hospitality, and otherwise also give the gift which is the right of strangers. O mighty one, fear the gods. We are suppliants, and

Zeus Xenios is the avenger of suppliants and strangers, he who attends on reverend strangers.”¹¹

The Cyclops gives a hideous reply: we pay no heed to Zeus or the god, we are much stronger than they. But worse is to come; apparently starved for meat, he seizes two of the men, dashes their brains out and eats them. This is the law of *xenia* stood on its head: instead of feeding guests, they feed you very literally. It is also the most barbaric meal conceivable, not merely uncooked flesh, but raw human flesh, washed down by milk. Anthropologically, meals do not go any lower. Strictly speaking his act does not constitute cannibalism, as the Cyclops is not human, but he is sufficiently anthropoid and the connection is irresistible. This is not the only place in the *Odyssey* or Greek mythology where the ultimate taboo makes an appearance.

Many of you know the progress of the story: Polyphemus continues to eat two men for the morning and evening meal, and their numbers are becoming crucially low, but they can't kill him because of the boulder which he always places at the entrance. But if Odysseus and his company lack the strength of the Cyclops, they have something he doesn't: mind power and teamwork - they can work as a community, something of which the Cyclops has no concept (οὐδ' ἀλλήλων ἀλέγουσιν).¹² Homer takes pains to underscore foresight and method in the plan for revenge and escape: while he watches his flock, they choose a great tree trunk in the cave, cut it down and smooth it, harden it in the fire, put it out of sight, and choose the men for the deed by lot.¹³ But their plot does not entail mere force - Odysseus uses the appetite of the Cyclops against him, and the drink of civilization will become a weapon too. When Polyphemus returns that evening, Odysseus offers him a bowl of the wondrous wine which he had been saving. He swills it down, as a milk-drinker he is unused to such strong stuff, and after three servings he has lost such wits as he possessed. The difference between man and beast, or civilized man and savage, is control over the appetites. The latter bound to obey them, while the civilized man has the capacity to decide when his appetites are beneficial, and to restrain them where necessary – the virtue of *sophrosyne*.

There ensues a depraved reversal of the guest-host bond and the exchange of gifts (the key word *xeineion*)¹⁴ as the Cyclops promises such a gift if Odysseus will give his name, which he gives as “No-man” or “Nobody” for reasons that do not become clear until the end of the tale – this device again contrasts the foresight of Odysseus with the oblivious stupor of the barbarian. Polyphemus announces his gift, in what passes for a joke in Cyclops society: he will eat No-man last of all. The Cyclops has been called the “anti-host” for this tendency to work in patterns exactly contrary to accepted custom.¹⁵

As the Cyclops drifts into insensibility, his repulsive nature is given tangible form in especially graphic fashion: “from his throat gushed wine and morsels of man flesh; wine-heavy, he belched it out.”¹⁶ Lack of control has turned the marvelous wine into cannibal vomit; it doesn't get much worse. And drunkenness

brings ruin to the Cyclops, as to other persons of the *Odyssey*. As he lies passed out, they set to work, bringing out the carefully prepared stake; again cooperation is emphasized as they all handle the thing together and burn away his eye. He shrieks and runs outside, calling to his neighbors, and when they ask who has injured him, he cries, "No man!" Their answer is telling: if no one did it to you, it must be sickness, you'll just have to endure it.¹⁷ And they go back to bed. Here is the fatal flaw of the Cyclopean race; they have no sense of community, they will not exert themselves to help a neighbor. They also have no curiosity, it does not occur to them that the whole situation makes no sense, that maybe they had better go investigate. They are complete literalists; no one did anything to him. Note that here again Homer appears to present a conscious dichotomy: the teamwork of the men as they bore into the giant's eye is likened to workmen managing a strap-driven drill in shipbuilding, a high-technology endeavor that requires real sense of ensemble; almost immediately afterward we have the Cyclopes neglecting to make the most basic effort on behalf of a neighbor. This is what comes of dining on cheese in caves.

I hope to have made the importance of food type and its concomitants evident in the episode of the Cyclops, but I wish to close with some observations which may locate these themes in a wider interpretive context. Motifs well-known to folklorists abound here, such as those of the Trickster or the small defeating the great in the manner of Jack the Giant Slayer or the young David, for that matter. Less obvious perhaps is its inverse relationship with another Greek myth, that of Prometheus and the eagle, which is often presented through its Structuralist interpretation along the lines of binary antithesis outlined by J.P. Vernant.¹⁸ The story here involves the Titan Prometheus, one of the early gods and a trickster entity, who, when men and gods are gathered together to agree on a ritual of sacrifice, tricks Zeus into forgoing the choicer share of sacrificial meat. Zeus in his anger denies fire to humans, and Prometheus steals it from heaven and bestows it upon the mortal race. His punishment is to be bound to a rock far in the Caucasus where an eagle or vulture eats his liver each day.

You might notice some juxtapositions here – sacrificial meat and fire, fire that gives us power over the animals, including the ability to cook them, and it's also the prime mover of technology, specifically metalwork and pottery). Thus Structuralists rightly see here a representation of the nature-vs.-culture dilemma; another embodiment of that strange myth wherein the emergence of culture (technology or anything specifically human) cuts us off from the state of nature and communion with the gods. It is there from the Garden of Eden and it runs deep through Greek and Roman thought; the sense that we become more degenerate and corrupt as we become more civilized. So for thus empowering man with fire so that he can rule nature and cook animals, Prometheus suffers a condign, precisely inverse punishment: he himself is eaten raw by an animal, forcibly returned to the state of nature.

If we look at the tale of the Cyclops, we see the inverse punishment of Prometheus re-inverted, if you follow me. It's not a story of the transgression of nature, but rather the opposite, a transgression of cultural laws. The brutish Cyclops violates civilized norms by the consumption of raw human meat, and he receives his chastisement through the drink of civilization and through fire, which the men have employed to harden the stake. There is no remorse here for the natural state; culture is celebrated as a superior power.

I further wish to point out a closely related myth. The Cyclopes are children of the gods, living a pastoral life without laws or farming, given all their produce unbidden from the ground, very much children of the state of nature we have thus described. These details connect the Cyclopes with another deep-running mythical trope, that of the Golden Age. This too is an old one in epic and the most common version is Hesiod's.

Χρῦσεον μὲν πρότιστα γένος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων
 ἀθάνατοι ποίησαν Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχοντες.
 οἱ μὲν ἐπὶ Κρόνου ἦσαν, ὅτ' οὐρανῶι ἐμβασίλευεν·
 ὥστε θεοὶ δ' ἔζων ἀκηδέα θυμὸν ἔχοντες
 νόσφιν ἄτερ τε πόνων καὶ οἰζύος, οὐδέ τι δειλὸν
 γῆρας ἐπῆν, αἰεὶ δὲ πόδας καὶ χεῖρας ὁμοῖοι
 τέρποντ' ἐν θαλίησι, κακῶν ἔκτοσθεν ἀπάντων·
 θνησκον δ' ὥσθ' ὕπνῳ δεδμημένοι· ἐσθλὰ δὲ πάντα
 τοῖσιν ἔην· καρπὸν δ' ἔφερε ζεῖδωρος ἄρουρα
 αὐτομάτη πολλὸν τε καὶ ἄφθονον· οἱ δ' ἔθελημοὶ
 ἦσυχοι ἔργ' ἐνέμοντο σὺν ἐσθλοῖσιν πολέεσσιν.
 [ἀφνειοὶ μῆλοισι, φίλοι μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν.]
 αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ τοῦτο γένος κατὰ γαῖα κάλυψε,
 τοὶ μὲν δαίμονες ἄγνοὶ ἐπιχθόνιοι τελέθουσιν
 ἐσθλοὶ, ἀλεξίκακοι, φύλακες θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων¹⁹

But you see that Hesiod's golden race dwell with their sheep in prelapsarian bliss, undefiled and righteous. In Hesiod's version the appearance of technology in the later bronze and iron ages brings corresponding moral deterioration. This idealization of primitivism also runs very deep in Classical thought and is still with us, inspiring most Utopian thought. You can easily see the kinship of the Cyclopes to the Golden Race, but you can just as easily see the difference – here the children of nature are not supernally serene and righteous but crude, bestial and malign. This tale seems to me very much a refutation of the Golden Age “orthodoxy” which was its close contemporary.

To my knowledge the contrast of the myth of Odysseus and the Cyclops with those of Prometheus and the Golden Age has not been appreciated before, and is so specific that it seems to me deliberate, but it's not customary to speak of

intentional thematic choices when we're dealing with oral epic. The *Odyssey* may be somewhat younger than the *Iliad* or Hesiod and further out of the so called Dark Ages, and it may simply represent a greater positivism toward progress and less preference for ancient days. It definitely celebrates current human accomplishment and the present and perhaps even the future much more that do its predecessors (the *Iliad* for example shows an archaizing tendency completely absent from the *Odyssey*).

But as for the Cyclops tale, it celebrates civilized man and society. In this exemplary clash of humanity with savagery, the former has won through superior community, intelligence, and self-control. These are all the virtues fostered and strengthened by the shared meal, one of the most frequent and most exemplary scenes in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Notes

¹ John Dayton, 'Food and Civilized Society in the Homeric Epics,' in *Food: Expressions and Impressions*, ed. Don Sanderson and Mira Crouch (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 31-45.

² Homer, *Odyssey* 3.34-42, trans. A.S. Kline, viewed 14 December 2013, <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Odhome.htm>

οἱ δ' ὡς οὖν ξείνους ἴδον, ἀθρόοι ἦλθον ἅπαντες,
 χερσὶν τ' ἠσπάζοντο καὶ ἐδρίασθαι ἄνωγον.
 πρῶτος Νεστορίδης Πεισίστρατος ἐγγύθεν ἐλθὼν
 ἀμφοτέρων ἔλε χεῖρα καὶ ἴδρυσεν παρὰ δαιτὶ
 κώεσιν ἐν μαλακοῖσιν ἐπὶ ψαμάθοις ἀλίησιν
 πᾶρ τε κασιγνήτῳ Θρασυμήδεϊ καὶ πατέρι ᾧ·
 δῶκε δ' ἄρα σπλάγγων μοίρας, ἐν δ' οἶνον ἔχευεν
 χρυσεῖφ δέπαϊ· δειδισκόμενος δὲ προσηύδα
 Παλλάδ' Ἀθηναίην κούρην Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο . . .

But when they saw the strangers, they crowded round them, clasped their hands in welcome, begging them to be seated. Nestor's son, Peisistratus, was first to approach and took them both by the hand, and made them sit on soft fleeces spread on the sand, beside his father, and brother, Thrasymedes, so they could feast. Having done so, he served them inner portions, poured wine in a golden cup, and drinking her health, spoke to Pallas Athene, the aegis-bearing daughter of Zeus . . .

³ *Odyssey* 9.109-566

⁴ 9.116-124, 131-35

⁵ 9.106-129

⁶ 9.106-15, 125-9

Κυκλώπων δ' ἔς γαῖαν ὑπερφιάλων ἀθεμίστων
 ἰκόμεθ', οἷ ῥα θεοῖσι πεποιθότες ἀθανάτοισιν
 οὔτε φυτεύουσιν χερσὶν φυτὸν οὔτ' ἀρώσιν,
 ἀλλὰ τὰ γ' ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα πάντα φύονται,
 πυροὶ καὶ κριθαὶ ἢ δ' ἄμπελοι, αἳ τε φέρουσιν
 οἶνον ἐριστάφυλον, καὶ σφιν Διὸς ὄμβρος ἀέξει.
 τοῖσιν δ' οὔτ' ἀγοραὶ βουλευφόροι οὔτε θέμιστες,
 ἀλλ' οἷ γ' ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων ναίουσι κάρηνα
 ἐν σπέσσι γλαφυροῖσι, θεμιστεύει δὲ ἕκαστος
 παίδων ἢ δ' ἀλόχων, οὐδ' ἀλλήλων ἀλέγουσιν. . . .
 οὐ γὰρ Κυκλώπεσσι νέες πάρα μιλοπάρηοι,
 οὐδ' ἄνδρες νηῶν ἐνὶ τέκτονες, οἳ κε κάμοιεν
 νῆας εὐσσέλμους, αἳ κεν τελέοιεν ἕκαστα
 ἄστε' ἐπ' ἀνθρώπων ἰκνεύμεναι, οἷά τε πολλὰ
 ἄνδρες ἐπ' ἀλλήλους νηυσὶν περώωσι θάλασσαν

(We) came to the land of the Cyclopes, a lawless, aggressive people, who never lift their hands to plant or plough, but rely on the immortal gods. Wheat, barley, and vines with their richly clustered grapes, grow there without ploughing or sowing, and rain from Zeus makes them flourish. The Cyclopes have no council meetings, no code of law, but live in echoing caves on the mountain slopes, and each man lays down the law to his wives and children, and disregards his neighbours . . . The Cyclopes have no vessels with crimson-painted prows, no shipwrights to build sound boats with oars, to meet their need and let them travel to other men's cities, as other races visit each other over the sea in ships.

⁷ 9.175-6

⁸ 9.39-61

⁹ 9.208-11

¹⁰ 9.216-223

¹¹ 9.266-271

¹² 9.115

¹³ 9.316-335

¹⁴ 9.370

¹⁵ P. Winston Fettner, 'Preparations for a Structuralist Study of Cannibalism in Greek Myth,' viewed 14 December 2013,

http://www.academia.edu/956356/_Preparations_for_a_Structuralist_Study_of_Cannibalism_in_Greek_Myth_

¹⁶ 9.373.4

¹⁷ 9.408-12

¹⁸ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1996) 183-202.

¹⁹ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109-12, trans. Daryl Hine, viewed 9 January 2014, www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/329658.html.

First the immortals who dwell high up on the top of Olympus
 Fashioned the first born race of articulate men, which was golden,
 And it is said that they lived when Cronos was ruling in heaven.
 God-like, they lived like gods, and their hearts were entirely carefree
 Distant strangers to labour and suffering; neither did wretched
 Age overtake them; instead, their members intact and unchanged, they
 Took much pleasure in banquets and parties, apart from all evils
 Till they died as if sleep overcame them. And everything worthwhile
 Came to their hand as the grain-growing earth bore fruit without tilling,
 Plenty of good food crops unbegrudged; so they lived at their pleasure
 Peacefully minding their own business, amid numerous good things.
 Wealthy in flocks were they, and beloved of the blessed immortals.
 After this whole first gold generation was finally buried
 Even today they are called pure spirits inhabiting earth and
 Noble protectors of mankind, warding off evils from mortals

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John Dayton has a doctorate in Classics from Brown University and is currently Associate Professor in English at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Dubai. He is the author of ‘‘The Athletes of War’: An Evaluation of the Agonistic Elements in Greek Warfare’ (Toronto: Edgar Kent, 2006).