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Xenia in Odysseus' Encounter with Polyphemus

Homer's "The Odyssey" is undisputedly one of the most influential pieces of literature in human history. Its tale of the epic hero Odysseus gives us not only an oft repeated and imitated story, but also a look into ancient Greek culture and customs. One of these well-illustrated Greek customs is xenia. Xenia was the Greek moral code of hospitality. When abiding by its principles, it was customary for hosts to bathe, clothe, and feed strangers even before asking their names or intentions. After the passersby had stayed their welcome, it was common for them to exchange gifts with the hosts at their parting, and for the host to provide them with needed support to continue their journey. As we mentioned in our group discussion, these customs were both socially and religiously derived. From a religious perspective, it was thought that Greek gods could take human form and mimic travelers. The Greeks believed if one of these disguised gods were to take lodge in your home, you would be either blessed or cursed based on your hospitality towards them. As such, all Greek citizens felt compelled to treat guests with the upmost respect in order to receive the best blessings possible. The themes of xenia permeate the Odyssey – the moral code is both upheld and broken in multiple instances. Homer demonstrates an interesting play on the themes of xenia when Odysseus encounters the cyclops Polyphemus. While Odysseus makes every possible attempt to follow xenia through word and deed, Polyphemus violates the code, eventually leading Odysseus to do the same in order to save his life.

Odysseus' initial appeals to *xenia* are evident from his actions when he first enters Polyphemus' cave. Although his shipmates urge him to "make away with the cheeses, then ... put out to sea at once" (*The Odyssey* IX), Odysseus insists on waiting to meet the cyclops in an attempt to exchange gifts with him. While it is unclear if this desire to exchange gifts was motivated by courtesy or greed, it is nonetheless consistent with the Greek customs of *xenia*. Assuming that Polyphemus would abide by the commonly held morals, the company then "set [their] hands on the cheeses, offered some to the gods and ate the bulk [themselves] and settled down inside, awaiting [the cyclops'] return" (*The Odyssey* IX). While this may seem immoral with our current standards of hospitality, the group was acting consistent with the previously discussed principles of hospitality commonly followed at the time.

After Polyphemus returns, Odysseus continues his plea for *xenia* through verbal petition with the cyclops. He explains his intrusion by saying: "we've come to you... at your knees in hopes of a warm welcome, even a guest-gift, the sort that hosts give strangers. That's the custom." (*The Odyssey* IX). He seeks to appeal to the moral code (and assumingly wouldn't do so if he hadn't the intention of keeping it himself). Odysseus even goes as far to mention that the code is customary, and therefore expects the cyclops to honor his role as host and caretaker. If that weren't enough, Odysseus then mentions the religious motivations behind *xenia*, in hopes, maybe, of stirring the cyclops into mercy through fear of godly retribution: "We're suppliants—at your mercy! Zeus of the Strangers guards all guests and suppliants: strangers are sacred—Zeus will avenge their rights!" (*The Odyssey* IX). To Odysseus' fear and disappointment, Polyphemus immediately shows no intention of following *xenia*, saying: "I'd never spare you in fear of Zeus's hatred" (*The Odyssey* IX). From this we see the stark difference in morality between the

cyclops and humans. Polyphemus (allegedly the son of Poseidon) fears no holy retribution from Zeus, and therefore has no incentive to follow the code of hospitality.

This point in time, when the cyclops makes clear his intentions, is when Odysseus is forced to betray his morals in favor of the lives of himself and his crewmates. Until this exchange with Polyphemus, he appears determined to uphold the values of *xenia*. After the cyclops' blatant betrayal of the moral code, Odysseus is in turn forced to break it as well. While not outwardly showing so to Polyphemus, Odysseus from that point on plots to injure the cyclops and escape with his crewmates. In order to do so, he keeps a façade of politeness, ironically, by offering the cyclops gifts as if continuing to abide by *xenia*: "Here, Cyclops, try this wine—to top off the banquet of human flesh you've bolted down!" (*The Odyssey* IX). Polyphemus mimics and mocks Odysseus by returning the favor with a punishment rather than a gift, saying: "I'll eat [you] last of all [your] friends— I'll eat the others first! That's my gift to you!" (*The Odyssey* IX). We again see in this jab the cyclops' blatant disregard for, and even contempt towards the Greeks' moral code. Before this threat is brought to fruition, however, Odysseus and his crew stab the cyclops in the eye and make their escape. While it is apparent that Odysseus would have liked to remain cordial, exchange gifts, and head on his way, Polyphemus' consumption of his crewmates made clear his lack of interest in being hospitable. In consequence, Odysseus breaks *xenia* by lying about his name, injuring his host, and stealing from his host's flocks midst his escape. While this breaking of the code was made necessary by circumstance, Odysseus does inevitably violate the principles of *xenia*.

The influence of Greek morality and customs are evident in the lives of the characters in Homer's "The Odyssey". In particular, the Greek's code of hospitality, *xenia*, is demonstrated throughout the travels of Odysseus. His interactions with Polyphemus the cyclops give us an

interesting look at what happens when this code is not upheld. While Odysseus tries his best to uphold the code, he is eventually forced to break it to save the lives of he and his crew.

Works Cited

The Odyssey