

# A Poke in the Eye with a Sharp Stick

by G.I.C. Robertson

The tale of Odysseus' escape from death on the island of the Cyclopes, as told in the ninth book of Homer's *Odyssey*, is one of the best-known of the hero's adventures. On their way back from the war at Troy, Odysseus and his companions land on an island that has no human population, but seems to be an ideal place. The rich soil is suitable for crops and vines, there is a sheltered harbour for the twelve Greek ships, and the island is teeming with wild goats who (with a little prompting from the local nymphs) obligingly make their way down to Odysseus' camp in time for dinner, where they serve as the main course. But Odysseus is intrigued by another island across the water; he can see the smoke of fires and hear the bleating of animals, and decides to investigate and discover whether its inhabitants are just and hospitable or brutal and violent. On the next day, he and some of his companions gather provisions and a skin full of wine, sail one ship across to the island, and discover a cave full of animals, milk, and cheese. As they are helping themselves to the food, the monstrous Cyclops Polyphemos returns, helps himself to a couple of Greeks for his own dinner, and keeps the rest of the intruders captive in his cave for the night. On the next morning, when Polyphemos has taken his flocks to pasture (after a breakfast of another two Greeks), Odysseus and his companions sharpen a large stick and plan their escape. When Polyphemos returns, Odysseus gets him drunk and plays a famous trick, telling the Cyclops that his name is 'Nobody'. When Polyphemos has passed out, the Greeks blind him with the stick; he calls out to the other Cyclopes for help, but of course his cry that 'Nobody is killing me' does not carry the sense of emergency that he desires to convey to his friends. The Greeks are now able to escape by hiding under the bellies of the large animals that the Polyphemos lets out of the cave to pasture the next day; they run back to their ships and, from a safe distance, Odysseus calls back to Polyphemos, revealing his true name and taunting the giant as the Greeks sail away.

Homer's story, involving very ancient elements from folk-tale (there are many analogies in folklore around the world), became the standard version of this tale for generations to come. It emphasizes important themes in the *Odyssey* as a whole: the cunning and resourcefulness of Odysseus, and the violations of the laws of hospitality. Odysseus and his companions may seem to be overstepping the bounds of good behaviour in eating the Cyclops' food while he is away, but Polyphemos is less than hospitable towards his unexpected guests: when he returns and asks them abruptly what they are doing in his cave, Odysseus replies tactfully and asks Polyphemos to observe the usual formalities with respect to wandering strangers. Polyphemos scoffs at this request, saying that the Cyclopes are stronger than Zeus and therefore exempt from the usual divinely-ordained rules of hospitality, and proceeds to devour Odysseus' companions. (Later, under the influence of the wine, he relents a little and offers Odysseus a guest-present: he will be eaten last.) But it is worth remembering that in this encounter between 'civilization' and 'savagery', Odysseus draws his companions into the nearly disastrous adventure for no better reason than his own curiosity. The Greeks lack for nothing in the place where they first land, but Odysseus simply wants to find out who lives on the neighbouring island. He says, in fact, that even before he boarded his ship to

investigate the new place, he suspected that he might get a hostile reception from a savage and lawless man. As often in the *Odyssey*, the hero is not without fault.

The lines between 'civilization' and 'savagery' are re-drawn (and re-blurred) in another portrayal of this story, Euripides' *Cyclops*, produced towards the end of the fifth century B.C. (The date is not certain, but it was probably within the last ten or twelve years of the century.) This is the only complete surviving example of the dramatic genre known as the 'satyr-play', a humorous re-telling of a story from myth which would traditionally be performed after a set of three tragedies at the Athenian festival of the god Dionysos. From one complete example (*Cyclops*) and numerous fragments (including substantial portions of Sophokles' *Trackers*) as well as other sources, we can get an idea of some of the usual elements of a satyr-play. There was, most importantly, always a chorus dressed as satyrs: grotesque humanoid creatures with pointed ears, a horse's tail, and a large phallus. The satyrs were among the traditional attendants of Dionysos in Greek myth; following him, they would roam the mythic countryside indulging their huge appetites for the Dionysiac delights of wine and sex. A satyr-play would usually take a well-known episode from myth and reconstruct it so that the hero would find himself in need of help, which would be offered by a band of satyrs who (according to the playwright's version of the story) had somehow become separated from Dionysos and enslaved by someone else. In return for their help, the hero would have to release the satyrs from their current slavery and return them to their true master, Dionysos. The satyr-plays, though comic, did not belong to the genre of comedy: like tragedies, they re-told stories from myth (unlike the Old Comedy of Aristophanes), they were presented at festivals of tragic drama, written by the same playwright as the tragedies which preceded them, and performed by the same company. When the audience left the theatre, the last thing they would have seen would not have been the stifling world of tragic destiny, but rather a joyous, drunken song and dance.

In Euripides' *Cyclops*, the wild satyrs, slaves of the eponymous monster, add another dimension to the contrast between civilized and uncivilized behaviour which characterizes the Homeric story on which the play is based. When Odysseus arrives in Sicily (where Euripides has chosen to locate the Cyclops) saying that his men are hungry and offering unlimited wine in exchange for some of the food which the satyrs are guarding for their master, the satyrs go mad with delight; they would do anything for a swig from Odysseus' magical wine-flask. Their desire for wine is rivalled only by their sex drive, and their only interest in the Trojan War or Odysseus' heroic exploits is a prurient curiosity as to whether the Greeks had the opportunity to gang-rape Helen before bringing her home (179 ff.). When the Cyclops returns and is enraged to see the Greeks eating his food, Odysseus claims that he made his bargain with Silenos, father of the satyrs, in good faith; Silenos, on the other hand, anxious to avoid punishment by his master, insists that he never made any agreement with Odysseus, and seems content to leave the Greek hero (who was, for once, telling the truth) to a grisly fate as the Cyclops' dinner.

But lest we sympathize too readily with Odysseus (addressed by Silenos as a 'sharp talker, son of Sisyphos' [104]), Euripides gives his hero an extraordinary speech in which he claims that the Cyclops should treat him well because in the Trojan War, he and his comrades saved Greece from the Phrygians. 'Greece' is said to include the Cyclops' home in Sicily (described pointedly by Odysseus [297] as part of the land of Hellas) and

the sites sacred to the Cyclops' father Poseidon. Odysseus sounds very much here (as he does in several tragedies) like fifth-century Athenian political speakers, who sought to justify fifth-century Athenian imperialism on the grounds that Athens was chiefly responsible for defeating the two Persian invasions earlier in the century (see e.g. Thucydides 1.73 and, with specifically Sicilian reference, 6.82-3).

This argument cuts no ice with the Cyclops, who claims to be greater than Zeus (as he does in Homer) and to worship no god apart from his own appetites; since he is so powerful, he can ignore the inferior Odysseus' appeals to law and justice. Here again there is an echo of contemporary political debate; the Cyclops sounds rather like the youthful oligarch Kallikles who advocated a 'might-is-right' philosophy (Plato, *Gorgias* 482c ff.). Whereas Homer's blinded Polyphemos rather tenderly addresses the ram under which Odysseus hides (*Odyssey* 9.447-55) and appears almost human for a moment, Euripides' Cyclops has no redeeming qualities. In this respect, he is a worthy opponent for the wily and unscrupulous Odysseus, who has no trouble convincing the rowdy satyrs to help him befuddle the Cyclops with wine. When drunk, the monster is an even more unsavoury character; he hauls Silenos off into his cave to gratify his sexual appetite. When the blinding occurs (off-stage), the satyrs urge Odysseus on with bloodthirsty cries, and then taunt the blind Cyclops as he stumbles around trying to catch the Greeks; the play ends with their departure to join Odysseus' crew and eventually be reunited with Dionysos.

As I mentioned earlier, Homer's *Odyssey* does not portray the encounter between Odysseus and Polyphemos as a simple case of 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour, but the genre of the heroic epic requires that Odysseus be seen as somewhat more 'right' (or at least less wrong) than the Cyclops. The satyric genre implies no such restraints for Euripides; Odysseus, the Cyclops, and the satyrs are all portrayed as guided solely by their own interests. The land itself is described by Silenos at the beginning of the play as joyless, 'without any dancing' (124); in this dystopia, the dancing of the satyrs starts when the violence escalates. To an audience in Athens, coping with civic strife threatening their city's stability as well as a long and exhausting war precipitated by the expansion of their own empire, an audience who had voted for harsh punishment of rebellious states and a disastrous expedition to the very land in which the play is set, this satyric *Cyclops* might well have been a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.