Civilisation and Barbarity in *Odyssey* book 9

**The Activity**

What does book 9 of Homer’s *Odyssey* teach us about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in Homeric society?

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**The Odyssey: initial considerations**

Homer’s epic poem about the travels of Odysseus has earned a canonical reputation in western literature. It is one of the earliest surviving pieces of literature in the west, and was passed down from bard to bard as part of the Greek oral tradition from as early as the eighth century B.C. until it was eventually written down, when it quickly became a cornerstone of western culture. Along with the *Iliad*, the other poem attributed to Homer, the *Odyssey* has been heralded as an equivalent of the Bible for classical civilisation. Like the first line of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (the key Roman epic poem) the *Odyssey* begins with the poet asking his Muse to tell him the story of a *man* (the word ‘man’ is memorably put first: *andra moi ennepe, Mousa*). Indeed, the whole poem is, in a sense, a journey of discovery about what it is to be a civilised Greek man, and for Odysseus himself, who is away from home for twenty years (ten years at Troy, ten years travelling back home), it is very specifically a *nostos* – a journey of self-discovery. The individuals and communities that Odysseus encounters during his travels are also part of this self-discovery, paradigms of proper or improper behaviour, civilisation or counter-civilisation.

One of the governing themes in the *Odyssey* is that of *xenia* or ‘guest-friendship’, a set of values and principles that was fundamental to Greek civilisation, particularly in its early stages. The rituals governing how you were supposed to behave when you visited another community, or when someone visited you, were deeply and systematically embedded in Greek society, and any contravention of these rituals cut at the heart of civilised Greek behaviour. Failure to meet these expectations was one of the key telltale signs of barbarians, the ‘other’ in the Greek world against whom all civilised Greeks measured themselves. Book 9 of the *Odyssey* is a focussed exploration of the values of *xenia* through Odysseus’ encounter with various peoples during his journey home. Its most memorable character, the Cyclops Polyphemus, epitomises the Homeric conception of barbarity and counter-civilisation.
Approaches

You should read book 9 of the *Odyssey* carefully and make a list of all the characters and episodes that feature in it. You should also consider its place in the surrounding books of the *Odyssey*, the context in which Odysseus' story is being told, and the various themes which it explores. Below I have outlined some useful approaches to this activity, although these are by no means the only ones you can take:

(i) Alcinous and the Phaeacians

Odysseus has been shipwrecked on the island of the Phaeacians, and hospitably welcomed by their king, Alcinous. Gifts have been exchanged and Alcinous hosts a lavish banquet in his palace, and invites Odysseus to tell him the story of his adventures. Book 9 is the beginning of Odysseus’ story, which last for four books. In the first section of the book (lines 1-28, or thereabouts), see if you can find any references to the nature or significance of Alcinous’ hospitality towards Odysseus. What effect do you think the context in which Odysseus’ story is being told has on his account of his reception by Polyphemus later in the book?

(ii) The Cicones

Odysseus and his men encounter the Cicones, a race allied to the Trojans, early in their story and sack their city, kill the men, and enslave the women. Do you think this is appropriate behaviour? In what ways are the ethics and morals of Odysseus' hostile encounter with Polyphemus later in the book are different? What weaknesses do Odysseus’ crew display during this episode, and what is their effect on the unfolding of the story?

(iii) The gods/ fate

Make a list of all the ways in which the gods participate in, or influence, the plot and development of book 9. Do they behave in a civilised/ moral fashion? Do the gods/ fate control and direct all mortal affairs, or do the human protagonists in the story take any responsibility for what happens to them?

(iv) Polyphemus and the Cyclopes

The majority of book 9 (lines 105-566) deals with Odysseus’ encounter with the Cyclopes, and the exploration of civilised behaviour, barbarity and the practice of guest-friendship. What you should aim to do is make a list of all the ways in which the Cyclopes offer a model of counter-civilisation. What do they do that we are supposed to consider as barbaric? What do they fail to do? How does their lifestyle, habitat and appearance underscore their barbarity? You should examine the language that the poet uses in describing them, as well as the words that the poet puts into Polyphemus’ mouth. Does Polyphemus have any redeeming features? Are we supposed to feel sorry for him after Odysseus blinds him?

(v) Odysseus and his men

Finally, you should of course consider the behaviour of Odysseus himself, and his men. Do they always behave as they should? What mistakes do they make? How does Odysseus manage to escape from his predicament, and are these characteristics and qualities we would expect of a Homeric hero?
Literary criticism: an example

Below I have taken a small section of Book 9, and indicated some of the ways in which you might approach the themes and ideas explored in the passage. You should try to select several other passages yourself which you consider to be important for this activity. What I have done below is by no means a prescriptive or exhaustive demonstration of how to approach this section of the poem: so long as you can develop your own argument and illustrate it using clear and logical examples from the text, you are engaging effectively with the activity.

Lines 105-30:
‘Thence we sailed on, grieved at heart, and we came to the land of the Cyclopes, an overweening and lawless folk, who, trusting in the immortal gods, plant nothing with their hands nor plough; but all these things spring up for them without sowing or ploughing, [110] wheat, and barley, and vines, which bear the rich clusters of wine, and the rain of Zeus gives them increase. Neither assemblies for council have they, nor appointed laws, but they dwell on the peaks of lofty mountains in hollow caves, and each one is lawgiver [115] to his children and his wives, and they reck nothing one of another. “Now there is a level[1] isle that stretches aslant outside the harbor, neither close to the shore of the land of the Cyclopes, nor yet far off, a wooded isle. Therein live wild goats innumerable, for the tread of men scares them not away, [120] nor are hunters wont to come thither, men who endure toils in the woodland as they course over the peaks of the mountains. Neither with flocks is it held, nor with ploughed lands, but unsown and untilled all the days it knows naught of men, but feeds the bleating goats. [125] For the Cyclopes have at hand no ships with vermillion cheeks,² nor are there shipwrights in their land who might build them well-benched ships, which should perform all their wants, passing to the cities of other folk, as men often cross the sea in ships to visit one another-- [130] craftsmen, who would have made of this isle also a fair settlement.’

Characteristics of Cyclopes within this passage:
(i) They are ‘lawless’
(ii) They do not hold assemblies for sharing council, like all civilised Greek city-states
(iii) They neither sow seeds nor plough the land, as civilised societies should
(iv) They rely entirely on the gods to make sure everything grows
(v) They live in caves by themselves, with no regard for each other
(vi) In spite of having such a well-located and fertile island nearby, they know nothing of shipbuilding or seafaring and so they cannot reach the island to colonise and cultivate it. As the Odyssey shows us, seafaring was one of the defining characteristics of civilised Greek societies, enabling them to travel, trade, communicate and establish colonies.

We later find out that the Cyclopes respect neither the gods (even though Polyphemus is the son of Poseidon) nor the sacred laws of hospitality. Not only are they cannibalistic, but their monstrous appearance also underscores their barbaric identity.

An early amphora, dating to c. 670 B.C. showing Odysseus blinding Polyphemus, from the museum at Eleusis