

GOAT ISLAND: *OD.* 9.116–141

Before Odysseus and his companions cross over to the land of the Cyclopes, they land on an island, which is described in unusual length and detail (9.116–41). It is inhabited only by wild goats; no hunters disturb them. It possesses neither flocks nor cultivated land, sown or ploughed, since no men live there. The Cyclopes, while nearby, have no ships, nor are there shipwrights who might build ships on which men travel to every city. The island could be made to flourish, for the soil is rich and would bear all things in season. In addition, it contains well-watered meadows, good for vineyards, and a fine protected harbour which requires no mooring.

The stop-over at the island accomplishes several functions within the narrative of Odysseus' adventures. Most important, it allows Odysseus to leave eleven ships and all but twelve men in safety.¹ In a different way, it throws into relief Odysseus' motives for crossing over to the Cyclopes as a comparison with the parallel episode on Circe's island will reveal. On Aeaea, too, the sight of smoke (10.196) results in sending forth a scouting-party, but there the motivation is total loss of orientation (10.190–2). Here in Book 9, on the other hand, Odysseus is impelled to discover the source of the smoke out of curiosity (9.173–5) and a desire for guest-gifts (9.229). After the disastrous episode in Polyphemus' cave, Odysseus seems no longer quite so eager for exploration and adventure.

The utility of the island for the plot of the *Odyssey* still does not justify the length of description devoted to it. Reinhardt notes that 'Nirgends sonst wird Landschaft in der Odyssee in solchem Mass um ihrer selbst willen gegeben'.² Another critic discovers the 'function of the episode' to be 'to ease the tension before the exciting adventure of the Cyclopes begins'.³ But the dominant interpretation finds in this passage the newly awakened spirit of Ionian colonization which looks upon an uninhabited site with a view to its practical potential as a new settlement.⁴

True enough, the description of the island focuses on its potential for cultivation and settlement. But its great potential remains unrealized because the nearest neighbours, the Cyclopes, do not possess ships which would allow them to exploit its possibilities. And, in any case, as we have already learned, the Cyclopes do not plough or sow but limit themselves to the care of sheep (9.108–11).

A clue to the true significance of the island hangs on the correct interpretation of a word: *χηρεύει* (9.124), a *hapax* in Homer. A denominative verb derived from *χήρα*,⁵ it means literally 'to be widowed'. *χηρόω*, on the other hand, has a

¹ Cf. W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer*⁶ (London, 1975), on 9.116: 'Homer probably introduced this island as a device for putting Odysseus' other eleven ships safely out of the Cyclopes' reach.'

² *Tradition und Geist* (Göttingen, 1960), p. 63. G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 363, includes 'the semi-lyrical picture of the islet' among the 'many brilliant evocations and descriptive *tours de force*' of the *Odyssey*.

³ M. H. A. L. H. van der Valk, *Textual*

Criticism of the Odyssey (Leiden, 1949), p. 257.

⁴ See for example G. S. Kirk, *Myth* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 165, who calls the island 'a colonist's ideal landfall'; L. H. Jeffrey, *Archaic Greece* (New York, 1976), p. 50, says of the island: 'the Greeks would have put a colony there in a twinkling'.

⁵ *χήρος* is a secondary development. Cf. H. Lommel, *Studien über indogermanische Femininbildungen* (Göttingen, 1912), p. 13.

factive force, 'to make widowed',⁶ and is used literally in *Il.* 17.36 (χήρωσας δὲ γυναῖκα) and metaphorically of Herakles' sack of Troy (*Il.* 5.643: Ἴλιον ἐξαλάπαξε πόλιν, χήρωσε δ' ἀγυάς). The latter passage offers the closest parallel to our own and implies that Herakles had emptied the streets of the inhabitants of the city which Homer frequently calls εὐ ναιομένην. For us the important thing to realize is that the expression, ἀνδρῶν χηρεύει, cannot simply mean *viris egere*, 'empty of men', 'uninhabited', or 'deserted'. Such a sense would be correctly expressed by χητεῖ λαῶν (*b. Apoll.* 78) describing the island of Delos, totally uninhabited—except for seals and octopodes! ἀνδρῶν χηρεύει means 'widowed' or 'bereft of men'. Now a spinster can never be a widow, and nothing can be bereft of a thing it never possessed. In other words, ἀνδρῶν χηρεύει implies that the island of the goats was formerly inhabited, but had become deserted by the time Odysseus and his men arrive there. The reflections on the island's potential but unrealized wealth and prosperity, then, refer *backward* to a time when the island was actually so exploited.

When used of places, χηρεύω and χηρόω retain this force in subsequent Greek. Consider, for example: πολλῶν ἂν ἀνδρῶν ἐχηρώθη πόλις (Solon 36.25 (West)); ἄλις δὲ Πριάμου γαῖ' ἐχήρωσ' Ἑλλάδα (Eur. *Cyclops* 304); Ἄργος δὲ ἀνδρῶν ἐχηρώθη (Hdt. 6.83); πᾶσαν ἐχηρώσαντο πόλιν (the Lemnian women) (Quint. Smyr. 9.351); and especially Dyme as described by Plutarch (*Pompey* 28, end): χηρεύσαν ἀνδρῶν τότε; also Aelian, *N.A.* 4.59, concerning Scyros, ἀνθρώπων χηρεύουσιν ὡς τὰ πολλά. Previous habitation is always implied. χηρεύω in the other instances cited by LSJ never simply means 'to lack', *egere*. When it is not used absolutely, 'to live as a widow' (Plutarch, *Amat.* 749D), or 'to be solitary' (Soph. *O.T.* 479), χηρεύειν always implies that the subject is bereft or deprived of something which it previously possessed.⁷

The island on which Odysseus and his companions land was previously

⁶ See E. Risch, *Wortbildung der homerischen Sprache* (Berlin, 1974), p. 333: 'χηρεύω "bin Witwe" . . . neben faktitivem χήρωσα'. On the distinction between denominative -εύω and factitive -όω see A. Debrunner, *Griechische Wortbildungslehre* (Heidelberg, 1917), pp. 99, 104–8. Cf. χηρωσται *Il.* 5.158; *Theog.* 607. The stem *χη- is related to χῆτος, χατέω, 'to abandon', χώρα, and Indic j ā h ā t i, H. Frisk, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch s.v. χήρα*. C. J. Ruijgh, and N. van Krimpen, 'L'histoire et la pré-histoire de ΚΙΧΑΝΩ', *Mnemosyne* ser. 4.22 (1962), 113–36, find the same verbal root in κυχάνω and gloss χηρόω as 'rendre abandonné' (p. 114).

⁷ In Alciphron 2.22 (Benner-Fobes), Hylē complains to Nomius, who has left the farm for the attractions of the city, that ἀργὸς δὲ ἡ γῆ χηρεύουσα τῶν ἐμπονούντων. Heliodorus I.1.2 tells of a ship attacked by pirates: ὁλκάς . . . τῶν μὲν ἐπλεόντων χηρεύουσα. In the immediate sequel, the crew which formerly manned the vessel is described as lying dead or dying nearby on

the shore. Stephanus *Scholia in Hippocratem* I.219 D (Dietz) describes those suffering from chills as χηρεύοντες ἀπὸ τῆς φυσικῆς ἐλλάμψεως which is synonymous with the next phrase: τοῦ ἐμφύτου θερμοῦ στερηθέντες. Both expressions imply the loss of normal bodily heat. Hermes Trismegist. *apud* Stob. I.41.6 (Wachsmuth, p. 286) speaks metaphorically of the cosmos which is never widowed of, but always pregnant with, τὰ ὄντα: οὐδέποτε γὰρ χηρεύει τῶν ὄντων τινὸς ὁ κόσμος, αἰεὶ δὲ φερόμενος ἐν ἑαυτῷ κρύσκει τὰ ὄντα. Achilles Tatius 4.1 offers an apparent exception. For Cleitophon cries out to an unwilling Leucippe: Μέχρι πότε . . . χηρεύομεν τῶν τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ὀργίων; Here we must translate χηρεύομεν as simply 'be deprived', for the hero has not previously possessed his beloved. But the whole phrase is an amusing word-play influenced by ἀνδρίζεσθαι in the previous sentence. The last two examples demonstrate that a sense for the derivation of χηρεύω from χήρα is still alive in later Greek.

occupied and perhaps once even achieved its full potential for cultivation. Can we identify the former inhabitants of the island? Are there any clues within the *Odyssey*? The answer, I believe, is yes and points beyond trivial geographical curiosity to some fundamental issues of the poem. This now deserted island is none other than Hyperia, the former home of the Phaeacians from which they emigrated to Scheria under the leadership of Nausithoos, on account of the depredations of the Cyclopes (6.4–6).⁸ The geographical features of the island, which we can now call Hyperia, correspond in a striking fashion to those of Phaeacia: the fine harbours (9.136–9, cf. 7.43); the poplar grove, spring, and meadow (9.140–1, cf. 6.291–2 (the grove of Athena)). Finally, the rich soil of the island which would bear ὥρια πάντα and imperishable vines corresponds to the *temenos* of Alcinoos (7.114–32) where the natural potential is almost magically realized.⁹

The former geographical proximity of the Phaeacians and Cyclopes highlights the contrast between the super-civilized Phaeacians and the barbaric Cyclopes. But the earlier closeness of these very different peoples reveals a more complex and problematic interrelation than the simple polar opposition ‘nature/culture’ pointed out by some recent scholars.¹⁰ For the Phaeacians, who used to live near the Cyclopes, are related to them in yet another way. Alcinoos remarks that the

⁸ Such was already the opinion of ‘some’ in antiquity. Cf. Scholia BEPQV at Od. 6.4: ἄλλοι δὲ ὅτι νῆσος ἦν πρότερον πλησίον τῆς τῶν Κυκλώπων χώρας; and Eustathius 1549.13–14. G. S. Kirk, *Myth* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 165, intuitively comes close to the truth when he says: ‘this island, like the land of the Phaeacians [italics mine] – they had once been neighbours according to *Odyssey* VI, 4–7, but had been forced to move by the Cyclopes’ aggressiveness . . .’

⁹ In addition, the eerie mist which surrounds the island (9.144–5) is reminiscent of the mist concealing the Phaeacian ships (8.562). The presentation of the prehistory of the Phaeacians follows what R. Friedrich, *Stilwandel im homerischen Epos* (Heidelberg, 1975), pp. 82 ff. calls ‘die Technik der gegenseitigen Ergänzung’ so characteristic of the *Odyssey* as a whole.

¹⁰ For example, C. P. Segal, ‘The Phaeacians and the Symbolism of Odysseus’ Return’, *Arion* 1 (1962), p. 33: ‘The fullest antithesis of the Phaeacians is the Cyclopes . . . The high civilization of the Phaeacians, their social development, shipbuilding and sailing, entertainment of guests, stand in the greatest contrast with the isolation of the individual Cyclopes, their lack of ships and primitive means of sustenance, their scorn for the gods and divinely sanctioned rights’. Compare N. Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* (Berkeley, 1975), p. 153: ‘At the opposite end of the spectrum from the Cyclopes are the Phaeacians’. See also p. 162. P. Vidal-Naquet, ‘Valeurs religieuses et

mythiques de la terre et du sacrifice dans l’*Odyssée*’, *Annales: Economie, Société, Civilisation* 25.5 (1970), 1294, goes beyond simple opposition: ‘En un sens ils [les Phéaciens] sont bien, comme on l’a dit, l’inverse des Cyclopes. Toutes leurs vertus humaines, la pratique de l’hospitalité, la piété, l’art du don et de la fête, sont bien la contrepartie de la barbarie cyclopique. Mais il y a plus et mieux à dire: l’ancienne proximité et l’actuel éloignement des Phéaciens et des Cyclopes traduisent des relations plus subtiles.’ But Vidal-Naquet then avoids the issue by turning his attention to an examination of the thematic parallels and contrasts between the Phaeacians and the adventures of the *Apologoi* in Books 9–12.

The blurring of a simple nature/culture distinction may already be indicated in our passage by the presence of *goats* on the island. For goats are both wild and domesticated animals. (Cf. C. Calame, ‘Le Mythe des Cyclopes dans l’*Odyssée*’, in *Il Mito Greco: Atti del Convegno Internazionale* (Urbino, 1973), ed. B. Gentile, 372 n. 4.) In fact, the domesticated goat can become wild again. See O. Keller, *Die Antike Tierwelt* (Leipzig, 1909), I.298. A striking parallel exists in the double olive bush—one wild, the other cultivated, ἐξ ὁμόθεν πεφυῶσας, under which the storm-tossed Odysseus takes refuge his first night on Scheria (5.476–7). On the wild olive, see W. Richter, *Die Landwirtschaft im homerischen Zeitalter. Archeologia Homerica* II, H (Göttingen, 1968), p. 135.

gods usually reveal themselves undisguised to the Phaeacians nor 'do they hide themselves, since we are near them,'¹¹ just as the Cyclopes and the wild race of Giants' (7.205-6). ἐγγύθεν is usually understood as 'closely related' genealogically.¹² Of course, Poseidon is both Alcinoos' grandfather and Polyphemus' father. And as we learn also from Athena's genealogical sketch (7.56 ff.), Alcinoos' great-grandfather, Eurymedon, was king of the Giants, but 'he destroyed a reckless people and perished himself' (7.60).¹³

It may surprise us to learn that the peace-loving, sybaritic Phaeacians are so closely related to the Giants by lineage; surprising, too, is their connection with the Cyclopes.¹⁴ But Alcinoos' ἐγγύθεν suggests more. He seems to speak of an especially privileged position *vis-à-vis* the gods. The ἀρχιῖθες Phaeacians, of exemplary piety, enjoy not only the undisguised intercourse with the gods, but also the magical ships granted them by Poseidon, the splendid products of divine technology, and the 'shining gifts of the gods' in Alcinoos' garden (7.35; 7.92; 7.110; 7.132). But the Cyclopes, while characterized by grossly impious behaviour, culminating in cannibalism, also receive a privileged status from the very gods they ignore. Thus, Zeus makes their land fertile (9.111), and Poseidon immediately hearkens to the curse pronounced by his son. The ancient connection between the Cyclopes and the Phaeacians who fled from their βίη re-emerges as the curse of Polyphemus finally succeeds in reducing the Phaeacians to oblivion, if not destruction. The circle draws to a close.¹⁵

In the *Odyssey*, the opposition between civilization and barbarism or nature and culture cannot be viewed as a simple one. They are interrelated as Goat Island and the prehistory of the Phaeacians and Cyclopes reveal. The nearness of both to the gods is both surprising and illuminating.

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¹¹ The Phaeacians are called ἀρχιῖθες at 5.35 and 19.279 and φίλοι ἀθανάτοισιν at 6.203.

¹² See Ameis-Hentze, *Homers Odyssee*¹¹ (Leipzig, 1908) ad loc.; also Stanford (above, n. 1); and G. W. Nitzsch, *Erklärende Anmerkungen zu Homers Odyssee* (Hanover, 1840) remarks: 'So unähnlich sie sonst den frevelhaften Giganten und Kyklopen waren, dennoch nennen sie sich den Göttern so nahe verwandt wie diese.'

¹³ Hence there are no Giants in the *Odyssey*. But consider the Laestrygonians who are likened to Giants (*Od.* 10.120). According to a later tradition (Scholia to Apoll. Rhod. 4.992), both the Phaeacians and the Giants sprang from the blood of the mutilated Uranus.

¹⁴ The Scholia and Eustathius at 7.205 offer a strange and indefensible misreading of

the passage by suggesting that Alcinoos is putting forth a proportional scheme whereby the Phaeacians are as closely related to the gods κατὰ δικαιοσύνην as the Cyclopes and the Giants are to each other κατὰ γένος, κατὰ τόπον, or κατὰ ἀδελφίαν. The Greek of 7.205 cannot be construed this way. But these bizarre misinterpretations reveal the discomfort of the ancient commentators and represent their attempts to skirt the embarrassing and paradoxical implications of the passage.

¹⁵ One wonders, in fact, whether the oracle given to Nausithoos (8.564-70, 13.172-8) was not pronounced on the occasion of the Phaeacian migration from Hyperia to Scheria. For the practice of consulting an oracle before sending out a colony, see H. W. Parke, *A History of the Delphic Oracle* (Oxford, 1939), pp. 47 ff.