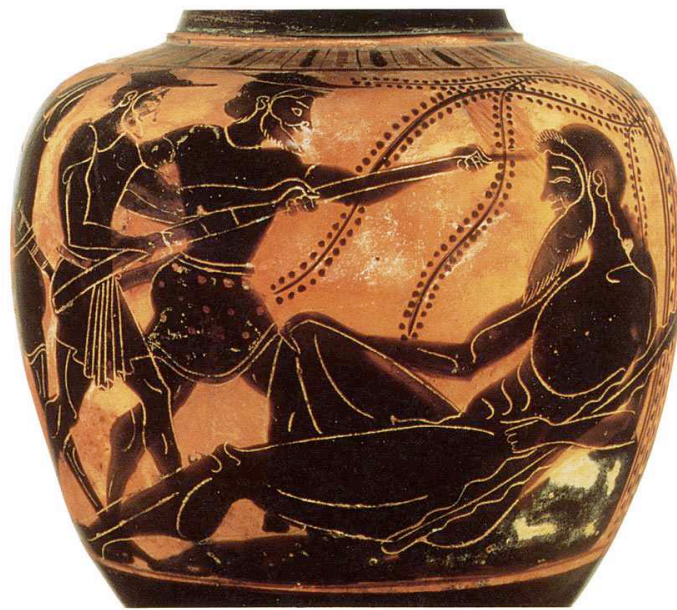


“Preparations for a Structuralist Study of Cannibalism in Greek Myth”

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Among the myths of the ancient Greeks there are several ghastly tales of cannibalism: the startling lines in Plato about initiation, ritual cannibalism and lycanthropy [*The Republic* 8 565d-e], the cannibalism of Uranos, the feast of Pelops and Thyestes, the rumors that the Scythians were cannibalistic. And there were protest movements-Dionysian, Cynical, Pythagorean and Orphic-which were designed in opposition to the established *polis* religions of blood sacrifice, movements which used the dietary codes to create alternative rituals and to articulate criticisms of the *polis* religion. This essay is preparation for further studies of cannibalism in Greek myth, and here we begin with a most primal scene of cannibalism from Homer. We may assume that the Greeks were not actually cannibals, and that mythical language has a certain indirectness and ambiguity all its own. My argument is that the tales of cannibalism were not really about cannibalism at all, but about more typically Greek issues (such as the transfer of political power, the guest-host relationship, the initiation of youths into adulthood, and so on). Cannibalism is rather the image used to designate the negative extremes of human behavior as conceived by the Hellenic world: social breakdown, barbarism, reversion to animality, and ultimately, the inability to live under the institution of the *polis*. Here we only examine Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops in bk. IX of *The Odyssey*; but a larger study would also have to include the episodes mentioned above and compare them, reading them together as that group of tales that comprise the cannibalistic system in Greek myth. In turn, this system would have to be located within the larger system of myths that deal with the monstrous, and the uncanny, and so on. These few tales could be compared to other Indo-European tales of similar content and ultimately, cross-cultural comparisons of cannibalism myths are also possible, but only after much preparation.

Underneath the raw terror of the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey* is a certain logic that reveals much about the social world of the Greeks; for the real subject of Bk. IX of the *Odyssey* is *xenios* (ξενίος), the ethical code governing guest-host relationships. As one of the central themes of the *Odyssey* as a whole, that ethical code is thrown into dramatic relief by the episode with Polyphemus, because he commits some of the most direct and dramatic transgressions of *xenios* in the work. Polyphemus is the anti-host; his tale serves as a negative model by displaying actions which are the exact opposite of those demanded by *xenios*. An extreme term in the culinary code of any people, cannibalism here marks Polyphemus as the anti-host, for

cannibalism is the diametrical opposite of hospitality: instead of feeding his guests, Polyphemus eats them.

*Xenios* is a pan-Hellenic code of conduct that “guards the obligations arising from the relationship of guest and host and the claim of strangers (ξενιοσ) to protection”.<sup>1</sup> A seafaring and mercantile people, the Greeks probably required a system by which trust can be established relatively quickly between parties who are strangers. The double meaning of the word *xenios* (ξενιοσ), denoting both stranger and guest, reflects the need and the possibility of a quick and easy transition from stranger to friend. Located on the edge of the world and on the edge of society, Polyphemus is the extreme term in the code of *xenia*, and is represented by an extreme negative term in the culinary code: cannibalism. The Cyclops even mocks the law of *xenia* directly when he promises to spare Odysseus until he is the last crewmember left uneaten, in return for a gift potent wine. This mockery shows that the Cyclops knows too much of Zeus’ laws to be simply an innocent savage; he lives in the same moral universe as Odysseus and his men. After all, Polyphemus is, as Odysseus calls him, a “caveman”; he possesses some rudiments of culture (he has pottery, makes cheese and herds animals). His father is one of the Olympian gods, Poseidon, brother of Zeus himself. In addition, his neighbors, the other Cyclopes, also know of Zeus, as we see when they reply to his cries after he is blinded.<sup>2</sup> His mockery of *xenia* is explicit and malicious, reflecting the hubris that is typical of titanic beings:

“With the specification of ξενιον the theme of ξενινη (cf. 176, 229, 267-71, 356, 365) is brought here to a climax (cf. 517-21n.)...the blinding...[is] proper punishment for one who so outrageously offends against the basic moral precepts.”<sup>3</sup>

“Nohbody’s my meat, then, after I eat his friends.

Others come first. There’s a noble gift, now.” (*Odyssey*, bk. IX, ll. 269-70)

At the beginning of book VI, Odysseus wakes up from his exhausted sleep on his bed of olive leaves to the sound of the Phaiakian princess and her ladies. Startled, he wonders: “...mankind again, but who? Savages, are they, strangers to courtesy? Or gentle folk, who know and fear the gods?” (*Odyssey*, bk. VI, 120-2) The Homeric

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<sup>1</sup> Richard John Cunliffe *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* Oklahoma, 1963 p. 283

<sup>2</sup> Homer *The Odyssey* Robert Fitzgerald, trans. Anchor press, 1963 bk. IX, 410-1

<sup>33</sup> Alfred Heusbeck and Arie Hoekstra *A Commentary on Homers’ Odyssey* Vol. II Oxford 1990 p. 33

poems contain a number of “standardized phrases or ‘formulas’ that could be fitted together to cover many of the common actions and events of heroic experience.”<sup>4</sup> These formulas enabled the bards to retain and perform large sections of verse; one of the most famous is “rosy fingered dawn”. Odysseus’ question about the courtesy-and piety-of unknown people is one such formula. It recurs in Bk. IX, when Odysseus wonders what kind of people live on the Cyclops’ island; he is curious to “find out what the mainland natives are-for they may be wild savages, and lawless, or hospitable and god-fearing men”. (*Odyssey*, bk. IX, ll. 77-8) In this case, the question foreshadows the horror to come, the cannibal gluttony of Polyphemus.

At the beginning of bk. IX, Odysseus has been asked to recount the events that bring his as a shipwreck to the court of King Alkinoos. With words that recall the marvelous feasts and gifts of good king Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, Odysseus offers gratitude for the excellent feast and music that the king provides for the weary adventurer, just as in Hrothgar’s feast-hall, Heorot:

“There is no boon in life more sweet, I say,  
than when a summer joy holds all the realm,  
and banqueters sit listening to a harper  
in a great hall, by rows of tables heaped  
with bread and roast meat, while a steward goes  
to dip up wine and brim your cups again” (*Odyssey*, bk. IX, 5-10).

Framing the tale of the evil, cannibalistic host, Odysseus thanks the good host King Alkinoos for a feast. Besides thanking him, Odysseus will also repay his host with news and adventures from the world outside the kingdom, as well as spread the King’s good name during further travel; these are some of the obligations of the guest, and Odysseus responds appropriately with his narrative. The decisive moment in that narrative is Odysseus’ decision to wait and see who lives in the cave of the Cyclops, even though he has a sense that the cave man is a “towering brute...a wild man, ignorant of civility”. (ll. 212-14) For modern readers it is a shocking decision, but “..in testing whether the inhabitants are φιλοξενοί [*philoxenoi*: friendly to strangers], [Odysseus] is still acting as a hero accustomed to receiving hospitality as an honored guest...” (Heusbeck and Hoekstra, 1990:24). Where in translation he expresses a desire to see what the caveman “had to offer” (l. 228-9), the Greek reads

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<sup>4</sup>. G. S. Kirk, 'Homer' in *Early Greek Poetry* Easterling and Kennedy, eds. Cambridge, 1989 p. 2

literally “if he would give me *xenia*”.<sup>5</sup> He requests courtesy from his huge host “in the formal language of supplication” (Hexter, 1993:131), deliberately reminding him that Zeus himself watches over the traveler; but Polyphemus merely expresses profound contempt, and even hubris, toward the gods. Odysseus says:

“It was our luck to come here; here we stand, beholden to you for your help, or any gifts  
you give-as custom is to honor strangers,  
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care  
for the gods’ courtesy; Zeus will avenge  
the unoffending guest’.

He answered this

from his brute chest, unmoved:

“You are a fool

or come from the other end of nowhere,  
telling me, mind the gods! We Kyklopes  
care nothing for your thundering Zeus  
or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far!  
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus...” (Odyssey, bk. IX, ll. 262-75)

For his direct attack on Zeus, as well as for his absolute disregard of *xenia*, Polyphemus will suffer a great punishment. That Poseidon harasses Odysseus for the blinding of the Cyclops is not contradicted by the need for the Cyclops’ punishment; it is merely a statement that the need for personal, familial revenge is a separate right, coexisting with the guest-host system. Odysseus is, and sees himself, as the agent of Zeus’ revenge:

“you damned cannibal! eater of guests  
under your own roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!” (Odyssey, bk. IX, ll. 78-9)

Just as Polyphemus is the anti-host, so are the suitors of Penelope the anti-guests. They practice gluttony, drunkenness, theft and commit transgression against Zeus. However, they do so in knowing defiance of the law/custom of *xenia*, not in the total disregard and partial ignorance of the code displayed by the Cyclops. Where the

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<sup>5</sup>. Ralph Hexeter *A Guide to the Odyssey* Vintage, 1993 p. 130

Cyclops eats the men as raw, uncooked and finally natural food; in contrast the suitors eat deliciously roasted meat and especially bread, the meal of polis-dwelling humans. The Cyclops sins against *xenia* from the side of nature, and the suitors do so from the side of culture. However, through the agency of Odysseus, both transgressors are severely punished by Zeus in the end, although the suitors are killed and Polyphemus is spared.

Here, it should be noted that the duality between the savage Polyphemus and the civilized is not a simple one, but one mediated by degrees and ambiguities. That is partly because of the complication that Polyphemus seems to be the most savage of the Cyclopeans, so that he may stand in opposition the others of his island as well as to the Argives. Kirk has pointed out that Polyphemus is an atypical Cyclops,<sup>6</sup> more solitary and more vicious than his cousins. Yet in some ways, even he is closer to the gods than the heroic Odysseus himself. Unlike his friend Achilles, Odysseus does not possess divine blood; he is only a very powerful human being, a hero. Yet again, Uranos, who spawned the Olympians, swallowed his children.

Unlike the Minotaur and the Centaurs, the Cyclopes are not quite in that special position of the monster, mediating between human and animal. Perhaps they complete the cycle by mediating instead between god and animal, in the way that dialectical oppositions terminate in identity-the Cyclops would be both god and animal, where god and animal are almost always at opposite end of the system. Polyphemus does indeed devour the men “bones, guts and all, like a wild animal, a mountain lion (287-93)”...yet at the same time, like all of the Cyclopes and “like the Phaeacians”, he is very close to the gods, more so even than Odysseus, beloved of Athena: Polyphemus is Poseidon’s son and Zeus’ nephew, (VII, 295f.)” (Kirk, 1970:166) and yet, although (unlike humans) the Cyclopes do not labor in the field and vineyard, they still eat bread and (even in the case of Polyphemus) drink wine: “what distinguishes men is their eating of cereals (and yet the other Cyclopes eat, but do not have to cultivate, them).” (Kirk, 1970:166-7) However, Polyphemus at least labors to prepare cheeses from the milk he obtains from his herd, just as humans do. We will return to the unclassifiable Polyphemus in a moment.

Let me now move on to a methodological comment, which is that structuralism seems to me the most appropriate method for studying cannibalism in

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<sup>6</sup>. From G. S. Kirk *Myth Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* Cambridge, 1970 p. 169

myth. Cannibalism depends on how one classifies the other people, animals and vegetables whom one encounters in the world. For an American such as myself, it would be very nearly an act of cannibalism to eat a dog or monkey. It is not so for all cultures. In my own personal opinion, the consumption of a porpoise or elephant would also qualify as cannibalism, because even though their bodies are very different from ours, they seem to have minds that are on a par with our own. Yet there are many people who eat whales, including the Vikings, the Japanese, the Eskimo and some Native Canadians. Some of the Pythagoreans believed that it was cannibalism to consume the fava bean. My point is that one commits cannibalism by eating whichever kind of creature is considered the same as oneself. The classification same/not same may vary widely from culture to culture, and classification is the proper object of the structuralist method. The taboo against cannibalism involves a highly charged, highly meaningful classification.

For example, is the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* a cannibal? After all, Polyphemus works as a shepherd, has tools and clothing, and makes cheese, like a human being. Indeed, because he is able to speak and understand Homeric Greek, Polyphemus does not even qualify as a barbarian. Yet, his gigantic size, divine parentage and single eye make him undeniably other than human. Therefore, is he or is he not committing cannibalism when he smashes Odysseus' men against the wall and consumes them? It is true that Odysseus curses him as a "damn cannibal"; but the word is *anthropophagos*, and here I am pointing out that Polyphemus is not really *anthropos*. The Vikings had a word, *skarelig*, for beings which have many human features but which are not quite human (like trolls, giants and dwarves). What is the Greek equivalent of *skarelig*? Further, if there is no such word, wouldn't that suggest that a being like the Cyclops is disturbing not only for his consumption of raw, warm human meat, but also because he is an ambiguous creature, neither fish nor fowl? If he is the mediating term between animal and immortal, that may explain his recalcitrance to classification. Again, such ambiguities, which bind and maintain the classificatory scheme even in their disruption of it, are the province of structuralist analysis.

What part did the myths of cannibalism play in Greek literature? How do such tales fit with other stories of the fantastic and grotesque? Why would the Greeks produce such a savage past for themselves, one that infects the genealogies of gods and royal houses? A structuralist account seeks to explain cannibalistic episodes by linking them to other episodes that are similar or analogous (for example, the Dionysian practice of eating raw meat), applying the methods of structural

anthropology to classical myth. Episodes of cannibalism become more intelligible when linked to other episodes of transgression, like sacrifice, incest, the transformation of human to animal. Through such a reading, episodes of cannibalism in ancient Greek myth are read as part of a system, connected with other episodes (like sacrifice) that deal with taboos, and arranged according to dietary and ritual codes.