

Homer's Polyphemus and Modern Tales: A Fresh Reading of Old Arguments

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MOST ATTEMPTS to identify a secondary Homeric or even pre-Homeric layer of the Polyphemus myth have relied largely on the similarities or divergences of contemporary tales, the vast majority of which were recorded in the 19th century. Until the end of the last century the dominant view was that these tales had an independent existence and only a few sceptics disagreed; but this is probably no longer the case. A growing number of voices advocate a more cautious approach to the value of the various comparanda in these tales. The argument that the Polyphemus episode reconciles two earlier folktales seems in recent years to be treated also with increasing caution—not so much because it is disputed that Homer composed Polyphemus in the context of a folk tradition, but more importantly out of doubt that those folktales can with some probability be reconstructed through modern comparanda. This paper re-examines the arguments of those who contend that the modern variants do not derive from the Homeric episode, while also presenting the objections of scholars who call for a more cautious approach. The discussion concludes with the view that the excessive zeal of folklorists to emphasize oral tradition, the biased treatment of the Homeric narrative, and the increasing inadequacy of Hackman's catalogue have all contributed to the confusion surrounding the authorship and transmission of the Cyclopean episode.

In 1815 H. F. von Diez discovered in the Royal Library of Dresden the *Book of Dede Korkut*, a 16th-century manuscript con-

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taining a collection of previously unknown Turkish stories. The stories are set in the heroic era of the Turkish tribe of the Oguz (Turkmen), who in the 11th century became the most important power in what would become the Ottoman Empire. One of the twelve stories in the book was *The Story of Basat, Killer of the One-Eyed Giant*, which had many narrative elements in common with the Homeric myth of Polyphemus, but also some important differences.¹ Diez's initial assessment that the Tepegöz story represented the original form of the myth belonging to an ancient proto-race of the Oguz, and that the episode in the *Odyssey* had been extracted from it,² was enthusiastically accepted. Quickly, and in the context of a Turkish nationalism, *Dede Korkut's* book was promoted as “the Iliad of the Turks,”³ the main source of national identity, history, customs, and values of peoples of Turkish origin.⁴

If the above was true, then in simple terms it means that Homer borrowed some themes that existed in the oral tradition of western Asia Minor, which, although they remained oral, continued to be alive even after two millennia, and these same themes were borrowed again by the unknown Turkish author of the *Book of Dede Korkut*, this time in the depths of Anatolia. Lewis comments—with obvious reservation—that this is not unlikely (“Well, it is not impossible”) but rather suggests that “it is simpler to assume that they [the versions] and the story of Goggle-eye

¹ O. Hackman, *Die Polyphemsage in der Volksüberlieferung* (Helsinki 1904) 99–101; J. G. Frazer, *Apollodorus II* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1921) 452–454. Transl. G. Lewis, *The Book of Dede Korkut* (Harmondsworth 1974) 140–150.

² H. F. Diez, *Denkwürdigkeiten von Asien in Künsten und Wissenschaften, Sitten, Gebräuchen und Alterthümern, Religion und Regierungsverfassung* (Berlin 1815) 417–418.

³ D. T. Can and M. Ekici, “*The Book of Dede Korkut: The Villains in and out of Turks*,” in D. L. Chalmers (ed.), *Villains, Heroes or Victims?* (Freeland 2010) 3–9, at 3.

⁴ See M. E. Meeker, “The Dede Korkut Ethic,” *IJMES* 24 (1992) 395–417.

[Tepegöz] ultimately come from Homer.”⁵ Mundy even argued that the hero’s name itself (Tepegöz, originally: Depegöz < tepe (depe) = top, ace, and göz = eye), which plausibly refers to the well-known one-eyed monster, is “too authentic to be true,” and that it is probably a Turkish corruption of the Greek word *σαραντάπηχος*, a designator of the giant monsters of Greek mythology.⁶ True or not, it is interesting that the name Tepegöz is later reintroduced in Greek as *Τεπεκόζης* or *Τεπεκόης* to describe giants (sometimes one-eyed).⁷ This suggests that there was at least some later interconnection—a blending of oral traditions—between the Greeks and the Turks who recited these stories in the former Byzantine lands. And not only between them: in Armenian mythology, a series of stories with Cyclops (T’ap’agöz) testify both to the influence of the Armenian tradition from the Turkish-Muslim environment in which they lived for many centuries, and to the (literary or oral) penetration of the Homeric myth.⁸ Anyway, the prevailing view today is that the versions of the stories in the *Book of Dede Korkut* began as folk tales and songs no earlier than the 13th century CE and were recorded no later than the early 15th century.⁹

However hasty von Diez’s assessments may seem today, they undeniably drew significant attention at the time and sparked

⁵ Lewis, *The Book of Dede Korkut* 16.

⁶ C. Mundy, “Polyphemus and Tepegöz,” *Bulletin of the SOAS* 18 (1956) 279–302, at 287–288.

⁷ A. B. Cook, *Zeus: II.2* (Cambridge 1925) 992–993; cf. R. Dawkins, *More Greek Folktales* (Oxford 1955) 14.

⁸ J. R. Russel “Polyphemos Armenios,” *REArm* 26 (1997) 25–38.

⁹ See Meeker, *IJMES* 24 (1992) 395–417. Cf. F. Sümer et al., *The Book of Dede Korkut: A Turkish Epic* (Austin 1972) 10–11; Lewis, *The Book of Dede Korkut* 16–19; J. N. Bremmer, “Odysseus versus the Cyclops,” in S. Des Bouvrie (ed.), *Myth and Symbol I Symbolic Phenomena in Ancient Greek Culture* (Bergen 2002) 135–152, at 136; J. A. Conrad, “Polyphemus and Tepegöz Revisited: A Comparison of the Tales of the Blinding of the One-eyed Ogre in Western and Turkish Traditions,” *Fabula* 40 (1983) 278–297, at 280–281; Can and Ekici, in *Villains, Heroes or Victims?* 3.

European scholars' interest in the myth of Polyphemus. This was largely due to the fact that the discovery of the first manuscript coincided with a period when medieval epic traditions in various languages were once again gaining prominence as early representatives of national literatures, and comparative literature was beginning to establish itself as a distinct field of study.¹⁰ Thus, his views inaugurated a long line of comparative studies that drew on a growing body of folktales, primarily from Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.¹¹ Some years later, Wilhelm Grimm, though not accepting Diez's hypothesis, argued that the version of the myth in *Dede Korkut's* book (along with nine others he collected) and Homer's version probably go back to a common proto-tale.¹² Grimm's *Die Sage von Polyphemus* is the first published collection of myths dealing exclusively with the Cyclops Polyphemus. However, Grimm's assumption that the various versions from scattered parts of Europe are independent and all trace back to the same proto-tale overlooks the fact that these versions were recorded from oral testimony more than 2500 years after Homer. Bremmer aptly comments: "The romantic idea that the people are bearers of ancient traditions made such questions unnecessary."¹³

In the years that followed, numerous scholars (mostly folklorists) collected and published tales similar to that of Polyphemus. Kristoffer Nyrop added 16 more tales continuing Grimm's enumeration, and separately recorded some folktales that include the false name trick.¹⁴ Gregor Krek edited some

¹⁰ Cf. M. Mavroudi, "Homer in Greece from the End of Antiquity I," in C. O. Pache (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to Homer* (Cambridge 2020) 444–472, at 464.

¹¹ M. Aguirre and R. Buxton, *Cyclops: The Myth and its Cultural History* (Oxford 2020) 26.

¹² W. Grimm, "Die Sage von Polyphem," in *Kleinere Schriften* IV (Berlin 1887) 428–462; first published as *Die Sage von Polyphem* (Berlin 1857) 1–24.

¹³ Bremmer, in *Myth and Symbol* I 136.

¹⁴ K. Nyrop, "Sagnet om Odysseus og Polyphem," *Nord.Tidsskr.Filol.* 5 (1880) 216–255.

already-known ones and added a few more tales from the Balkans and Russia to northwestern Europe and the Celts.¹⁵ He included, however, several stories that can only have a tenuous connection with the myth of Polyphemus, and Ludwig Laistner did the same a few years later.¹⁶ Much more systematic was the work of Polivka (1898) and Bolte and Polivka (1916–1918). They examined the period from 1857 to 1918 and provided many versions, some for the first time, even anthologizing from such unprecedented regions as Ireland and Korea.¹⁷ Nikos Politis offered valuable versions of the myth from Greek-speaking regions,¹⁸ and so did William Halliday.¹⁹

Throughout the 19th century, the communis opinio on the origin and distribution of the Cyclopean myth shared the view expressed by Grimm: “It is certain that a complete Cyclopean myth from the earliest times was indigenous to the so-called barbarian peoples independently of Homer.”²⁰ This view was reinforced by the Finnish folklorist Oskar Hackman in his monumental *Die Polyphemsage in der Volksüberlieferung* (1904), in which he collected 221 stories and folktales thematically related to the Polyphemus myth. His work is distinguished by its systematic approach and remains, to this day, a point of reference and an indispensable scholarly resource. Hackman also spoke of the independent development and distribution of the myth by Homer,

¹⁵ G. Krek, *Einleitung in die slavische Litteraturgeschichte* (Graz 1887) 665–759.

¹⁶ L. Laistner, *Das Rätsel der Sphinx* II (Berlin 1889) 1–168.

¹⁷ G. Polivka, “Nachträge zur Polyphemsage,” *ArchRW* 1 (1898) 305–336, 378; J. Bolte and G. Polivka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm* III (Leipzig 1918) 375–378.

¹⁸ N. Politis, *Παραδόσεις* II (Athens 1904) 1338–1342; see also St. Imellos, “Aus dem Kreis der Polyphemsage in Griechenland,” in W. Siegmund (ed.), *Antiker Mythos in unseren Märchen* (Kassel 1984) 47–52; G. Spyridakis, “Ο μύθος του Πολύφημου εις δημόδιες παραδόσεις περί των Τριαμάτηδων,” *CretChron* 15–16 (1962) 106–116.

¹⁹ W. R. Halliday and R. M. Dawkins, *Modern Greek in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1916) 550; cf. Dawkins, *Greek Folktales* 12–19.

²⁰ Grimm, *Kleinere Schriften* IV 418.

arguing that the episode with the ring represents a key episode of a proto-tale that Homer failed to include in his own version.²¹ Some fifteen years later the anthropologist James George Frazer, without having read Hackman's work, published a selection of 36 variants of the tale, enough, he declared, "to show the wide circulation of the tale and the general similarity of the versions."²² Gabriel Germain, focusing mainly on Berber stories, argued that the tale was in fact an Egyptian-Libyan initiation myth, predating Homer himself.²³

The debate about the origin of the myth took on new dimensions when in 1955, for the first time a leading Hellenist, Denys Page, joined Grimm's view, suggesting that the Homeric episode is one of the many "*Weltmärchen*, universal folk-tales, independent of each other and of the main theme of the *Odyssey*," which were fitted into "the framework of the main theme, the folk-tale of the Returning Hero" but "had nothing to do with that theme."²⁴ He demonstrated five points that significantly differentiate the Homeric story of Polyphemus from the folk-tales: a) the magic ring, b) the weapon with which Polyphemus is blinded, c) the choice of partners by lot, d) the monocularity, and e) the mode of escape. He also considered it highly significant that the later variants lack both the giant's inebriation and the trick with the name, leading him to argue that these elements were Homer's own additions. Consequently, he concluded, the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey* is the result of the fusion of two distinct folkloric tales: one involving an ogre-like giant who devours human flesh and is ultimately blinded, and the other featuring a hero who deceives a monster by giving a false name—typically "Myself."

The last major apologist for the Grimm-Hackman-Page line

²¹ Hackman, *Die Polyphemsage* 177–180.

²² Frazer, *Apollodorus* II 404.

²³ G. Germain, "Ulysse, le Cyclope et les Berbères," *RevLitComp* 15 (1935) 573–623.

²⁴ D. L. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955) 1–2.

is Justin Glenn. In his excellent paper “The Polyphemus Folktale and Homer’s *Kyklôpeia*,” drawing on Hackman’s corpus, he examined the individual motifs in the Polyphemus myth (25 in all) in comparison with the attested variants. He concluded that many of them have an independent development and course from Homer, thus adopting the hypothesis put forward by Grimm 150 years earlier.²⁵ He based his view on three points: the apparent slips in Homer’s own version, which suggest that he was aware of alternatives that have survived in later versions; the many other wide-spread motifs common to the *Odyssey* and folktales; and the fact that Homer’s poems are deeply rooted in oral tradition. Until the end of the 20th century the consensus on the origin, composition, and distribution of the myth continued to be determined (more or less) by the Grimm-Hackman-Page interpretive line.²⁶

In recent years, Steve Reece has argued that, “the clearest evidence of the independence [of the modern folktales] is the fact that [...] only Homer’s Cyclopeia combines two separate motifs [Hackman’s Group A and B]. If Homer’s version was the original tale from which all the other versions were derived, it would be impossible to account for the clean dissection of the two motifs in these later versions.”²⁷ But Reece overlooks that in Hackman’s corpus there is also Group C, where the name-trick episode is combined with episodes specific to the Cyclops story

²⁵ Glenn, *TAPA* 102 (1971) 133–181, at 138.

²⁶ See C. S. Brown, “Odysseus and Polyphemus: The Name and the Curse,” *CompLit* 18 (1966) 193–202, at 193; W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*² (Ann Arbor 1968) 9; G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley 1970) 164; R. Mondì, “The Homeric Cyclopes: Folktale, Tradition, and Theme,” *TAPA* 103 (1983) 17–38, at 17; A. Heubeck, *A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey II* (Oxford 1990) 19; S. Reece, *The Stranger’s Welcome: Oral Theory and the Aesthetics of the Homeric Hospitality Scene* (Ann Arbor 1993) 123–130; G. Anderson, *Fairytales in the Ancient World* (New York 2000) 123–131; W. Hansen, *Ariadne’s Thread* (Ithaca 2002) 291–294.

²⁷ Reece, *The Stranger’s Welcome* 126 n.1

(47 variants in total). Oddly enough, both Page and Glenn underestimate the importance of Group C and barely mention it.²⁸ Calame aptly wonders, “Why would it not be the variants of Group B that had borrowed this episode from the versions of the Cyclops story in which it is used?”²⁹ Even Hackman himself acknowledged that there are several stories thematically related to those in Group B that do not include the name trick.³⁰ Thus, we can reasonably assume that the original form of the stories in Group B did not include the name trick and that it was borrowed from elsewhere.

Martin West argued that it is unlikely that all modern versions “derive from the *Odyssey* or have been modified under its influence.” Moreover, he points out that, “[t]his was not a story invented by a Greek epic poet, nor can it have originated in Greece; [...] It must have been imported from abroad”;³¹ but he does not provide any suggestion as to what he considers *abroad* and where this *abroad* might be. Recently, Lowell Edmunds provided a concise answer to all the objections of those who argue against the antiquity of folktales,³² although these answers often seem to underestimate the vast amount of time that separates antiquity from modern records of the stories.

However, apart from those who sought an easy and definitive solution, ignoring Homer’s dominant influence on the later literary and oral tradition, there are also those (mainly classicists) who refused to compromise with arbitrary and sometimes hasty arguments. As early as 1878, Ferdinand Bender briefly com-

²⁸ Page, *Homeric Odyssey* 18 n.7, almost dismisses Group C.

²⁹ C. Calame, *The Craft of Poetic Speech in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca 1995) 143.

³⁰ Hackman, *Die Polyphemsage* 199.

³¹ M. L. West, *The Making of the Odyssey* (Oxford 2014) 13. Mondì, *TAPA* 113 (1983) 22, is more specific: “As an individual character, the man-eating ogre Polyphemus stems from a folk tradition which is not specifically Greek; but the Cyclopes themselves—the storm-demons who arm Zeus with the thunderbolt—clearly are products of Greek mythological speculation.”

³² L. Edmunds, *Stealing Helen: The Myth of the Abducted Wife in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton 2016) 38–41.

mented on and rejected Grimm's theory, noting that the reasons Grimm gives are not sufficient to rule out the possibility of the myth being transferred from Greek circles.³³ Homer was also accepted as the source of the myth by A. Wiedemann, arguing that, "in later times, of the different conceptions of Polyphemus, the one most in keeping with literary taste was always preferred."³⁴ The baton was taken up in 1908 by A. van Gennep, who criticized Hackman's views on the origin of the myth, arguing that all contemporary variants which show an obvious affinity with the Homeric myth are simply local popular adaptations of the old literary narrative.³⁵ Ludwig Radermacher, although first to propose "that we have to assume two forms of a more primitive narrative," is quite reserved: "But there is no strict proof for this assumption."³⁶ In the same vein, Karl Meuli, writing specifically "The influence of the Homeric model can in no way be excluded with absolute certainty for the variants of Polyphemus, and indeed all of them ultimately go back to the *Odyssey*."³⁷

C. S. Mundy judged that Page's idea that the Homeric story is based on folktales and not the other way round rests upon very uncertain foundations. He also argued that the ring episode (a key argument of the Grimm-Hackman line) must not be related to the Polyphemus myth, as it "does not fit into the ancient motif of 'hospitality' nor is it an integral part of the tradition."³⁸ D. H.

³³ F. Bender, *Die märchenhaften Bestandtheile der homerischen Gedichte* (Darmstadt 1878) 29–30; but see Glenn, *TAPA* 102 (1971) 139–140.

³⁴ A. Wiedemann, "Zur Polyphem-Sage," *Am Urquell. Monatsschrift für Volkskunde* 5 (1894) 85–86.

³⁵ A. van Gennep, *Religions, moeurs, et légendes: Essais d'ethnographie et de linguistique* (Paris 1908) 165; see also 155–156.

³⁶ L. Radermacher, "Die Erzählungen der Odyssee," *SBWien* 178 (1915) 3–59, at 13.

³⁷ K. Meuli, *Odyssee und Argonautika* (Berlin 1921) 67; but see Glenn, *TAPA* 102 (1971) 140–141

³⁸ Mundy, *Bulletin of SOAS* 18 (1956) 292–295; Glenn, *TAPA* 102 (1971)

F. Gray, in his short review of *The Homeric Odyssey*, expressed surprise at Page's arguments ("It is hard to believe that such an argument is meant to be taken seriously"), and concluded his assessment with subtle irony: "The problems remain problematic; sand blows over the 'green oases of comfort', quicksands submerge the 'solid ground', and there are traces of 'meretricious cosmetics' on the plain face of common sense."³⁹ Seth Schein, while acknowledging the indebtedness of the Homeric episode to folk tradition, criticized Page's analysis as "incomplete" for treating a portion of the *Odyssey* in isolation from the rest of the poem, and demonstrates how each of the differences identified by Page is, in fact, intricately connected to the overarching themes of the *Odyssey* as a unified poetic composition.⁴⁰ The most systematic criticism of Page's views came several years later, when J. N. O'Sullivan attempted to deconstruct his argument point by point. He argued that the Homeric episode cannot be confidently broken down into individual folktales (especially when the majority of them have been recorded in modern times) and contain no flaws that would support such an analysis. In his view, it is very likely that a folktale without the 'Nobody trick' developed from the Polyphemus story in antiquity and was the ancestor of the extant versions.⁴¹

The idea of an intermediate version that fertilized all later variants of the Homeric story was not new. As early as the 1970s Detlev Fehling had argued that the considerable agreement in the content of the post-Homeric texts only proves that they have

178, characteristically avoids taking a position: "I reluctantly leave this important question under a verdict of *non liquet*." Cf. A. J. Podlecki, "Guest-Gifts and Nobodies in *Odyssey* 9," *Phoenix* 15 (1961) 125–133.

³⁹ D. H. F. Gray, *JHS* 76 (1956) 109.

⁴⁰ S. L. Schein, "Odysseus and Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*," *GRBS* 11 (1970) 73–83. Cf. Mundy, *Bulletin of SOAS* 18 (1956) 294: "Grimm and his followers are prepared to assess details according to their plausibility in the narrative, but not as parts of a structural whole."

⁴¹ J. N. O'Sullivan, "Observations on the *Kyklopeia*," *SymbOslo* 62 (1987) 5–24.

a common source, not that their source is independent and ultimately older than Homer. For Fehling, it is more likely that the international tradition is posterior to Homer, having developed from him over time. In his view, the myth of Odysseus and Polyphemus was in origin a uniquely Greek story that descended through literary channels into Byzantine times, and from there was carried to the West as the tale found in the *Dolopathos* and to the East as the tale of Sinbad in the *Arabian Nights*, and it is from these two stories that most of the more recent texts have come.⁴² William Hansen strongly criticized Fehling's reasoning, speaking of "disbelief in the stability of oral narratives over time" and "unlimited faith in the literary tradition and in the dependence of the oral tradition on it."⁴³ However, Bremmer aptly observed that oral tradition is very vulnerable and can only survive if it is linked to something specific (e.g. a ritual, a monument, a text), and notes "it would go much too far to deduce from these variants, as folklorists do, that they point to an independent oral tradition which for two millennia went underground and only emerged during the Crusades."⁴⁴ The existence of an intermediate, innovative variant was considered entirely possible by Reeve, who argued that through it all popular versions of the tales could indeed be traced back to the *Odyssey*.⁴⁵

In more recent years, Calame showed that the tales in Hackman's corpus have been selected on the basis of a "general and imprecise test of similarity with the Homeric tale,"⁴⁶ and in order to define the specific traits of the Homeric tale he examined the Cyclops story and ten variations (seven from

⁴² D. Fehling, *Amor und Psyche: Die Schöpfung des Apuleius und ihre Einwirkung auf das Märchen, eine Kritik der romantischen Märchentheorie* (Mainz 1977) 89–97.

⁴³ Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread* 293–294.

⁴⁴ Bremmer, in *Myth and Symbol* I 138.

⁴⁵ M. D. Reeve, *Manuscripts and Methods: Essays on Editing and Transmission* (Rome 2011) 49; cf. O'Sullivan, *SymbOslo* 62 (1987) 11.

⁴⁶ Calame, *The Craft* 143.

Hackman's corpus and three from Frazer's). He argued that the episode with the false name need not be a separate group (i.e. Group B), and also suggested that all stories in Group C "should be excised from the corpus" (161). He concluded that only "the story in the *Odyssey* follows the nuclear syntax of the Cyclops story exactly" (163). Jonathan Burgess, although he found suspicious some discrepancies between Homer's narrative and the depictions in archaic pottery, clearly noted "one should not slip into the illusion that a pre-Homeric folktale can be reconstructed from modern analogues."⁴⁷ Emily West rejected Page's suggestion that the inconsistencies are evidence of the clumsy introduction of extraneous material into the context of the poem. She saw the "theory of a folktale-based *Cyclopeia* ... [as] in some ways unsatisfying" (yet still argued for a reciprocal interaction between the folktales and the *Odyssey*) and proposed that "we must begin to consider the *Cyclopeia* as an intact core, rather than a successful adoption."⁴⁸ Stephanie West, in contrast to Page, held that the striking uniformity that has preserved the basic narrative of the story in a recognizable form rather suggests the prevalence in the oral tradition of a small number of popular intermediate versions.⁴⁹ Ratcliffe noted "it is far more likely that the *Odyssey* was the source of nearly all of these other versions as the majority of them come from the Black Sea region where Greek sailors still tell versions of the Polyphemus story."⁵⁰

Over the last decades, interest in the Homeric episode with Cyclops Polyphemus continued to be lively. Edith Hall in her

⁴⁷ J. S. Burgess, *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle* (Baltimore 2001) 95.

⁴⁸ E. B. West, "An Indic Reflex of the Homeric *Cyclopeia*," *CJ* 101 (2006) 125–160, at 127–128; cf. Podlecki, *Phoenix* 15 (1961) 126, who argued that "one man's creative genius is responsible for this version of the story."

⁴⁹ S. West, "Odysseus' Most Memorable Exploit," *Classica Cracoviensia* 16 (2013) 189–206, at 204.

⁵⁰ J. Ratcliffe, "Arimaspians and Cyclopes: The Mythos of the One-Eyed Man in Greek and Inner Asian Thought," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 249 (2014) 1–71, at 41.

inspiring book on the *Odyssey* drew attention to its catalytic influence on world literature and art. Although she rightly noted that “the type of the Cyclops figure is manifested in a wide range of myths recorded the world over,” in no way did she go so far as to assume that modern folk stories represent pre-Homeric or parallel independent versions of the Homeric story.⁵¹ Mercedes Aguirre and Richard Buxton summed up the whole debate in a very apt statement: “Until securely datable, pre-Homeric comparanda are found—and such a discovery is by no means impossible—we think it not unreasonable to reserve judgement about whether or not an ‘international tale’ such as that summarized by Anderson and Hansen did actually constitute the background to the Homeric episode.”⁵² Recently Paul Robertson examined the myth of Cyclops throughout Western history, noting that “there were undoubtedly other Cyclops myths preceding these stories [sc. Homer’s], found not only in the artistic record but in competing poetic-oral strands tied to localized ethnicity and post-Trojan War identity,” and these strands “can be found in folktales many hundreds of years later.” But he pointed out that “the Homeric material was innovative” [...] and “despite or because of these apparent innovations, the Homeric version of the story swiftly became the dominant one, both geographically and in subsequent literary and artistic imagination, even as non-Homeric versions likely continued in parallel in some form.”⁵³

Thus, Justin Glenn may have stated in the 1970s that the independent existence of modern folktales “is supported by a clear majority of scholars,” and only “a small but steady number

⁵¹ E. Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer’s Odyssey* (London 2008) 99.

⁵² M. Aguirre and R. Buxton, *Cyclops: The Myth and Its Cultural History* (Oxford 2020) 37. For the summaries see Anderson, *Fairytales* 124, and Hansen, *Ariadne’s Thread* 289.

⁵³ P. Robertson, *The Cyclops Myth and the Making of Selfhood* (Piscataway 2022) 22–23.

of skeptics” disagree,⁵⁴ but, as noted above, this is probably no longer the case. Nowadays a growing number of voices advocate a more cautious approach to the value of the various comparanda in these tales.⁵⁵ Page’s thesis that the Polyphemus episode reconciles two earlier folktales seems in recent years to be treated also with increasing caution—because it is disputed not so much that Homer composed Polyphemus story in the context of a folk tradition, but that the folktales in question were once stand-alone stories, and can, with some probability, be reconstructed through comparanda.

Indeed, most attempts to identify a secondary Homeric or even pre-Homeric layer in the Polyphemus myth have been based on the similarities and divergences between Homer’s account and various folktales—most of which were recorded in the 19th century, with a few dating earlier and some even more recent.⁵⁶ However, it is striking that scholars who argue for the reduction of these stories to a pre-Homeric source ignore the vast chronological gap of more than 2500 years—an omission

⁵⁴ Glenn, *TAPA* 102 (1971) 135–136.

⁵⁵ Cf. O’Sullivan, *SymbOslo* 62 (1987) 5–24; Calame, *The Craft* 143–144; West, *CJ* 101 (2006) 127–128; Reeve, *Manuscripts and Methods* 49–50; B. Clayton, “Polyphemus and Odysseus in the Nursery: Mother’s Milk in the *Cyclopeia*,” *Arethusa* 44 (2011) 255–277, at 265; B. Louden, *Homer’s Odyssey and the Near East* (Cambridge 2011) 180; West, *Classica Cracoviensia* 16 (2013) 190–191, 203–205; Ratcliffe, *Sino-Platonic Papers* 249 (2014) 41–42; J. S. Burgess, “The *Apologos* of Odysseus: Tradition and Conspiracy Theories,” in Chr. Tsagalis et al. (eds.), *The Winnowing Oar – New Perspectives in Homeric Studies* (Berlin 2017) 95–120, at 98–99; Aguirre and Buxton, *Cyclops* 34–35; I. Nova, “The Cyclops Comes to Sicily: The Western Setting of a Homeric Episode,” in S. Dova et al. (eds.), *Homer in Sicily* (Syracuse 2023) 155–178, at 155–157.

⁵⁶ All written records of the stories are from the 10th century CE and later. The earliest proven is in the Latin version of the *Dolopathos*. Only the story of Sinbad could theoretically be traced back to an earlier time, see K. Campbell, *The Seven Sages of Rome* (Boston 1907) xi–xv. Again, it does not precede the Homeric episode, but it is close enough to works that are direct offshoots of it (ca. 400 BCE). In this case, Anderson’s observation (*Fairytales* 129) that the apes of the story may have some connection with the Satyrs of the Euripidean *Cyclops* does not seem absurd.

they rarely acknowledge. Equally remarkable is the confidence with which they assert the existence of specific pre-Homeric folktales, despite the absence of any direct attestations in ancient literature. Moreover, their arguments continue to rely on Hackman's corpus, a collection of narratives compiled 120 years ago. While groundbreaking for its time, this work seems now to lack the scholarly coherence, consistency, and uniformity required for modern research. It has also long faced serious criticism for its criteria in determining narrative eligibility.⁵⁷

To better understand the debate, we must keep in mind that the Polyphemus tale was until recently discussed by folklorists (as Aarne, Grimm, Hackman, Frazer, Röhrich were), who at first in their enthusiasm often "treated tales, incidents, and motifs as the same sort of thing, failing to distinguish between whole tales and parts of tales, a confusion that led scholars into many muddy discussions and unfounded conclusions."⁵⁸ Zipes notes that "the confusion is so great that most folklorists constantly confuse the oral folktale with the literary tale and vice versa,"⁵⁹ and, as Mayor argued, this is mainly due to "the lack of communication between classicists and folklorists."⁶⁰ Additionally, most folklorists had a high regard for the autonomy and credibility of oral tradition. The leading folklorist Hans-Jörg Uther admits: "Up until the 1960s, folktale scholars generally believed that oral traditions had existed unchanged for centuries [...] This romantic concept [...] had a lasting influence on the perceived im-

⁵⁷ Cf. Dawkins, *More Greek Folktales* 13: "The occurrence of any single motive is enough [sc. for Hackman] to put a story into his list and the actual thread of the story he is too apt not to consider at all."

⁵⁸ W. Hansen, "Mythology and Folktale Typology: Chronicle of a Failed Scholarly Revolution," *Journal of Folklore Research* 34 (1997) 275–280, at 276.

⁵⁹ J. Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (Oxford 2015) xv.

⁶⁰ A. Mayor, "Bibliography of Classical Folklore Scholarship: Myths, Legends, and Popular Beliefs of Ancient Greece and Rome," *Folklore* 111 (2000) 123–183, at 123.

portance of the documentation of oral tradition.”⁶¹ Horálek points out: “All the sources and documents which constitute the object of the comparative science of folk poetry must be critically examined, and their documentary value and reliability tested.”⁶² Hansen acknowledges that we know virtually nothing about the employment of the narratives collected, as “the early collectors of oral tales characteristically recorded little information about their informants or the performance of tales.”⁶³

But even when credibility is not questioned, the acceptance of a story as valid is based on *bona fides*, and can easily be challenged. For example, when John Colarusso recorded a Caucasian story similar to that of Polyphemus, he noted that “clearly a common tale has come down both in Greek and in Circassian, with the two cultures situating the adventure in a realm most familiar to each,” and supported his case saying that Adnan Saygili [the informant] “had heard neither of Cyclopes [sic] nor of Odysseus nor of Ulysses.”⁶⁴ But this is neither proof nor argument. Saygili’s father or mother or grandparents, or whoever told Saygili this story, could have heard of Cyclopes, Odysseus, and Ulysses, and simply not bothered to mention that detail—note that in this tale neither the hero nor the giant has a name. Folk stories (at least in the past years) were usually circulated by lay and illiterate people who often neither care about the authorship of a story nor feel any commitment to the original.⁶⁵ As Benson points out, “folktales have no acknowledged author—beyond the myth of an original source—but rather a series of

⁶¹ H.-J. Uther, “Classifying Tales: Remarks to Indexes and Systems of Ordering,” *Narodna Umjetnost* 46 (2009) 15–32, at 18.

⁶² K. Horálek, “Folk Poetry: History and Typology,” in A. S. Abramson (ed.), *Linguistics and Adjacent Arts and Sciences II* (Boston 1974) 741–808, at 743.

⁶³ Hansen, *Ariadne’s Thread* 299.

⁶⁴ J. Colarusso, *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus: Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs* (Princeton 2002) 163 and 202.

⁶⁵ But cf. Edmunds, *Stealing Helen* 38: “While it is true that the tellers of the tales recorded in modern times have usually been illiterate, it is also the case that some have been literate, without detriment to their value as informants.”

narrators whose relationship to the tales is both intimate and detached.”⁶⁶

Moreover, in non-literate societies everything is conveyed orally, and a large portion of it is not folklore, just as a large portion of oral instruction is not folklore in literate cultures.⁶⁷ This means that oral tradition may also carry written or literary texts, even if we cannot explain how and when the literate source was transformed into orality. Hillers notes: “These two worlds [the world of letters and the world of the non-literate storytellers] may in fact have been less hermetically divided than we have hitherto assumed.”⁶⁸ Sometimes, even when there is a dominant oral or a written version, the story merges with local tradition to such an extent that its traces are blurred.⁶⁹

The confusion surrounding the origins of modern folktales is often exacerbated by a biased approach to the Homeric narrative of the Cyclops episode. Scholars who advocate for the independent existence of these tales tend to scrutinize the *Odyssey* for even the slightest inconsistency or ambiguity—no matter how trivial—and, upon finding a vague parallel in one of the hundreds of diverse modern folktales, hastily attribute it to a pre-Homeric source. However, they overlook the fact that variations—often significant ones—appear in nearly all later literary adaptations of the Homeric episode. To limit the discussion to its most immediate offshoots, many comedic works depict Polyphemus with characteristics that differ notably from the Homeric ones.⁷⁰ For example, all three fragments of Epichar-

⁶⁶ S. Benson, *Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory* (Detroit 2003) 20–21.

⁶⁷ Cf. A. Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs 1965) 1–2.

⁶⁸ B. Hillers, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 12 (1992) 63–79, at 74.

⁶⁹ See e.g. J. L. Comhaire, “Oriental Versions of Polyphem’s Myth,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 31 (1958) 21–28, and the concluding remarks (28), about the differences between the Homeric Cyclops and the story of Sinbad.

⁷⁰ See S. D. Olson, *Broken Laughter: Select Fragments of Greek Comedy* (Oxford 2007) 52.

mus' *Cyclops* (FF 70–72 K.-A.) seem to be inspired by the scene in which Odysseus gets Polyphemus drunk on Maron's wine, but they also present the Cyclops as a cook. In the extensive excerpts from the *Odyssseis* of Cratinus (FF 143–157) there is once again reference to Maron's wine (F 146), to the name trick (F 145), and to the monocularity (F 156), but the longest one describes Polyphemus' culinary preferences (F 150);⁷¹ even more interesting is the passage in which Cyclops speaks to Odysseus and his companions(?) and accuses them of spending the whole day feasting on white milk, dining on beestings, and filling themselves with curds (F 149). In the fragments of Callias' *Cyclopes* it seems that a great feast was celebrated (F 6), Cyclops is described as dancing after dinner (F 7) and as playing the game *kottabos* taught by Odysseus (F 12).

In Aristophanes' *Wasps* old man Philocleon tries to escape his house by slipping out suspended beneath a donkey. Bdelycleon, his son, scents the trick and scoffs at the donkey: "Why, what are you moaning and groaning for? You might be carrying another Odysseus" (180–181). Philocleon, after the escape has failed, introduces himself as *Nobody* and immediately reveals his (supposedly) true name (184–186). Kanellakis points out: "Given that there are no close verbal similarities to the Homeric version, that the latter was adapted for the stage many times, and that this version is scenically elaborate [...], it is clearly suggested that here we probably have a parody of a previous production, rather than one of the *Odyssey* itself."⁷² In Euripides' satyr drama *Cyclops* Polyphemus cooks his victims instead of eating them raw, is

⁷¹ M. Telo, "On the Sauce: Cratinus, Cyclopean Poetics, and the Roiling Sea of Epic," *Arethusa* 47 (2014) 303–320, at 308: "Polyphemus recasts his Homeric predecessor's raw cannibalistic feast as a gourmet meal designed with the skills of a Sicilian chef."

⁷² D. Kanellakis, "Myth and Paradox in Aristophanes: The Poetics of Appropriation," *Logeion* 7 (2017) 170–215, at 182. He also notes (198) that in *Thesm.* (1213, 1216, 1222) "[the] game with the fake identities and names alludes to Polyphemus's blinding by Odysseus, who had introduced himself as 'Mr. Nobody'."

blinded with a spit instead of a stake, has never tasted wine, and drinks milk (327). He is (like Homer's) a man-eater but in a sign of faint sophistication, Satyrs are not on his menu because they will bounce around in his belly (220–221). The Euripidean Cyclops wants his cave clean (32–35), unlike Homer's (cf. *Od.* 9.229–230). Of Odysseus' companions he chooses the fattest first (380),⁷³ and cuts and cooks his victims with skill like a monstrous chef (396–397). The image of the Cyclops-cook is also found in Antiphanes (FF 130–131), while Polyphemus' drunkenness with wine is described in Aristias' satyr drama *Cyclops* (*TrGF I 9 F 4*).

It appears, then, that dramatic poets took a particular interest in the Homeric episode of Polyphemus and did not hesitate to modify or parody it. However, none of these alterations suggest even the slightest awareness of any version of the myth other than Homer's.⁷⁴ All deviations from the *Odyssey* are clearly driven by the comic poets' intent to introduce humor or eccentricity into the episode, rather than by reference to some earlier, independent proto-story. Moreover, in passages of Old and Middle Comedy that incorporate the Polyphemus episode, the Homeric epic world is deliberately evoked through a combination of theme and meter,⁷⁵ making it difficult to doubt that all these literary adaptations ultimately trace back to Homer. Why, then, should we not consider the possibility that comic poets

⁷³ An element not found in Homer but present in many modern folktales, e.g. Hackman nos. 37, 54; Frazer nos. 1, 23, 31.

⁷⁴ Mondì, *TAPA* 113 (1983) 36, argues that several aspects of the Euripidean story can be better understood if they are considered to be based directly on other folktales rather than on the literary version in the *Odyssey*. However, B. Seidensticker, *Euripides: Kyklops* (Berlin 2020) 53, notes that Euripides may have been inspired by Cratinus (or, through Cratinus, by Epicharmus) to present Cyclops as a cook.

⁷⁵ Cf. M. Silk, "Aristophanes versus the Rest: Comic Poetry in Old Comedy," in D. Harvey et al. (eds.), *The Rivals of Aristophanes: Studies in Athenian Old Comedy* (London 2000) 299–315, at 305–306, and M. C. Farmer, "Theopompus' Homer: Paraepic in Old and Middle Comedy," *CP* 115 (2020) 339–364.

simply took the Homeric story, adapted it to suit the conventions of their genre, thus generating a series of variations that later resurfaced in modern folktales?

Returning now to the modern folktales that are said to preserve a pre-Homeric narrative, one would expect that a story capable of surviving orally for millennia—while also managing to eclipse the formidable Homeric tradition—would at the very least retain its fundamental components unchanged. However, a close examination of the evidence reveals that these tales are anything but consistent or uniform. Take for example the so-called ‘ring episode’. Röhrich argued strongly that the story of *Dolopathos* (a medieval collection of stories, one of which resembles that of Polyphemus, the oldest securely datable example and the first to feature the ring episode) represents a version that stands independently alongside Homeric and is based on oral tradition.⁷⁶ He is right about the latter (the ring episode probably comes from local oral traditions),⁷⁷ but on the former the reference to the name Polyphemus in the text (although not in the story under consideration [no. 7] but in the next story [no. 8]) does not leave much room to doubt that the author of *Dolopathos* (Johannes de Alta Silva) knew Homer. Röhrich tried to downplay this by maintaining that the real issue is whether the version as found in the *Dolopathos* has any indication that it is based on Homer. But why is this even necessary? We have a story that is similar to Homer’s, and the monster in both stories has the same name. And although Röhrich finds no other indication of Homeric influence, he apparently overlooks the

⁷⁶ L. Röhrich, “Die mittelalterlichen Redaktionen des Polyphem-Märchens (AT 1137) und ihr Verhältnis zur außerhomerischen Tradition,” *Fabula* 5 (1962) 48–71.

⁷⁷ The ring episode is not attested in any variant of the Homeric myth that dates or can reasonably be dated to a period earlier than the *Dolopathos*, while the variants incorporating this episode are recorded mainly in north-western Europe: cf. van Gennep, *Religions* 162–164; Cook, *Zeus* II.2 989; Bremmer, in *Myth and Symbol* I 138 and passim.

fact that elsewhere there is a reference to Circe and Odysseus,⁷⁸ while Johannes undoubtedly knew (whether little or much) Greek, as he knows that the word *Dolopathos* derives *ex greco latino-que sermone*.⁷⁹

A closer look at the ring episode: of the 124 stories in Hackman's Group A—those considered to preserve the original Polyphemus story structure—only 37 include this episode.⁸⁰ Moreover, despite its name, the 'ring episode' actually features a ring in only 17 of these 37 cases. In 15 versions, the magical object is an axe or hatchet, while in the remaining five it takes the form of a white stone (once), a sword (twice), or a staff (twice). Though all these objects share the same magical function, their variation is undeniable. One might call this a minor difference. Perhaps it is—but consider how much debate has surrounded Homer's choice to have Odysseus blind Polyphemus with a stake rather than a spit. Inconsistencies also emerge in the narrative structure of the episode. For example, in the Ossetian tale of Urysmag (Frazer no. 34) the only entrance to the cave is blocked by a massive rock, yet the Cyclops inexplicably throws the magic ring to the hero even before he has escaped.⁸¹ In Basat's confrontation with Tepegöz (Frazer no. 36) the ring appears at the right moment but does not speak, so it does little to reveal the escaped hero. In fact, instead of the ring being the main feature, it is only one of the three parts of the post-escape episode (the other two are a vault and a moving sword). In the Icelandic story of Egil, son of Ring(!), things get a bit complicated (Hackman no. 37). The giant, after confronting the hero and being defeated,

⁷⁸ A. Hilka, *Historia septem sapientum* II (Heidelberg 1913) 108: *quomodo etiam Circe, Solis filia, Vlixis socios in diuersa transformauerit animalia*.

⁷⁹ Hilka, *Historia Septem* II 4.

⁸⁰ Glenn, *TAPA* 102 (1971) 178, cites 38 stories, but has put Frazer no. 10 twice (in both the ring and the hatchet).

⁸¹ Frazer records the short version. For the full version see J. Colarusso and T. Salbiev, *Tales of the Narts: Ancient Myths and Legends of the Ossetians* (Princeton 2016) 27–33.

offers as a souvenir to Egil a golden ring. As Egil is about to take the ring, the giant pulls his hand back, strikes Egil, and cuts off his right ear. Egil then cuts off the giant's right arm and grabs the ring. In an Italian version (Frazer no. 8), the ring again does not speak but turns the finger into marble, thus preventing the hero from moving (but why?). One will again say that the overall point of the post-escape episode is served with either a ring or a sword whether it speaks or not. Yes, but then why so much debate about whether Odysseus escaped hanging from the ram rather than wearing its skin as the hero in most modern folktales does?

Moreover, in Hackman's corpus both the criteria for eligible tales and their classification are increasingly found to be problematic. As Meuli early on stated, "the hundreds of variants of the Polyphemus narrative seem poor and sparse enough in comparison."⁸² Dawkins noted: "Indeed Hackman casts his net so wide that much of his material is entirely irrelevant to the Homeric story of the Cyclops."⁸³ Calame has convincingly shown that Hackman does not explain at all "the criteria used to limit what went into the corpus," and argued that "some of the stories gathered by Hackman are so different from one another that any attempt to put a limit on the corpus would be sure to fail."⁸⁴ Aguirre and Buxton are right when they note: "The limits of the dossier compiled by Hackman, and amplified later, are in the end arbitrary, since the question of precisely which 'background tales' are relevant is an open one."⁸⁵ Note that Hackman himself often expresses concern about the credibility, authenticity, and relevance of the stories he has included in the corpus.⁸⁶ These parameters often escape the attention of scholars, who usually begin their comparative analysis of the cyclopean

⁸² Meuli, *Odyssee und Argonautika* 70.

⁸³ Dawkins, *More Greek Folktales* 13.

⁸⁴ Calame, *The Craft* 143–144.

⁸⁵ Aguirre and Buxton, *Cyclops* 37.

⁸⁶ Hackman, *Polyphemsage*, notes at 12–13, 15, 24, 57, 75, 77, 103.

episode with the erroneous statement that the story is attested in more than two hundred versions.⁸⁷

Any discussion of the relationship between the Homeric episode of Polyphemus and modern folktales—beyond all other arguments—ultimately resembles a tug-of-war. On one side are those who find it unlikely that an oral tale could have survived independently of the Homeric version for millennia; on the other, those who point to the large body of oral narratives recorded over the past 200 years—though, as we have seen, this body may not be as extensive as often claimed. And while the former position seems a reasonable and cautious approach, the latter demands what is essentially “a leap of faith [...] that not everyone has been willing to take.”⁸⁸ Yet in the search for a satisfying resolution to this debate, it often feels as though we are asking the wrong questions altogether.

Are we looking for the archetypal story? If yes, then what was it? In other words: Which elements of structure and narrative belong to the proto-tale and which are innovations first introduced by Homer? The distinguished classicist Walter Burkert, in his search through the collective memory of humanity for a parallel to the Cyclops—a giant dwelling in a cave in distant lands and tending a large herd of animals—concludes that the figure which most closely corresponds to this archetype is the one known in scholarly literature as the prehistoric Lord of the Animals.⁸⁹ Burkert proposes to see the Cyclops tale as a Palaeolithic quest myth: “the triumph of cleverness against brute force, set in the elementary experience of trap and escape” (33). He particularly stresses that the detail of Odysseus choosing not to

⁸⁷ E.g. Reece, *The Stranger's Welcome* 126; Comhaire, *Anthropological Quarterly* 31 (1958) 21; Brown, *CompLit* 18 (1966) 193.

⁸⁸ Aguirre and Buxton, *Cyclops* 12.

⁸⁹ Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979) 30–34. For a comprehensive discussion of the Lord of the Animals see D. B. Counts et al. (eds.), *The Master of Animals in Old World Iconography* (Budapest 2010).

blind Polyphemus with a sword, but instead behaving like a Palaeolithic man by hardening a stake—fashioned from Polyphemus' own club—in the fire, is not incidental. Rather, it strongly supports the interpretation that the myth can be traced back to prehistoric times.

It is entirely possible that Homer knew the archetypical myth of the Lord of the Animals, and thus some elements in the Homeric episode with Polyphemus can be read as echoes of hunting practices (e.g. the masquerade with the use of skins) and even initiation rites (e.g. the sacrifice of the good ram). But Polyphemus is a shepherd, not a guardian of game animals as the Master of Animals typically is. Bakker notes that “We could read the quest into Cyclops' cave [...] as a mythicized memory of the rise of animal farming. But such an interpretation does not exhaust the episode's significance and will in fact give rise to new layers of meaning.”⁹⁰ Moreover, Bauer argues that hunting myths only rarely talk about the invention of weapons or tools,⁹¹ while Bremmer points out that “the blinding of Polyphemus is nowhere part of the myths and stories surrounding the Lords and Ladies of the Animals.”⁹² These considerations lead to the plausible conclusion that Burkert was right to suggest that Homer was likely familiar with and drew upon the Lord of the Animals archetypical myth. However, it would be highly speculative to assume that this earlier myth contained the specific details found in the Polyphemus episode.

Recently Julien d'Huy has taken an ambitious stance, arguing that a cave painting from Les Trois-Frères in the Pyrenees, known as “Le Petit Sorcier à l'arc musical,” represents the earliest iconographic evidence of the encounter between Polyphemus and Odysseus. The panel depicts a human-animal

⁹⁰ E. J. Bakker, *The Meaning of Meat and the Structure of the Odyssey* (Cambridge 2013) 59.

⁹¹ J. Bauer, “Jägerzeitliche Vorstellungen,” *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* VII (Berlin 1993) 427–432, at 430.

⁹² Bremmer, in *Myth and Symbol* I 145.

hybrid facing a bison-like creature, with the two exchanging gazes. Notably, the creature's thigh resembles that of a human. The detailed rendering of the anus and vulva further invites comparison with Amerindian variants of the Polyphemus myth, in which a man hides inside an animal by entering through its anus.⁹³ For d'Huy this image, although necessarily speculative and problematic to interpret, as he himself acknowledges, may be construed as an allusion to the hero's escape scene. The cave painting is dated to approximately 15,000 years ago, suggesting that the Ur-tale of Polyphemus traces back at least to the Palaeolithic period. Nevertheless, in the absence of corroborating evidence, d'Huy's theory remains highly conjectural. As Simona Petru notes: it is hard, if not impossible, to understand the way people in the Palaeolithic period perceived the world because our Western mind restricts us. Maybe at that time people and animals were not perceived as two different and totally separate entities.⁹⁴

In any case, regardless of what or how much of the above we accept as possible, if we had to roughly describe this Ur-tale, it would go like this: A hunter encounters a monster guarding a group of animals, gets trapped with the monster, and manages to escape by clinging to the animals.⁹⁵ If so, certainly no one will disagree that the Homeric episode is one (perhaps the oldest written) version of this story. But then all the details of the story (monocularity, cannibalism, drunkenness, blindness, name-trick, etc.) must be attributed to Homer, and by extension all

⁹³ J. d'Huy, "Polyphemus, a Palaeolithic Tale?" *RMN Newsletter* 9 (2015) 43–64, at 55.

⁹⁴ S. Petru, "Man, Animal or Both? Problems in the Interpretation of Early Symbolic Behaviour," *Documenta Praehistorica* 39 (2012) 269–276, at 269.

⁹⁵ In the Aarne-Thompson catalogue the story is considered an international tale and has been labeled as *AaTh 1137: The Ogre Blinded (Polyphemus). Escape under ram's belly*: A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (Helsinki 1961) s.v. Type 1137. Anderson and Hansen each offered a useful but questionable summary of the AaTh 1137 tale-type, see n.52 above.

variations of these elements in modern folktales necessarily presuppose knowledge of the Homeric episode.

Are we looking for a literary tale which included the above details that predates Homer? That would indeed be ideal, but not only do we not have one, there is not the slightest suggestion that one (containing all or most details) ever existed. In recent years a very serious effort has been made to highlight the roots of the Homeric episode in the IE tradition,⁹⁶ while the similarities with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* have been clearly pointed out.⁹⁷ Watkins proposed a connection between the Cyclopean episode and the reconstructed IE myth “Hero Slays Serpent.” However, a notable deviation occurs: Odysseus does not ultimately kill Polyphemus. It appears that Homer envisioned a different fate for ‘his own monster’—one that diverges from the primitive formula and instead gestures toward a new narrative logic: ‘the monster is civilized’, or more precisely, ‘the monster is humanized’. For Polyphemus has nothing to do with the cruel and faceless monsters of the IE tradition. It is more like a humanized monster, a monster that can now have a pivotal influence on the course of history, can have a say, can deceive, can threaten, can pray. And it is precisely Polyphemus’ words to Odysseus, to the other Cyclopes, and to his beloved ram that “made him a personality, destined to live on throughout classical literature.”⁹⁸

Andrew T. Alwine exploits the information contained in the Homeric scholia and considers that these constitute evidence for a competing myth (or group of myths) that existed alongside the version of the *Odyssey*, and which apparently shaped the episode with Polyphemus.⁹⁹ However, “in the Homeric scholia references to the cyclic poets—often merely called ‘younger’—serve

⁹⁶ See e.g. C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York 1995) 402–404; West, *CJ* 101 (2006) 129–156.

⁹⁷ See Louden, *Homer's Odyssey and the Near East* 183–196.

⁹⁸ S. E. Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer* (Berkeley 1938) 57–58.

⁹⁹ A. T. Alwine, “The Non-Homeric Cyclops in the Homeric *Odyssey*,” *GRBS* 49 (2009) 323–333.

almost primarily to define Homeric style and content by illustrating what Homer is not.”¹⁰⁰ In any case, it seems very logical that an earlier literary tradition about Polyphemus and Cyclopes existed before and during Homer’s time,¹⁰¹ often questioning basic features of the Homeric narrative. But as Erwin Cook notes, “the search for ‘an original version’ of the Polyphemus Saga is pointless.”¹⁰²

Are we looking for certain folktales? To say that the material used by Homer belonged as such to separate folktales which had an independent form is a convenient choice, but it is a bit glib to assume that folktales can be easily transformed or incorporated into a literary narrative that claims historicity. For let us not forget that, although the Cyclopean episode is often treated as a folktale, in antiquity it was one of the adventures of Odysseus. And regardless of what we believe today about the historicity of Odysseus, in Homer’s time probably no one doubted that he was a real person, king of Ithaca and hero of the Trojan War. Thus the story belonged to the heroic myth. Stephanie West is right to point out that the rendering of folk themes into heroic verse, though not impossible, is clearly an arduous and incongruous task.¹⁰³ Burkert considers the Polyphemus episode to be almost a pure folktale, or rather, “poetry that is perfectly crystallized in Homer’s text,” but admits that it is problematic that Odysseus is an epic and not a folk hero.¹⁰⁴

But neither is Polyphemus the classic folktale villain.¹⁰⁵ This is

¹⁰⁰ J. P. Christensen, “Epic Cycle,” in *Cambridge Guide to Homer* 118–119.

¹⁰¹ Cf. S. L. Schein, *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays* (Princeton 1995) 3: the Homeric epics “are the final product of a Greek poetic tradition that can be dated up to 1000 years before they were written.”

¹⁰² E. F. Cook, *The Odyssey in Athens: Myths of Cultural Origins* (Ithaca 1995) 93 n.1. Cf. Bremmer, in *Myth and Symbol* I 143–148.

¹⁰³ West, *Classica Cracoviensia* 16 (2013) 190.

¹⁰⁴ Burkert, *Structure and History* 32–33.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. R. M. Newton, “Poor Polyphemus: Emotional Ambivalence in

a point often overlooked by those who identify parallels between a folktale and the Homeric narrative. Polyphemus (not just any Cyclops, but specifically Homer's Polyphemus) is not—nor has he ever been—merely the ‘villain’ of the tale, in the conventional sense of folktales. No mythological monster that began in utter savagery and cannibalism has undergone such a complete process of humanization and acculturation as Polyphemus has. And certainly, after a trajectory spanning nearly 3000 years, it no longer matters whether he drank milk or wine, whether he was blinded with a wooden stake or a spit, or whether he consumed Odysseus' companions raw or cooked. Inevitably, various aspects of the Homeric version have gained or lost prominence over time due to shifting historical, social, and literary or artistic developments—rarely for arbitrary reasons, and often in ways that are deeply revealing. Nevertheless, the essential core of the story and the literary figure fashioned by Homer have remained remarkably stable.

Thus, it is perfectly normal that, from the plethora of myths, legends, and folktales, some incidents were adapted to the Homeric narrative, but as Burgess aptly notes, “no monolithic pre-Homeric tale type can be reconstructed on the basis of the modern folktales.”¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, there is no doubt that a skillful poet like Homer could have drawn from existing myths and folktales to craft a distinct and easily recognizable set of characteristics for the Cyclops Polyphemus. However, he did not stop there. Instead of merely adapting a single story, Homer created a unique amalgamation of myths and folktales—an episode that does not simply replicate any particular tale and remains unparalleled in its originality. Podlecki aptly points out that “whatever we like to think about one-eyed giants in universal folklore or the availability of a ready-made epic diction, the intricacy of thematic development in *Odyssey* 9” [...] “forces

Odyssey 9 and 17,” *CW* 76 (1983) 137–142; P. N. Hernández, “Back in the Cave of the Cyclops,” *AJP* 121 (2000) 345–366.

¹⁰⁶ Burgess, in *The Winnowing Oar* 98.

us to acknowledge the master touch of a conscious and highly original creative genius whom we traditionally call ‘Homer’.”¹⁰⁷

As for the modern variations, they are not—unless proven otherwise—evidence of a pre-Homeric independent story (whether literary or oral). Rather, they likely result from the gradual appropriation of various common folktales and motifs into the well-known Homeric narrative. This is not to say that pre-Homeric stories or folktales featuring a hero killing a villain, a monster hiding in a cave, a pun on a name, or an adventurous escape by trickery did not exist. However, when a modern tale incorporates most or all of these elements together, we can reasonably attribute its origins to Homeric influence. This is precisely what such variations rely on, as most of them—particularly those in Hackman’s Group B—are not fully developed stand-alone stories. Instead, they resemble simplistic narrative structures that require a complete story to gain meaning. Consequently, given both the chronological and geographical distance from the *Odyssey*, we should be cautious about retroactively projecting modern tales onto a much earlier period as potential sources for the Homeric episode.¹⁰⁸

But even if these hesitations are set aside, the fundamental question remains: why and how could this supposed pre-Homeric story have entirely displaced the Homeric narrative and, on its own, given rise to hundreds of variations? To accept this idea, one would have to believe that every literate or illiterate narrator had access only to this pre-Homeric version—somehow remaining unaware of Homer’s *Odyssey*—or that they collectively and deliberately chose to ignore it in an improbable act of mass conspiracy.¹⁰⁹ But such a notion is untenable. The *Odyssey*, and particularly the myth of Cyclops Polyphemus, has exerted an extraordinary influence from antiquity to the present

¹⁰⁷ Podlecki, *Phoenix* 15 (1961) 126, 133.

¹⁰⁸ See Aguirre and Buxton, *Cyclops* 47–59.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. O’Sullivan, *SymbOslo* 62 (1987) 7, who highlights a similar oddity about the ‘Nobody trick’ episode.

day “even in the Latin-speaking West during centuries when the Greek language was unknown to all but the rarest scholars.”¹¹⁰ Moreover, Homer’s influence can be traced in the most unexpected literary contexts and the most unlikely places;¹¹¹ and there is no doubt that whenever someone evoked the image of a one-eyed, man-eating monster, they had Homer’s Polyphemus in mind, “there being no other figure in Western literature who compares.”¹¹² Thus, as romantic as it sounds, it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that “Homer told such a good story that through oral and written channels it reached people in all corners of Europe and even beyond.”¹¹³

To summarize: Does the Homeric story of Polyphemus point

¹¹⁰ Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme* 156; 178, “the Cyclops and the Sirens, at least, were never entirely forgotten.” Cf. W. Burkert, “Vom Nachtigallenmythos zum ‘Machandelboom’,” in *Antiker Mythos in unseren Märchen* 113–125, at 118, who argues that Western Europe in the Middle Ages remained exposed to the Hellenic myth because of the popularity of Ovid in the curriculum of Latin schools.

¹¹¹ Cf. e.g. H. F. Cairus, J. B. T. Prado, and F. Jardim, “Um Ciclope francês nos trópicos,” *Alea* 25 (2023) 181–198; Slogar, “Polyphemus Africanus: Mapping Cannibals in the History of the Cross River Region of Nigeria, ca. 1500–1985,” *Terrae Incognitae* 37 (2005) 16–27; J. Wellendorf, “Odin of Many Devices: Jonas Ramus (d. 1718) on the Identity of Odin and Odysseus,” in T. R. Tangherlini (ed.), *Nordic Mythologies* (2014) 115–132; M. Mordine, “Odyssean Adventures in the *Cena Trimalchionis*,” *CLAnt* 32 (2013) 176–199; M. Kochenash, “The Case for Judith’s Imitation of ‘Nobody’ (among Others),” *JStJ* 54 (2023) 316–349; K. Ghazanfari and M. Asl, “Traces of a Greek Myth (?) in Subcultures of Lur-Inhabited Regions of Western Iran,” *Folklore* (2024) 185–202; West, *CJ* 101 (2006) 125–160; J. D. P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconnesus* (Oxford 1962) 82–85, 194 n.12; Bremmer, in *Myth and Symbol* I 135–152; T. Clark, “‘Titanic Cyclops’ or ‘Cyclopean Titan’?: Adamastor and Gonzalo Pérez’s *Ulyxea* and Gregorio Hernández de Velasco’s *Eneida*,” *Portugese Studies* 38 (2022) 5–24; J. Ahn, “The Renaissance Reception of Homer’s *Odyssey*,” in R. C. Evans (ed.), *Critical Insights: The Odyssey* (Hackensack 2019) 3–16.

¹¹² See Slogar, *Terrae Incognitae* 37 (2005) 19. Cf. C. Moseley (transl.), *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (London 2005) 167 and passim.

¹¹³ Bremmer, in *Myth and Symbol* I 148.

to the existence of non-homeric material? The answer is clearly yes. Do modern folktales preserve aspects of this material? The answer is also yes. Do they do that directly without the mediation (in one way or another) of the *Odyssey*? The answer can hardly be positive.

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