

Homer's "The Odyssey" (A Condensed Translation)

Chapter 2 - [Book 7-9]

So the king of Phaeacia, land of the oar-loving people, entreated Odysseus to tell his tale. The man of many schemes began his story.

I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, and Ithaca is my homeland. I am known among the bronze-coated Greeks and the horse-taming Trojans for my many schemes. Even the deathless gods are aware of my deeds. Since your poet sings to you about the war the Greeks fought at Troy, I shall tell you about my travels as I have tried to return home to Ithaca from Priam's great city.

Upon leaving Troy, we tried to sail homeward with our twelve ships, but Zeus, the Cloud-Gatherer, turned day into night with a fearful storm. The winds were our captain, leading us where they chose.

On the tenth day we arrived at the land of the Lotus-Eaters, where the inhabitants eat the fruit of the lotus plant. When we stopped to acquire fresh water, I sent three of my men to investigate the area. The Lotus-Eaters, being friendly and hospitable, gave them the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus to taste. But as soon as they ate it, they lost all desire to rejoin their companions and to return home; they only wished to remain among the Lotus-Eaters and eat the lotus fruit.

I had to find them, drag them tearfully back to our ships, and tie them securely beneath the benches in order to take them with us. Fortunately, we were able to leave that land before anyone else among us tasted the lotus fruit.

Next we came to the land of the Cyclopes, a one-eyed race who live easily off their rich land. They spend their time gathering wild wheat, barley, and grapes, and tending their sheep and goats. The people themselves are as free as their plants. Each family lives high in the mountains in a hollow cave and makes its own laws. There we anchored our ships and feasted upon the local mountain goats.

When Dawn next shone forth upon us, I said to my comrades, Stay here while I take my ship and my men over to the Cyclopes to see whether they are wild and without welcome or whether they befriend the stranger in their midst and honor the gods.

We had not gone very far when we spied a high cave very close to the shore, which appeared to house goats and sheep at night. Choosing twelve of my best men to investigate with me, I ordered our companions to remain behind and guard our ship. As a precaution against a cold welcome, I carried with me some food and a large goatskin container filled with sweet wine.

We could leisurely examine the large cave, for the Cyclops who lived there was probably out pasturing his flocks. At least, he was nowhere to be seen. When we noticed many crates of cheese, one of my comrades asked, Why don't we simply take this cheese down to our ship? We can return for the goats and sheep and then leave this place.

I had no desire to leave so soon after our arrival, so we kindled a fire and ate the Cyclops' cheese while we waited for him to return. When it was time for the unyoking of oxen, a giant of a man entered the cave. He stood above and apart from other men as a lone, lofty mountain peak towers in isolation above lower ridges. At the sight of this monstrous being we fled toward the darkest part of the cave, where we hoped we would be safe from his gaze.

The giant Cyclops brought into the cave a huge armful of firewood and the animals that needed to be milked. He left the males outside in the high-walled stone courtyard he had built. Then he closed the entrance to his cave with a rock so huge that twenty-two four-wheeled wagons could not have moved it. Yet, he picked it up and set it in place with no apparent effort.

He had performed his evening chores and kindled his dinner fire before he noticed us watching him from the deep recess of the cave. Who are you strangers? he asked. Have you come with some good purpose, or are you troublesome pirates?

Although we were terrified by his enormous size and his deep voice, I replied, We are Greeks returning home from Troy. The winds have driven us here, and we seek your hospitality in the name of Zeus, patron god of strangers.

We Cyclopes do not honor Zeus, he responded, because we are far better than those gods. How I treat you will depend upon how I feel about it. Tell me, where did you moor your ship?

I was clever enough to spot a trap, so I answered, Poseidon, the Earthshaker, destroyed our ship on your rocky coast. We were fortunate to escape with our lives!

His only reply was to leap to his feet, grab two of my companions, and kill them by slamming them upon the floor of the cave. Then he tore them apart and ate them--flesh, bones, and all--drank his milk, and lay down to sleep on the floor of the cave among his sheep.





We gave up all hope of sleep. Weeping with fear, grief, and sheer horror, we waited for Dawn to appear. My mind devised a clever plan whereby I would stealthily approach the sleeping giant and slay him in the chest with my sharp sword. Fortunately, however, further thinking pushed my hand from my weapon, for if I had killed him, then Death would soon have come for us as well. Who besides the mighty Cyclops could move the rock that sealed the entrance to the cave?

As soon as rosy-fingered Dawn shone forth upon gods and mortals, the giant Cyclops awakened, rekindled his fire, and milked his animals. When he had completed his morning tasks, once again he grabbed two of my men, tore apart their limbs, and ate them—flesh, bones, and all.

He easily moved aside the huge stone that blocked the entrance to the cave, drove his flocks of sheep and goats into the courtyard, and then replaced the stone as easily as a man covers his quiver. We heard his whistling as he headed toward the mountain pastures, and once the sound had faded into silence, I knew that I had better use this time to plan some way to punish him and yet escape. I prayed that bright-eyed Athena would grant me such glory!

Finally I devised what seemed to be a satisfactory plan. The monstrous Cyclops had left a huge, green, olive-wood shepherd's staff upon the floor of the cave next to the sheep pen to dry out for later use. It was so large that it could have been used as the mast of one of the large black merchant ships of twenty oars that were built to cross the salt sea. I cut off about a fathom's length from the staff and ordered my companions to make it smooth. Then, I sharpened one end of the six-foot-long poker to a point, which I hardened in the blazing fire. Finally, I concealed the poker by burying it beneath the large piles of dung that littered the floor of the cave.

Next, I asked my companions to choose by lot who among them would help me to raise the poker and twist it into the monstrous shepherd's lone eye once he had fallen asleep. Fortunately, the lots fell upon just the four men I would have chosen.

In the evening the giant Cyclops returned to the cave, this time driving all of his goats and woolly sheep into the interior, the rams as well as the ewes. As usual, he effortlessly raised the huge boulder, set it in place, and then went about performing his customary evening tasks.

However, when he grabbed two more of my men in preparation for his evening meal, I was prepared. Offering him a bowl filled with my sweet red wine, I addressed the monstrous shepherd. Cyclops, I said, wash down your meal of human flesh with this tasty red wine. I brought it with me from the ship in the hope that you would accept it as a gift and help us get home.

The Cyclops listened to my words, took the bowl from my hands, and drank the container dry. He was so pleased with the taste that he asked for more. Give me more with a great heart, and tell me your name. Then I will give you a gift in return. We Cyclopes have rich wine-giving plants, but your wine must be the ambrosia and nectar of the gods!

So the monstrous shepherd spoke and drained the second bowlful of wine as he had drained the first. Three times I brought him wine, and three times he foolishly drank the bowl dry.

By this time the wine had muddled his mind, so I craftily said to him, Cyclops, I shall tell you my name as you have asked, but in return I want the stranger's gift that you promised me. Noman is the name by which my mother, my father, and all my companions address me.

Then, Noman, replied the Cyclops, I shall tell you what my gift to you will be. I shall choose to eat you last of all! With these words he collapsed upon the floor of his cave and lay there in a drunken stupor while wine trickled from his gaping mouth.

I immediately withdrew the poker from its hiding place beneath the dung and pushed it deep under the hot coals of the fire until it was white-hot. Meanwhile, I tried to strengthen the hearts of my companions with words of encouragement. When the pointed tip of the olive-wood poker glowed with heat, I withdrew it from the fire.

With stout hearts my companions plunged the point of the poker into the giant Cyclops' solitary eye, while I twisted the pole round and round as a man drills a hole in the timber of a ship. Blood poured out from around the poker, and as the eyeball burned, its roots crackled as a white-hot axe hisses when a smith submerges it in cold water.

The Cyclops screamed in agony, causing the walls of the cave to echo with his cries. We ran from him in terror as he wrenched the bloody poker from his eye and threw it to the floor. We hoped he would not find us as we huddled against the rear wall of the cave, for he was jumping wildly about, swinging his arms in fury.

The monstrous shepherd called upon the neighboring Cyclopes for help, and they were quick to come to his aid. As they stood at the blocked entrance to the cave, they asked, What terrible thing has happened to you, Polyphemus, that you have awakened us in the middle of the night with your screams? Is some man stealing your flocks? Or is someone using trickery or force to kill you?

In his anguish, from inside his cave the giant Polyphemus cried, Noman is killing me, but with cunning and not with strength.

His friends replied, Well, then, if no man is hurting you, you are alone. You must be ill. All you can do is pray to your father, Poseidon.

With this advice they left, for they saw nothing else that they could do to help him. My heart filled with laughter at the success of my devious name.

Then Polyphemus blindly felt his way to the entrance of the cave, removed the huge stone that blocked the doorway, and sat there with outstretched arms, expecting that he would touch me if I attempted to leave with his sheep.

I thoughtfully considered how, in fact, my companions and I were going to escape almost certain death. As I gazed upon the Cyclops' well-fed rams, each wearing a coat of thick fleece, I devised a scheme that I thought would be successful. Quietly I collected the braided willow twigs Polyphemus slept upon and tied the rams together in groups of three across. I tied one of my companions beneath the body of each middle ram; the other two rams protected him from the monstrous shepherd's blind touch.

I myself chose the best ram of all. Clutching his back, I stretched myself beneath his body, burying my fingers in his thick fleece. In this way we waited the rest of the night. When Dawn next brought forth light, Polyphemus sent the males in his flocks out to pasture. As the sheep passed him, he slowly ran his fingers across the fleece on their woolly backs, but he failed to discover my companions. The rams carried them forth to safety.

Finally, the ram I had chosen passed beneath the giant's touch. Why are you last, good ram? Polyphemus asked. Each day you are the first to feed upon the grass, the first to drink from the stream, and the first to return home in the evening. Pity your poor shepherd for his blindness!

Noman is most cruel and cunning, he continued, to have used wine as a weapon against me, for surely no other device could have conquered me. If only you could speak, I know that you would tell me where he is hiding. Then I would hurl him to the ground with such force that his brains would splatter across the floor of my cave. Yet, even now, Noman has not escaped my wrath!

With these words Polyphemus sent my ram out to pasture with the rest. As soon as I felt we were safe from the Cyclops, I freed my companions, and we drove his fine rams straight toward our ship. As welcome as we were to those we had left behind, they wept for the men Polyphemus had eaten. I had no liking for their tears and ordered them to load our new cargo quickly so that we could speedily set sail upon the wine-dark sea.

However, I would not leave that monstrous Cyclops without a final word. When I knew that I could safely shout and still be heard, I cried, Polyphemus, the man whose companions you captured and ate in your hollow cave was indeed equal to your great strength! Zeus has now punished you for so cruelly mistreating your guests!

Polyphemus responded to my words by tearing off the peak of a great mountain and hurling it toward us. The Earthshaker must have given sight to his son's hand, for the gigantic rock crashed into the salt sea right in front of our ship, creating an enormous wave that forced us back toward the shore. Quickly I grabbed a long pole and pushed us off to sea before we met with further danger. Then, from twice as far, I prepared to shout another message.

Foolish captain! my companions exclaimed. Why must you continue to incite that monstrous Cyclops! Did not his first attack upon our ship bring us close enough to death?

Their words did not convince me to be more cautious. I comforted my angry heart by shouting, Cyclops, if any mortal asks who blinded you, tell him that Odysseus, raider of cities, is to blame.

Polyphemus groaned when he heard my words. Then the prophecy of long ago has come to pass! he cried. I have expected my fate in the form of some large and impressive visitor. I was completely misled by how small and weak you are. Never did I imagine that wine would destroy my sight! But return to me, Odysseus, raider of cities, so that I can give you a warmer welcome and pray to my father to grant you a fast journey home. The Earthshaker will hear my plea on your behalf. In fact, if he chooses, he has the power to restore my sight.

I wish I were as sure that I could end your life and send your shade down to the kingdom of Hades as I am certain that the Earthshaker will never be able to heal your eye! I responded.

Then Polyphemus raised his arms and prayed to his father. Poseidon, lord of the sea, if you are indeed my father and I am your son, prevent Odysseus from reaching his homeland. Yet if it is his unalterable fate to return to his home and his friends, may it be long before that day arrives. May he return alone and after much suffering, having lost all of his companions. May he be forced to arrive in a ship that is not his own, and may he find great trouble in his house.

So the mighty Cyclops prayed, and the lord of the sea heard his prayer. Then, with all of his strength, Polyphemus hurled a far larger rock at us. It fell into the sea just behind our ship, and the enormous wave it produced carried us toward the far shore.

There we rejoined our other ships. We divided the Cyclops' rams into equal portions, and I sacrificed my ram to Zeus, lord of Olympus. When rosy-fingered Dawn next shone forth upon gods and mortals, we continued our journey. Our hearts grieved for our lost companions, but we were happy to have escaped death.

