IN THE CYCLOPS’ CAVE:
REVENGE AND JUSTICE IN ODYSSEY 9

BY

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ODYSSEUS

God gave us two eyes because we’re human.

CYCLOPS

I’m not.

ODYSSEUS

One is for laughter, the other one cries.

Derek Walcott, The Odyssey: A Stage Version (1993)

At the close of the Ninth Book of the Odyssey Odysseus and the other survivors from Polyphemus’ cave rejoin the rest of the ἐπιθρόι on Goat Island¹). There follows a familiar scene of sacrifice and feasting when the companions divide up the Cyclops’ flocks. Odysseus receives as his special portion the great ram upon which he escaped, and, like Phrixos, he sacrifices this animal to Zeus (9.550-555):


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Those readers of Homer who believe that the Odyssey is a poem concerned with right and wrong should be troubled by this passage. Odysseus is making a thank-offering to Zeus, marking his escape from the clutches of Polyphemus; but Zeus declines the sacrifice (οὐχ ἐμπάξετο), apparently honouring the Cyclops’ prayer to Poseidon (528 ff.). Why does Zeus do this? Odysseus believed

2) It is relevant to ask the extent to which Odysseus’ account of Zeus’ reaction to the sacrifice is reliable. O. Jørgensen, Das Auftreten der Götter in den Büchern 1-μ der Odyssee, Hermes 39 (1904), 357-382 (363, for the passage under discussion), showed that in general the perspective of the ἀπόλογος is consistent with the first-person narrator; instead of ascribing responsibility for events to individual Olympians, as would the third-person narrator, Odysseus tends to point to divinity in a general way, naming θεός, δαίμων, θεοί, or Ζεύς; see also I. J. F. De Jong, The Subjective Style in Odysseus’ Wanderings, CQ 42 (1992), 1-11, for discussion of the narrative perspective of the ἀπόλογος. Accordingly, on Jørgensen’s view, lines 550-555 conform to this pattern; they are little more than a generalized inference of the mood of the gods produced by hindsight: see also Segal 505-507. Jørgensen’s conclusions, often referred to as Jørgensen’s ‘law’ or ‘rule’, have become axiomatic for many scholars, but, as Friedrich (16) has argued, some allowance must be made for exceptions: see also W. Suerbaum, Die Ich-Erzählung des Odysseus, Poetica 2 (1968), 150-177, at 154 ff. In the first instance, Odysseus has sacrificed the ram not to divinity in a generalized sense, but to Zeus, the personal god in whose name he blinded Polyphemus. Furthermore, there are other points in the ἀπόλογος where Odysseus knows things that seem to be beyond his human knowledge (e.g., the account of the nature of the Cyclops at 106 ff.; the identity of Hermes at 10.307 ff.). These details are important and cannot be dismissed as the narrator’s fancy. It is true that Odysseus tells false tales in the second half of the poem, but it would be hazardous to view the ἀπόλογος as suspect. Although such a view was occasionally expressed in antiquity (see the passages collected by Courtney on Juv. 15.16), it is hard to see how one could read the poem coherently in this light; we would be in the position of the reader of Lucian’s Vera Historia, whom the narrator tells καὶ ἐν γὰρ δὴ τοῦτο ἄλληθενως λέγων ὅτι φεύσωμαι (1.4). Moreover, in the Odyssey there are passages that attest to the veracity of the ἀπόλογος (cf. 1.6-9, 68-69, 2.19-20, 20.19-21, 23.248, 306-341), and these stand in opposition to those places where the falsity of the lying tales is made clear (cf. 13.254-255, 19.203). See now H. Parry, The Apologos of Odysseus: Lies, All Lies?, Phoenix 48 (1994) 1-20 (useful bibliography in 1 n. 1), who offers an interesting argument for the ‘truth’ of Odysseus’ account of his own wanderings.