

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CYCLOPS. 408 B.C.E. (conjectural)

Euripides

Overview. There are several ways to approach this satyr play, which is about half the length of a regular Greek tragedy (1600 lines.). Our minds can play back onto the rural/rustic origins of Greek drama as a whole, which seems to spring from dances and festivals indigenous to the mainland of Greece in the culturally formative centuries which followed on the early growth of the city-state, the incorporation of Homeric epic as a cultural binder, and the growth of an aesthetic public. In that perspective we will see the satyr play as entertainment, noting that it is characteristically written (and performed) to serve as a break in the course of a typical four play tetralogy, a submission to the annual festival of Dionysus in Athens. The only remaining intact satyr play is *The Cyclops* of Euripides.

On a second level we note that the satyr play—appropriately enough for drama featuring the uninhibited half-man half-beast woodland critters the satyrs were—was a forum for release, for giving full expression to animal spirits, bottled up desires, and even suppressed reserves of cruelty. Highly controlled by its choral forms, and by its choral formality—even though satyrs are the enactors—the satyr play gives license to a range of libidos, as in the present kerfuffle over the best ways to deceive and then blind the Cyclops.

We would be underestimating the multi-levelled brilliance of Euripides, if we minimized the richness of the messaging in this as you like it brawl. For one thing the appreciation of this entertainment thrived on the audience's close familiarity with the *Odyssey* passages on which the satyr play was based; that familiarity would ready the spectator to know how sharply Euripides inflects the Homeric passage by introducing the character of Silenus, who had hurried to the aid of Odysseus, as soon as he learned of the shipwreck which had befallen Odysseus and his men. Added to which, a keen spectator of the play could spot references to 'current events'—such as that of a living Athenian lawgiver, Alcibiades, who had stuck a stick into the eye of a Spartan lawgiver, a topical fuck you which the audience could not fail to have savored.

Characters

Silenus, old servant and slave of the Cyclops
Chorus of satyrs
Odysseus
The Cyclops

Story

Setting. The action opens at the foot of Mt. Aetna in Sicily. The first person we see is Silenus, servant to Cyclops, who is sweeping the entrance to the cave of Cyclops, the rustic one-eyed monster who dwells there. After Silenus recounts the shipwreck that brought him to this craggy spot, and that led to the capture of himself and his children, we observe the arrival of Odysseus, on his way home from Troy with his men, and like Silenus the victim of shipwreck on this coast. As Silenus remarks, the men approaching them are carrying vessels for water, and look hungry and tired.

Information. Odysseus peppers Silenus with questions about the Cyclops, and is given the basics. He learns that, in addition to milk and cheeses, the Cyclops loves to eat human flesh, the daintiest of dishes. Then Odysseus puts his plea, for food and especially drink, to Silenus himself, and wins the slave's heart with some promises of extra delicious red wine. Odysseus and his starving men make a trade of wine for food. Silenus and Odysseus converse, long enough for the former to digress onto his hatred for Helen, and the latter to confirm the viewpoint.

Cyclops. At this point the Cyclops comes on the visitors, and makes it clear that he is hungry for human flesh. Menacingly he drives Odysseus and his men into the cave. Not much later Odysseus emerges from the cave with a horrorstruck look, for he has just witnessed several of his men being gruesomely eaten by the Cyclops. The spectator can now share the shudder that Homer too had appreciated, when he brought the urbane and tricky character of Odysseus face to face with the primeval.

Survival. Odysseus' plan, for freeing his men from the cave, begins with getting the Cyclops very drunk, and incrementally diverting his taste from flesh to alcohol. Trapped in the cave, with his men, Odysseus realizes that he must inflict further torture on Cyclops, in order to ensure their release. It is here that Odysseus resorts to the blinding of the primitive one-eye, as happened in Homer, and reduces Cyclops to such a point of pain and terror that he struggles for the exit from his cave, and in doing so makes it possible for Odysseus and his men to escape. Raising a boulder, to heave it onto the departing ship, of Odysseus and his men, the Cyclops realizes he is blind, and gives up in humiliating defeat.

Themes

Trickery. Odysseus is as always cunning, and parlays a weak position, begging the giant for food, into a controlling and vengeful post. The trick of blinding the Cyclops is the turning point in the hero's narrative.

'Barbarism.' The Cyclops—the one eye, the circle eye, who has one huge eye in the middle of his face—is an exemplification of barbarism, pure fleshly existence and hunger, yet at the same time, in dialogue with Odysseus, a smooth talker and quick thinker.

Hedonism. Silenus is the go-to critter for hedonism, looking for a drink, treating the Cyclops with caution, and warily concerned for the well being of his children.

Topicality. As mentioned earlier, there are specific references to contemporary politics, in this satyr play. Generally speaking, those references apply to contemporary events, the exile of Alcibiades, the oncoming dominance of the Sophists, who, like the Cyclops, can spin rhetorical tracteries, even when being put through the tortures of blinding.

Character Analysis

Odysseus Odysseus is the main character, as always in Greek literature cunning, resourceful, and adventurous. Storm driven, he and his men, in Euripides as in Homer, intrepidly set out up the slopes of Mt. Aetna, looking for food and water, exhausted and wary. Odysseus and Silenus, the servant of the Cyclops, enter into conversation, in which Odysseus is both orienting himself, with an eye to winning grub from Cyclops, and satisfying his curiosity about the folkways of these unfamiliar Cyclops folk. When Cyclops returns from hunting, Odysseus and his men make their ways into the cave, hoping to feed on cheeses and milk and game, but get trapped, and find themselves witnessing a dreadful scene in which the Cyclops consumes a couple of fleshy sailors. Desperate to stop their host, Odysseus undertakes to fill him with the wine they have brought with them; Odysseus drunkens the monster by stages, until he is no longer capable of orientation, and then the intruders take the same step they take in the *Odyssey*, sharpening a branch, heating it to red fire, then collaboratively twisting it in the single huge eye of Cyclops, and blinding the monster with pain and desire to open the cave and to escape. That is just what happens; as Odysseus and his men also escape.

Curious. Odysseus engages Silenus in talk, as soon as they meet on the slopes of Aetna. As in the *Odyssey* this adventurer is above all curious, interested in the world he discovers, and he picks up useful information about the Cyclops' habits.

Practical. Odysseus asks Silenus to 'sell us food, of which we are in need.' Thereupon Silenus asks Odysseus how much gold he has brought with him. Odysseus is ready for this question, and answers with

a description of the luscious wine he has brought. He suspects, correctly, that wine alone will do the trick, and is he ever right!

Careful. Upon the return of the Cyclops, Odysseus 'reluctantly,' but totally en garde, follows the beast into his cave. He has his men and his strategy with him.

Narratorial. Upon emerging from the cave, Odysseus offers the chorus leader, who is all ears to know 'what it was like,' a detailed account of the Cyclops' home and life style. Odysseus proves a master narrator, putting the questioner right in the hot, lethal, wine- befumed cave, and surging with careful language—like Homer himself.

Tricky. The leader of the chorus, one of the Sileni, asks Odysseus how he plans to deal with the Cyclops, and learns—it is no surprise to him, for he has long heard of Odysseus' cleverness—the plan Odysseus has designed, to drunken the beast, and then to blind him. Odysseus delights to hear of his advanced reputation, even in this remote spot, for wiliness.

Parallels. Monsters abound in classical literature, offering borderlines between culture and violence, and reminding evolving civilizations of the danger-cusp they stand on. In Cretan myth, from Knossos, the Minotaur challenges Theseus' ingenuity, which, like Odysseus the hero, he employs to escape from a brutal spatial confinement; the gesticulating Scylla (paired with Charybdis) awaits our friend Odysseus at the Straits of Gibraltar, in the *Odyssey*; the Blatant Beast threatens all who near, in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*; and Grendel threatens Beowulf as eerily as the Cyclops threatens Odysseus.

Discussion questions

Euripides' Cyclops is not only dangerously primitive in his lifestyle habits, but—say in contrast to Homer's Cyclops—voluble and urbane in his conversation; a take off on the clever arguers among the Sophists, the most prominent public intellectuals in Athens at the time of the play. Do you think Euripides crafted this satyr play with a double-entendre wink toward the Homer-knowing audience?

Ingestion, in a crude sense, plays a large part in the present satyr-play. Odysseus highlights the care with which Cyclops savors the flesh of Odysseus' men who are trapped in the cave. A classic writer of the early modern period, Francois Rabelais, savors the pleasure of writing about Gargantuan appetites. Does the act of reading seem to you to be an ingestion of words? Can one in that sense overeat by reading?

Satyrs were folk and woodland characters, beast and man both, in imagining which mortals were able to give free play to their fancy. Have we, today in the west, social-psychological escape hatches through which we can exercise and work off our collective anxieties? Can sharing, overindulgence, or sadism serve versions of this kind of need?