

## SHORTER NOTES

### ODYSSEUS AND THE STAG

A number of recent papers have discussed the episode at *Odyssey* 10.156–72 in which Odysseus, on the third morning after landing on Circe's island, sees, kills, and transports a huge stag whose meat revives his men, who are exhausted in both body and spirit. Since the incident does not advance the main action, it invites interpretation, particularly since it is so richly elaborated. Naturally, it has received several: that the stag should be understood as a transformed human, and thus prefigures the rest of the episode;<sup>1</sup> that the incident marks the liminality of Odysseus, who is about to lose some of his manhood in remaining for a year on the island;<sup>2</sup> that the stag derives from the magical animal which, in folktale, often leads the hero into the Otherworld or the Underworld;<sup>3</sup> and that it serves, both within its immediate context and within the narrative as told to the Phaeacians, as a figure for heroic action, removed from the battlefield and rendered 'urbane' by its emphasis on the cleverness with which Odysseus transports the dead animal rather than on the actual killing.<sup>4</sup> I would like to point to a completely different aspect of the episode and to suggest that although some of these studies may be true pointers to its origin, its function within the narrative is straightforward and does not in itself demand such elaborate interpretation: the incident with the stag belongs to a series of incidents that test the ability of Odysseus and his crew to obtain meat, and so develop central themes of feasting, social order, and leadership.

The stag, after all, is introduced in order to be eaten. When Odysseus and his crew land on Circe's island, they are so broken that they lie by the beach for two days and nights in misery and exhaustion (10.142–3). Then Odysseus goes to look for traces of human habitation, and sees the smoke from Circe's house. He then considers going to investigate himself (10.150–1), but decides to feed his companions first and then send them to find out about the source of the smoke. The stag meets him as he returns towards his men, and enables him to provide them with a far better meal than would otherwise have been possible. Its killing is described in the language of epic battle.<sup>5</sup> Both its death and the device by which Odysseus successfully hauls the heavy carcass are meticulously described (157–71). The men feast and then rest, and on the next morning Odysseus describes what he saw from the lookout (189–97). His companions are extremely discouraged, remembering the Laestrygonians (198–201), but there is no way to avoid visiting the inhabitants. If morale is as low as this after the feast, it is easy to imagine how desperate Odysseus' crew would have been without it.

As everyone knows, among the nine adventures of the *Apologos* three receive an extended narrative, the Cyclops, Circe's island, and Thrinacia. The second begins with the killing of the stag; the first also opens with an episode of hunting on the Goat Island (9.150–60) followed by a feast and sleep (161–9). The two incidents are a perfect instance of Homeric repetition with variation; they are similar enough to be

<sup>1</sup> D. Roessel, 'The Stag on Circe's Island: An Exegesis of a Homeric Digression', *TAPA* 119 (1989), 31–6.

<sup>2</sup> D. Birge, 'Ambiguity and the Stag Hunt in *Odyssey* 10', *Helios* 20 (1993), 17–28.

<sup>3</sup> C. Alexander, 'A Note on the Stag: *Odyssey* 10.156–72', *CQ* 41 (1991), 520–4.

<sup>4</sup> E. A. Schmoll, 'Odysseus and the Stag: The Parander', *Helios* 14 (1987), 22–8.

<sup>5</sup> A. Heubeck in A. Heubeck, A. Hoekstra, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey II. Books IX–XVI* (Oxford, 1989), on 162–5.

obvious variants on a type, and their differences are obviously significant. In both cases the ships land on an unknown island. After an interval of time – overnight in the first adventure, two days and nights in the second – it is time to explore the island, with all the men wandering over it in the first adventure, while Odysseus goes alone in the second. In each case a divinity brings game into range: the nymphs on the Goat Island, an unidentified god who pities Odysseus in the second. The hunt produces enough meat for everyone, and there is a feast. Exploration follows, prompted by the sight of smoke from a habitation.<sup>6</sup> The similarities obviously serve to mark the differences. In the earlier adventure, Odysseus sets off to visit the Cyclops' island from pure curiosity; on Circe's island, on the other hand, only desperation impels him, since questioning the inhabitants is the only possible way he can learn where he is. In the first episode, the hunt is easy, and everyone participates; in the second, the crew is exhausted and discouraged, and Odysseus alone becomes the provider of meat. Only after the feast can he induce his men to visit Circe's house.

In the third section, on the other hand, Thrinacia provides nothing. The men fish and catch birds, but they cannot catch enough for survival (12.330–2). Odysseus is unable to feed the starving crew, who eat Helius' cattle and so cause their own destruction. The availability of game is absolutely crucial to the plot of the poem; through the three major adventures, the supply diminishes. If in the first long adventure all the men hunt successfully, in the second only Odysseus can provide meat, and all his cleverness is needed to transport it, while in the third no divinity helps and there is no food. The theme that is isolated as a brief, separate episode in the earlier adventures becomes the point of the last. The relationship among the three passages may help explain why Odysseus on Aea presents the stag to his companions with the injunction that they will not die of starvation yet, and should eat 'while there are food and drink on the ship' (ὄφρ' ἐν νηϊ θοῇ βρώσις τε πόσις τε, 176). After all, he planned a meal even before meeting the stag (10.155).<sup>7</sup> In describing the feast on the Goat Island, Odysseus stresses that they still had plenty of wine (9.163–5); on Thrinacia, the crew keeps away from the cattle as long as there are still food and wine on the ship (12.327–8, cf. Odysseus' exhortation at 320–4, ὦ φίλοι, ἐν γὰρ νηϊ θοῇ βρώσις τε πόσις τε | ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ βοῶν ἀπεχώμεθα...). At each point, the narrative refers to both possible sources of food, ship's stores and the land.

No critic, as far as I know, has found shamanistic or other esoteric meanings for the goats of *Odyssey* 9, or for the absence of game animals on Thrinacia. I would suggest that given this context, we should perhaps accept that the point of the great stag within the poem as we have it is simply that Odysseus has the divine help and the hunter's skill to feed his men, while the deer appropriates some of the qualities of a human warrior as a way of marking the importance of this task. Within the poem, heroic leadership lies in the ability to find food. A deer is primarily meat on the hoof, essential both to meet the physical need for food and to permit the feast which is the central expression of group solidarity in Homeric culture.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> P. V. Jones, *Homer's Odyssey: a Companion to the Translation of Richmond Lattimore* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1988) 93 (on 10.140–88), notes the parallels.

<sup>7</sup> Heubeck on 174–7 suggests that he means to surprise his men, which is quite possible; G. Beck, 'Zur Kirke-Episode in der Odyssee', *Philologus* 109 (1965), 5.

<sup>8</sup> J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), 14–19; O. Murray, 'The Symposium as Social Organization', in R. Hägg (ed.), *The Greek Renaissance of the Eighth Century B.C.: Tradition and Innovation* (Stockholm, 1983), 195–9. J. Whitley, *Style and Society in Dark Age Greece: The Changing Face of a Pre-literate Society 1100–700 B.C.* (Cambridge, 1991), 184–6, discusses Dark Age settlements as 'Big Man' societies centring on feasting halls.

Hunting thus belongs within the theme of feasting and social order, which is central to the poem as a whole. Elsewhere in the Homeric poems, hunting and feasting are separated, and both receive meanings that de-emphasize their basis in economics and physical needs. While lions may be driven by hunger to attack (*Il.* 12.299–306, *Od.* 6.130–4), human hunters are never depicted as trying to kill for meat in Homeric similes. Indeed, although the hunted animal may be a deer, goat, or wild boar, which are edible, it may also be a lion or leopard (*Il.* 21.573–8), which are not.<sup>9</sup> The scar which identifies Odysseus for his slaves is the result of a boar hunt, and it is significant that Odysseus' first adventure is a hunt set outside the cultivated works of men. The boar hunt, however, is distinctly different from the hunts on the Goat Island and on Aeaëa. Like the other hunts, this hunt is associated with a feast. The order of events, however, is different. When Odysseus arrives at his grandfather's house for his visit, his maternal relatives celebrate with a feast, as is appropriate (19.418–25). On the next day, in the morning, they go out to hunt (19.428–9). Odysseus' struggle with the boar is reminiscent of the hunting similes of the *Iliad*: it anticipates the conflicts of war rather than the effort to find food. This is normal hunting: a brief excursion onto the mountain, outside the civilized boundaries by a group of males who bond through shared danger, as they have already bonded through the feast. No feast follows this hunt, not only because Odysseus is wounded, but because this hunt was not undertaken in order to make a feast possible.

Within the *Apologos*, however, hunting is one way of obtaining meat in a narrative in which such ways are important markers: only Odysseus and his men hunt, while the cannibalistic Cyclops and Laestrygonians engage in pasturage. The men who hunt the goats of the island are the same who could make it into fertile, cultivated land:

οἱ (sc. ἄνδρες) κέ σφιν καὶ νῆσον ἐϋκτιμένην ἐκάμουντο.  
οὐ μὲν γάρ τι κακὴ γέ, φέροι δέ κεν ὥρια πάντα· (130–1)

The hunt is followed by the feast, as a sacrifice of domestic animals would be. When Odysseus kills his deer, the narrator emphasizes the technical skill required to bring the meat back so that it can become the material for a communal meal, whereas the shepherd Cyclopes and Laestrygonians apparently neither hunt nor sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> Hunting, within the structure of Odysseus' adventures, is a civilized and civilizing activity. Within the ordinary human world, sacrifice is the normal preface for the feast; the sacrifice establishes proper relations between mortals and gods, and the apportionment of meat establishes the proper relations among men. In the wilderness, sacrifice is not possible, but the feast can still be held, as long as meat is available.<sup>11</sup> Eating game defines Odysseus and his crew as a normal human community. In danger of being made into food by Polyphemus, Laestrygonians, and Scylla, they also receive dangerous, bad food during their adventures: the lotus, which makes them forget their return (9.93–7), and Circe's mixture of cheese, barley, and honey with the drugs that also make them forget their homeland (10.234–6) and turn them to swine.<sup>12</sup> They

<sup>9</sup> There is a full treatment of hunting similes in S. Lonsdale, *Creatures of Speech: Lion, Herding, and Hunting Similes in the Iliad* (Stuttgart, 1990), 71–102.

<sup>10</sup> On the absence of sacrifice in the *Apologos*, see P. Vidal-Naquet, 'Land and Sacrifice in the *Odyssey*: A Study of Religious and Mythical Meanings', *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*, trans. A. Szegedy-Maszak (Baltimore, 1983), 15–38.

<sup>11</sup> O. Murray, 'War and the Symposium', in W. J. Slater (ed.), *Dining in a Classical Context* (Ann Arbor, 1991), 83–103, stresses the importance of shared drinking in military societies. In Homer, clearly, meat is at least as important as wine.

<sup>12</sup> The Sirens, with their destructive singing, could also be said to provide a 'bad feast,' since the feast is the main occasion for the pleasure of song (1.325–7, 4.17–18, 8.62–83, 22.350–3).

also expose themselves to danger by eating food they have plundered instead of hunted or received as gift, among the Cicones (9.45–6), in Polyphemus' cave (9.231–2), and on Thrinacia (12.339–98).

Hunting is thus the appropriate method of winning food for those outside the civilized area of cultivation. As the hunting grows worse, so does the order of the feast. On the Goat Island, each ship receives nine goats, while Odysseus receives one for himself; the feast fulfils its function of defining human social order (9.159–60). On Aeaëa, though the feast is successful in restoring the group's solidarity, Odysseus is not said to receive a special portion (10.183–4). On Thrinacia, where hunting fails and the Companions consume the forbidden cattle of Helios, their attempt to conduct a sacrifice without the necessary wine and barley grains fails, and the feast also fails, since Odysseus does not participate in it (12.197–8). A feast in which the leader does not join is a mark of utter anarchy.

The ability to acquire edible meat from the land, and thus to make the feast possible, is a form of practical leadership. In the normal, civilized world, the king binds his followers to him by providing them with feasts. A king who cannot entertain is no king, and council and feast are closely linked functions. Alcinoüs splendidly fulfil this role in the *Odyssey*, and so do Nestor and Menelaüs. Telemachus reaches Pylos during a sacrifice to Poseidon on the beach, and reaches the gathering just as Nestor's men are preparing the meat (3.32–3); he arrives at Sparta in the middle of the wedding-feast, as a bard and dancers perform (4.15–19); Odysseus enters the palace of Alcinoüs as the guests are pouring their final libation of the evening before going home (7.136–8). Each episode presents a different setting and ritual function for the feast, and each depicts a different portion, so that together they show both the varieties and components of the king's feast. Alcinoüs gives two feasts to the leaders of the Phaeacians on the day following Odysseus' arrival: the first is announced in the assembly along with the preparations for Odysseus' voyage home (8.40–5), while the second follows the collection of gifts for Odysseus, which are brought to Alcinoüs' house and presented to him (8.387–453). In each case, the public action is followed by the king's feasting of the local elite. The suitors' endless feasting, on the other hand, breaks all the rules and demonstrates their disregard of social order.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of the king's feast is perfectly demonstrated in *Iliad* 9. After Agamemnon has proposed fleeing home and Diomedes has responded angrily, Nestor suggests that Agamemnon give a feast to his council, and reminds him of the abundance he has available (9.70–2);

δαίνυ δαῖτα γέρουσιν· ἔοικέ τοι, οὐ τοι ἀεικές·  
πλείαί τοι οἶνου κλισίαι, τὸν νῆες Ἀχαιῶν  
ἡμάτιαι ὀρήκηθεν ἐπ' εὐρέα πόντον ἄγουσιν

Only after the meal does Nestor make his substantive proposal of an embassy to Achilles, and his speech begins with an elaborate preamble honouring Agamemnon (96–102). The feast defines who is part of the group, and helps to re-establish Agamemnon's authority, which Diomedes' angry tirade has undermined. As

On the adventures' juxtaposition of the different extremes of bad hospitality, see J. Redfield, 'The Economic Man', in C. Rubino and C. Shelmerdine (edd.), *Approaches to Homer* (Austin, 1983), 218–47, esp. 237–42; G. Most, 'The Structure and Function of Odysseus' *Apologoi*', *TAPA* 119 (1989), 15–30.

<sup>13</sup> S. Said, 'Les crimes des prétendants, la maison d'Ulysse et les festins de l'Odyssee', *Études de la littérature ancienne* (Paris, 1979), 9–49; D. Lateiner, 'The Suitors' Take: Manners and Power in Ithaca', *Colby Quarterly* 29 (1993), 173–96.

commander, Agamemnon is obligated to provide feasts (he also offers a banquet at 7.313ff. after the duel between Hector and Ajax, and gives a special piece of meat to Ajax), while by partaking in his feast the Achaeans acknowledge his leadership. Achilles likewise serves meat, bread, and wine to the Embassy (9.201–23), and Odysseus opens his speech by simultaneously reminding Achilles of Agamemnon's feasts in which he has shared, acknowledging that Achilles does not need Agamemnon in order to feast (225–8), and using the pleasure of the feast as foil for the danger of the Achaeans (228–30).

Ordinarily, the leader redistributes the surplus of the community in the feast. When the feast takes place in its usual contexts of sacrifice, guest-entertainment, and the ratification of order, the availability of food and wine is usually taken for granted, although the Suitors' consumption of Odysseus' stock is a reminder that even great wealth is not unlimited. The performance of the feast becomes a way of evaluating how well individuals are fulfilling their ideal kingly roles. In the extreme situation of the *Apologos*, however, the ability to provide meat is not the function of wealth and generosity it is for Alcinous or Agamemnon, but is reduced, almost demystified. The significance of the hunt appears only gradually. On the Goat Island, Odysseus' men are not yet in serious need, and the hunt is both sport and a way of obtaining meat. When Odysseus kills the stag, he still has food for his followers, but the fresh meat is clearly needed to raise morale and re-establish the solidarity of the group. Only when both supplies and hunting fail does the crucial role of these feasts become clear. The leader retains his position only as long as he has food for his followers. On Aegaea, he can provide the essential meat only by finding, killing, and transporting it himself.

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#### ODYSSEY 22.474–7: MURDER OR MUTILATION?\*

ἐκ δὲ Μελάνθιον ἦγον ἀνὰ πρόθυρόν τε καὶ αὐλήν·  
τοῦ δ' ἀπὸ μὲν ρινᾶς τε καὶ οὐατα νηλεῖ χαλκῷ  
τάμνον μηδεὰ τ' ἐξέρυσαν, κυσὶν ὦμά δάσασθαι,  
χείρας τ' ἥδε πόδας κόπτον κεκοτηότι θυμῷ.

The treatment of the goatherd Melanthius in these lines received remarkably little animadversion from earlier commentators (who may have been inhibited by the very brutality of the actions described). In contrast, the late Manuel Fernandez-Galiano devoted an extremely full note to the passage.<sup>1</sup> One may wonder, however, whether he was right to base it on the automatic assumption that what we have depicted here is an act of *murder*.<sup>2</sup> He himself admits that we are not 'told exactly at what moment the unfortunate Melanthius dies'. (This observation goes back as far as Eustathius'

\* I am grateful to Dr Ursula Dronke for advice and for bibliography over and above that quoted in her book referred to below (n. 5).

<sup>1</sup> As part of the commentary on the *Odyssey* published first in Italian (1986), then in English (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> On 474–7: 'the goatherd's unpleasant death' and 'execution' (cf. on 479: 'the two executions'). On 478: 'slaughter', etc. A swift survey of recent studies of the poem seems to confirm that the murder interpretation is usually taken for granted: e.g. H. Eisenberger, *Studien zur Odyssee (Palingenesia 7 [1973])*, p. 243 n. 21: 'sowohl Iros wie Melanthios sollen erst durch die Verstümmelung sterben'; Uvo Hölscher, *Die Odyssee, Epos Zwischen Märchen und Roman* (Munich, 1988), p. 259: 'der Martertod des Melanthios'. For a (problematic) exception see below n. 9.