

THE STAG ON CIRCE'S ISLAND: AN EXEGESIS OF A HOMERIC DIGRESSION

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In his comments on the Circe episode, Denys Page calls attention to the discrepancy between “the length and detail of unimportant passages and the rapid and superficial treatment of such interesting matters as the use of the *moly* and the transformation into and out of pigs.”¹ Odysseus’ killing of a stag on Aeaea, which occupies almost twenty lines, certainly qualifies as one of the long and seemingly unimportant passages. But an examination of the nature of the stag reveals that the encounter between Odysseus and the beast may have close thematic links to the Circe story which enhance our understanding of oral technique.

When Odysseus arrives on Circe’s island, he and his crew spend two days mourning their comrades who had been destroyed by the Laistrygonians (10.142–43). On the third day Odysseus climbs a cliff from which he sees the smoke of Circe’s house (144–45). Instead of proceeding immediately to the origin of the smoke, he chooses to return to the ship and feed his crew (153–55). He has the following encounter on his way back:

ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ σχεδὸν ἦα κιὼν νεὸς ἀμφιελίσσης,
καὶ τότε τίς με θεῶν ὀλοφύρατο μούνον ἔοντα,
ὅς ῥά μοι ὑψίκερων ἔλαφον μέγαν εἰς ὁδὸν αὐτῇν
ἦκεν· ὁ μὲν ποταμόνδε κατήϊεν ἐκ νομοῦ ὕλης
πιόμενος· δὴ γάρ μιν ἔχεν μένος ἡελίοιο.
τὸν δ’ ἐγὼ ἐκβαίνοντα κατ’ ἄκνηστιν μέσα νῶτα
πλήξα· τὸ δ’ ἀντικρὺ δόρυ χάλκεον ἐξεπέρησε.
καὶ δ’ ἔπεισ’ ἐν κονίησι μακῶν, ἀπὸ δ’ ἔπατο θυμός.
τῷ δ’ ἐγὼ ἐμβαίνων δόρυ χάλκεον ἐξ ὠτειλῆς
εἰρυσάμην· τὸ μὲν αὖθι κατακλίνας ἐπὶ γαίῃ
εἶας· αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ σπασάμην ῥῶπας τε λύγους τε,
πεῖσμα δ’, ὅσον τ’ ὄργυιαν, εὖστρεφὲς ἀμφοτέρωθεν
πλεξάμενος συνέδησα πόδας δεινοῖο πελώρου,
βῆν δὲ καταλοφάδεια φέρων ἐπὶ νῆα μέλαιναν,
ἔγχει φρειδόμενος, ἐπεὶ οὐ πως ἦεν ἐπ’ ὤμου
χειρὶ φέρειν ἑτέρῃ· μάλα γὰρ μέγα θηρίον ἦεν. (156–71)

Odysseus and his men feast on the stag. He then tells them of the smoke which he had seen from the cliff. This leads to the division of the crew into two companies and the encounter with Circe.

The landing scene is a standard feature in the *Odyssey*.² The killing of animals for food may have been a part of one variant of this scene, as it occurs

¹ *Folktales in the Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass. 1973) 69.

² See W. Arendt, *Die Typischen Szenen bei Homer* (Darmstadt 1933) 79–81 and B. Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey*, Hermes Einzelschriften 30 (Wiesbaden 1974) 158–71, esp. 165–66. K. Reinhardt, “Die Abenteuer der Odyssee,” *Tradition und Geist* (Göttingen 1960) 63 and 79 draws parallels between the landing and

both here and in Book 9. There Odysseus and his men kill wild goats on a small island which lies near the home of the Cyclopes:

ᾠρσαν δὲ νύμφαι, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο,
αἶγας ὄρεσκόφους, ἵνα δειπνήσειαν ἑταῖροι.
αὐτίκα καμπύλα τόξα καὶ αἰγανέας δολιχαύλους
εἰλόμεθ' ἐκ νηῶν, διὰ δὲ τρίχα κοσμηθέντες
βάλλομεν· αἶψα δ' ἔδωκε θεὸς μενοεικέα θήρην.
νῆες μὲν μοι ἔποντο δυώδεκα, ἐς δὲ ἐκάστην
ἐννεα λάγχανον αἶγες· ἐμοὶ δὲ δέκ' ἔξελον οἶφ. (154–60)

So the passage about the stag on Circe's island might appear to need no explanation. It is simply part of a familiar landing and search motif employed by the oral poet. The motif facilitates the transition to a new episode and, on occasion, heightens interest by epic retardation.³

But on Circe's island, men are metamorphosed into lions, wolves, and pigs. In such a place, the stag could be something more than just a stag. In fact, the stag is unusual. Odysseus calls it ὑψίκερων ἔλαφον μέγαν (158), and a μάλα μέγα θηρίον (171); its feet are those of a δεινοῖο πελώρου (168).⁴ When Odysseus brings it back to the ship, the men stop their grieving to admire it:

ἐκ δὲ καλυψάμενοι παρὰ θῖν' ἄλλος ἀτρυγέτοιο
θήησαντ' ἔλαφον· μάλα γὰρ μέγα θηρίον ἦεν. (179–80)

A comparison of the encounter between Odysseus and the stag with the goat hunt in Book 9 is illuminating. The goats have no special qualities. But the poet goes out of his way to draw attention to the stag, even repeating the phrase μάλα γὰρ μέγα θηρίον ἦεν within the space of ten lines (171, 180).

The unusual nature of the stag is emphasized by the use of the phrase δεινοῖο πελώρου (168). In epic the noun τὸ πέλωρ and the variant form τὸ πέλωρον refer only to living things and mean "prodigy" or "monster" (for πέλωρ cf. *Il.* 18.410—Hephaestus, *Od.* 9.428—Polyphemus, *Od.* 12.87—Scylla; *h. Ap.* 374—Python; *h. Ap.* 401—the dolphin which jumps on the ship; for πέλωρον cf. *Il.* 2.321—birds as omens of the gods, *Theogony* 295—Echidna, *Theogony* 845—Typho). The association of the words with unnatural phenomena is heightened by the frequent use of such adjectives as δεινόν (*Il.* 2.321), αἰνός (*Od.* 10.219) and ἀμήχανος (*Theogony* 295). The cognate adjectives πελώριος/ον and πελώριος/η/ον have a wider semantic range. In addition to "monstrous," they also mean "large in size" and can be used of inanimate objects (for πελώριος/ον cf. *Il.* 3.229—Ajax; *Il.* 11.820—Hector; *Od.* 3.290—waves of the sea, *Od.* 11.594—the stone of Sisyphus; for πελώριος/η/ον cf. *Il.* 12.202—a snake, *Od.* 15.161—a goose; *Theogony* 159 and 173—Gaia; *h. Merc.* 225, where the neuter plural is used adverbially in the phrase πέλωρα

hunting scenes before the Cyclops and Circe episodes, but thinks the similarities were deliberate and not thematic.

³ H. Rahn, *Tier und Mensch in der homerischen Auffassung der Wirklichkeit* (Darmstadt 1968) 13 considers the stag a preliminary for the Circe tale, and Page (above, note 1) 53 appears to agree.

⁴ The emphasis on the unusual size of the stag has also been noticed by W. B. Stanford in his edition, *The Odyssey of Homer* (London 1947) I.370 and E. A. Schmoll, "Odysseus and the Stag: The Parander," *Helios* 14 (1987) 22–28. Schmoll interprets the stag in terms of Odysseus' travels generally and his activities on Phaeacia, while I prefer to view it as closely connected to events on Aeaea.

βιβάς).⁵ So the stag which Odysseus kills is a “terrible monster,” a meaning reinforced by the fact that δεινοῖο πελώρου is a formulaic phrase. In addition to *Od.* 10.168, it is used twice of Medusa (Γοργεῖαν κεφαλὴν δεινοῖο πελώρου—*Il.* 5.741; *Od.* 11.634), and once of Typho (θεσπεσίας κεφαλὰς δεινοῖο πελώρου—*Theogony* 856).

The other use of πέλωρον in the Circe episode helps to explain how the stag is a “monster.” When Eurylochus and his company approach Circe’s dwelling, they encounter some wolves and mountain lions to whom Circe has given her evil drugs. The animals greet the men like dogs welcoming their master:

ὥς τοὺς ἀμφὶ λύκοι κρατερώνυχες ἡδὲ λέοντες
σαῖνον· τοῖ δ’ ἔδρισαν, ἐπεὶ ἴδον αἰνὰ πέλωρα. (218–19)

The lions and wolves are αἰνὰ πέλωρα because they are humans who have been metamorphosed by Circe. Or so we are led to conclude by Eurylochus’ statement at 431–34, when he refuses to return to Circe’s house.⁶

“ἂ δειλοί, πόσ’ ἴμεν; τί κακῶν ἱμείρετε τούτων,
Κίρκης ἐς μέγαρον καταβήμεναι, ἢ κεν ἅπαντας
ἢ σὺς ἢ λέοντες ποιήσεται ἢ λέοντας,
οἳ κεν οἱ μέγα δῶμα φυλάσσοιμεν καὶ ἀνάγκη...”

The stag on Aeaea is also called a πέλωρον, so the logical assumption is that the stag is a man in animal garb, and the killing and eating of the stag is a kind of cannibalism.⁷

An objection immediately arises to the interpretation of the stag given above. The poet does not reveal Circe’s strange powers until lines 239–42, although there is an allusion at 212–13, where the poet describes the peculiar behavior of the lions and wolves which have been given “evil drugs.” In oral poetry, lines 239–42 cannot be read back into lines 156–71. The stag may be viewed as part of a digression separate from the Circe episode and connected to it by the oral poet’s linear method of composition, which allows incidents to be strung together without being logically dependent.⁸

⁵ On the difference between the semantic fields of these nouns and adjectives, see also P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris 1974) vol. III, 879. Schmoll’s (above, note 4, 26 n. 5) attempt to equate the use of the adjective πελώριος for warriors in the *Iliad* with the appearance of πελώρου at *Odyssey* 10.168 is linguistically suspect.

⁶ As Page, (above, note 1) 54, noted, Eurylochus had no way of knowing whether this was true when he said it. But that seems due to the compressed nature of the episode, not the falsity of the information.

⁷ A. Schnapp-Gourbeillon, *Lions, héros, masques: les représentations de l’animal chez Homère* (Paris 1981) 144 notes that there is something unusual in the cooking of the stag. “Les termes employés pour décrire le festin sont d’ailleurs exactement les mêmes que pour un animal domestique (boeuf ou mouton)...” She explains this as an indication that the killing of the stag is not just a heroic feat, but also a means of avoiding starvation. But perhaps the way in which a θηρίον becomes domesticated when cooked is another pointer to the stag’s strange, hybrid nature.

⁸ On the episodic view of Homeric composition, see B. A. van Groningen, “Éléments inorganiques dans la composition de l’*Iliade* et de l’*Odysée*,” *Revue des Études Homériques* 5 (1935) 3–24 and J. A. Notopoulos, “Parataxis in Homer: A New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism,” *TAPA* 80 (1949) 1–23.

This objection relies on one of two conditions. First, the audience must not know the tale of Circe and Odysseus. If they are familiar with the story, any mention of Circe or her island Aeaea will call to their minds the primary feature of the tale, the metamorphosis of humans. It is not, then, reading lines 239–42 back to lines 156–71, but remembering the version heard last year or last month. Most scholars will accept the premise that a majority of the audience knew what to expect when they discovered that Odysseus was on Aeaea. Page argues that the schematic nature of the Circe episode “...takes it for granted that you know a fuller story of which this is an abbreviated version.”⁹ This leads to the second condition, that the poet not mention where Odysseus is until the search party led by Eurylochus arrives at the house of the unknown inhabitant. Since an oral poet could add and delete episodes in performance, the audience would be unaware of which tale was being told without some reference. In fact, the island is identified as Circe’s at the time of Odysseus’ landing (10.135–39) and the smoke which Odysseus sees from the cliff is said to come from Circe’s dwelling (150). There is no question but that Odysseus is on Aeaea when he kills the stag. An audience familiar with the story would have reason to regard the stag with suspicion.

There are several possible explanations of the cryptic way Homer alludes to the strange nature of the stag. Hunting and killing a stag/man may have been part of another version of Odysseus’ adventure on Aeaea which Homer chose not to elaborate on in this particular telling. The poet did not, however, delete the event entirely, but left a trace of the undeveloped episode in his tale. This is certainly possible. Yet there is no indication that Circe changed men into anything except swine, lions and wolves; and all of Circe’s animals remain in the vicinity of her dwelling. This suggests another interpretation.

The poet organized formulae and episodes thematically as well as sequentially. In some cases, like scenes of arming and feasting, the same formulae can be repeated without change. In others, some of the same language can be used, but alterations are necessary to fit the new circumstances.¹⁰ In this broader thematic organization, one story of a goddess who changes men into animals, Circe, can be associated with another story of a goddess who changed a man into an animal, Artemis in the tale of Actaeon. The Actaeon story was traditional, for it appears in Hesiod’s *Catalogue*.¹¹ A specific connection between the stag and the Actaeon tale may seem unwarranted; Page has shown that the Circe episode has similarities to “witch in the woods” folk tales of many cultures.¹² The stag might therefore be read as an allusion to a type of mythical story about a goddess who metamorphoses humans rather than a single version of that genre. In Greek mythology, however, there seems to have been one famous account of a stag/man. Archaic and Classical art consistently characterized Actaeon

⁹ Page (above, note 1) 57.

¹⁰ For a general discussion, see Fenik (above, note 2) 133–71.

¹¹ See T. Renner, “A Papyrus Dictionary of Metamorphosis,” *HSCP* 82 (1978) 282–87, and R. Janko, “P. Oxy. 2509: Hesiod’s *Catalogue* on the Death of Actaeon,” *Phoenix* 38 (1984) 299–307. For a defense of the method of reading into Homeric epics myths whose first occurrence is post-Homeric, see W. Kullman, “Zur Methode der Neoanalyse in der Homerforschung,” *WS* n.f. 15 (1981) 5–42.

¹² Page (above, note 1) 56–65.

by the horns of a stag or a deerskin.¹³ Probably the mention of a stag/man would call to mind the same myth.

An allusion to Actaeon and his fate might once have served as a *paradeigma* of what could happen to Odysseus at the hands of Circe, as the famous Meleager story told by Phoenix in Book 9 of the *Iliad* warns Achilles. Such a *paradeigma* would have been appropriate to the speech of Hermes when he informs Odysseus about the dangers of Circe and the power of the *moly* plant. Or the Actaeon myth could function as a brief analogy to the events on Aeaea, just as the Orion myth is employed to shed light on Odysseus' involvement with Calypso in Book 5.121–29.¹⁴ In the latter case, Calypso mentions Orion by name, which places the analogy on a firm footing. In Book 10 no direct reference to Actaeon occurs, but such an analogy may still have been intended. The Circe and Calypso adventures are thematically linked and are sometimes viewed as doublets of each other.¹⁵ The use of myths which relate to Artemis' association with mortals in both episodes could have a structural purpose.

The present state of the Circe episode shows numerous signs of compression, and the incident with the stag reflects that condensation.¹⁶ How or why the Actaeon myth might originally have been incorporated in Book 10 can no longer be discerned. What Mabel Lang has said of the *Iliad* applies here as well: "...whether an *Iliad* theme attracted old tales as *exempla* or an old tale inspired an *Iliad* episode for which the tale was used as support, each would be liable over time to infiltration of details from the other...Such a complex whole could not have resulted from any single act of composition but repeated recreations."¹⁷ In the present case, the infiltration was so pervasive that the stag was kept even after the reason for its incorporation was removed.

All that now remains in the text is a stag with an unusual nature. But even in its present form, Odysseus' killing of the stag could hold a meaning for both the poet and the audience. Bernard Fenik observed that in Homeric epic "...certain recurrences are unmistakable—not to a listening audience, of course, or even to a reader. One has to search to find them, a fact which strengthens my own conviction that this technique of large-scale structuring is not there for aesthetic reasons so much as to serve as an outline for the poet himself—a framework on which to arrange his story and keep himself oriented."¹⁸ A regular feature of epic, Fenik notes, is "the foreshadowing of an important event to come by a minor replica of itself," which he terms the "anticipatory doublet."¹⁹ Odysseus' encounter with the stag certainly foreshadows the Circe episode in this way, whether it evokes the Actaeon story, as I have suggested, or not. The stag would also foreshadow the Circe episode for those listening to the poem, since once Odysseus landed on Aeaea, all animals would be suspect. So the encounter with a δεινὸν πέλωρον helps to lay the groundwork for the rest of the episode.

¹³ For the iconography of the Actaeon myth, see L. Guimond, "Aktaion," *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologicum* I.1 454–69 and I.2 346–63.

¹⁴ I owe the reference to a *TAPA* referee, who may not agree with the use made of it here.

¹⁵ See J. D. Niles, "Patterning in the Wanderings of Odysseus," *Ramus* 7 (1978) 48.

¹⁶ On this, see Page (above, note 1) 52–57.

¹⁷ "Reverberation and Mythology in the *Iliad*," in *Approaches to Homer*, ed. C. A. Rubino and C. W. Shelmerdine (Austin 1983) 163.

¹⁸ Fenik (above, note 2) 182.

¹⁹ Fenik (above, note 2) 101.

If the Actaeon myth is an anticipatory doublet for the Circe episode, it affects our understanding of a simile in the story. When Eurylochos' company approaches Circe's house, the lions and wolves gather around them:

ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἄν ἄμφι ἄνακτα κύνες δαίτηθεν ἰόντα
σαίνωσ'· αἰεὶ γάρ τε φέρει μελίσγματα θυμοῦ· (216–17)

The simile is perfectly understandable on a surface level, but gains a deeper meaning after the passage of the stag. It picks up and reinforces the idea presented in the anticipatory doublet.²⁰ This observation gains more credence when we recall that the lions and wolves are also metamorphosed humans (cf. *Od.* 10.432–33) and that they may eat the men whom they are now fawning when the latter are changed into swine.²¹ That situation produces a mirror of the Actaeon tale with a grim psychological twist.²²

This exegesis has taken what appears to be an unremarkable passage in Homer and shown how it could have had considerable significance in shaping the episode. The Homeric poems, like the hill of Hissarlik, contain many layers piled upon each other. A close look at the stag on Circe's island allows us a glimpse at what a previous version of the episode might have been like. At the same time, it opens up a new understanding of the text in its final form.²³

²⁰ For further examples of thematic similes in the *Odyssey*, see C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems*, Hypomnemata 49 (Gottingen 1977) 126–34.

²¹ As Norman Austin observed, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* (Berkeley 1975) 153, Circe metamorphoses men into swine and "...presumably eats them in that form." Curiously, Austin does not make the connection between this and Odysseus' refusal to eat. Yet Austin's own observations show that Odysseus might be concerned that his comrades are on the spit. Circe would, one expects, feed the domesticated lions and wolves from this ready supply of flesh as well. The poet of the *Odyssey* does not play up the elements of cannibalism on Aeaea, but the undertones of it are numerous.

²² W. Burkert, *Homo Necans*, trans. P. Bing (Berkeley 1983) 111–14 has suggested that in the Actaeon myth the dogs represent a sort of *Männerbund*. If so, an act of cannibalism lies embedded in the myth and its connection to the Circe episode in the *Odyssey* is strengthened.

²³ An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1987 APA Meeting in New York City. Carrie Cowherd read several drafts and made numerous improvements. I also thank the referees and editor of *TAPA* for helpful suggestions. Any errors are my own.