

Feasting and Anti-feasting: Hospitality, the Feast, and Its Relationship to Civilized Life

World Literature I

Played out over and over again in the Odyssey: 1 in 30 lines contains a reference to food/hunger!

1. **Positive paradigms** put first, thus the double inversion in the narrative structure

a. Nausicaa, bk 6, reproaches her handmaidens for running away from this strange man who comes out of the bushes, naked, unbathed, covered with salt grime: "for strangers and beggars come from Zeus"

b. Telemachus and Mentor/Athena approach palace of Menelaus in book 4: servant of Menelaus goes to ask his master whether they should receive them: Menelaus replies, "You were no fool before, / but now I see you're babbling like a child! / Just think of all the hospitality / **we** enjoyed at the hands of other men before we made it home. / and god save us from such hard treks in years to come. ... / Bring them in, strangers, guests, to share our flowing feast."

c. In the world before Holiday Inns, before police or any guarantee of safety, beyond the strength of oneself and one's friends and helpers, the function of hospitality is fundamental. **Hospitality is the means by which you forge the bonds among men that make the world a safe and agreeable place in which to live.**

d. A host of positive exempla: Tel. receiving Mentos/Athena in Bk 1; Nestor Bk3; Menelaus and Helen Bk 4; Od. by Calypso Bk 5; Nausicaa Bk 6; Alcinous and Arete Bks 7-8; Aeolus Bk 10; (Penelope receiving Od. in disguise-- later).

e. **The social code, how people are supposed to behave.** Stranger appears. Stranger is of obviously noble appearance, thus worth our attention. Strangers, we recall, are from Zeus. Invite stranger in. Possibly bathe him. Sit him down, in the honored place, next to the host. Wash his hands and feet. Feed him, give him wine. Only after the bread and choice meats have been put aside does the conversation begin. Who are you? Where do you come from? Where is your home and who are your parents? The stranger's tale is treated with interest, respect. We offer him assistance, as required. We send him off with gifts, to insure that when we or our relatives/descendants come upon him or his rel./desc., that we will be treated in the same fashion.

This is the core of **society (elite society)**: comfortable ease with one's fellow man, even a stranger; common feelings; shared values; shared belief in the value of a friendly and helpful human society; the conviction that ritualized, civilized, orderly behavior is at the root of the good life for man.

2. But there are also **negative paradigms**, counterexamples that make it clear how it goes when the **social code is broken, when Zeus not honored and hospitality is not afforded to the**

stranger, when the feast is not for the guest, but the feast becomes the guest himself, where those who should be the hosts feed on the guest.

a. **Suitors, metaphorically:** confused guest/host relationship: they want to eat and drink their way through the household of Od.

a. Hera and Achilles (and Hecuba) in the Iliad: their rage is so rampant, so beyond civilized, that they want to eat their enemies raw.

b. Enkidu: civilizing by sex and clothing and bread/wine

c. Agamemnon and his men lying in a mass of blood, wine, bread, meat at the ambush of Aegisthus: see esp. pp. 262f.

b. Perversion of the feasting type scene in Aeaea, Circe's island

the wildest beasts are tame, a beautiful nymph sings and weaves her loom all day long: could therefore have been ultra civilizing, but turns out to be a world of transformation into opposites, where men become beasts (swine) and, though, their mission is to return home, they lose the nostalgia feeling -

the pseudo-hospitality of Circe recalls the bona fide hospitality of Helen/Menelaus: Helen too dispenses a drug, to make men forget their cares (a dangerous woman therefore)

(enchantress/witch: note esp. the weaving)

c. But there are examples in the Od. where the feasting goes **seriously** wrong, where we see **not the feasting of man, but the feasting on man**. (Repeated line: "Are these men like us, perhaps, who live on bread?" One learns to beware of this lead-in!)

i. Laestrygonians

Od. sends out 3 of his men to reconnoiter. The men encounter a young maiden, the daughter of the king, going to fetch water. The men greet the princess, and she shows them to her father's (the king's) lodge. When they arrive they first see the queen.... Who do we think of? Do you begin to see the brilliance of the inverted chronological arrangement of the Odyssey?

But the queen of the L. "for greeting called from the meeting ground her lord and master, Antiphates, who came to drink their blood. He seized one man and tore him apart on the spot, making a meal of him; the other two leaped out of doors..." The L. people then chase them to the ships (Od. cuts his mooring rope & escapes), but the rest of the ships are smashed, and the L. "spear the men like fish and carry them away."

Inverse hospitality, an **anti-feast**, feeding on the guest rather than feeding the guest.

Contrast with Phaeacians / Nausicaa / Arete: these brutish people seem yet more brutish by contrast with the lovely and gentle Nausicaa and Scheria where the "feasting goes on forever" and men tell tales "through the endless nights"; the Phaeacians, who, you remember, are not skilled "in the boxing ring or the wrestling ground, but in racing on land and sea; and all our days [says Alcinous] we set great store by feasting, harpers, and the grace of dancing choirs, changes of dress, warm baths and downy beds."

The implication: these things are not simply aesthetic, incidental, but basic to civilized existence: the things that make life not simply possible but enjoyable, that make it human rather than brutish.

ii. Cyclops: Polyphemus

Cf. Enkidu, that first beast-man: like E., Polyph. has a special and natural relationship with the beasts: to the beasts he is kind and caring.

Recall Polyph. to the ram (as Od. lurks underneath): "Dear old ram, why last of the flock to quit the cave? In the good old days you'd never lag behind the rest-- you with your long marching strides, first by far of the flock ... master's eye." -p. 225 Is this really the same guy who so casually picks up two of Od's men, bashes out their brains, and eats them raw?

The image assaults our notions of the pastoral ideal: the gentle shepherd. And note that these are tame beasts: Polyph. is not fully a wild man, he is a shepherd; lives not by hunting, but by making cheese. He, like the shepherds who assist in the taming of Enkidu, on the margin b/t the civilized world and the wilderness. At that margin, he is the gentle tamer of gentle beasts; but no companionable rough pastor here, rather a monster. How so? What makes him such a brute?

The poem tells us. When Od. and his men first see Polyph. they note that the huge brute "seemed no man at all of those who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather a shaggy mountain reared in solitude." In the opening description of the Cyclops and their society we get not only a vivid description, but **a negative definition, as it were, of civilization:** "From there we sailed ktl"

- 1. no rule of law
- 2. no agriculture (so the Cyclops do not eat bread though the wheat grows up wild about them)
- 3. no assembly

- 4. no social meetings
- 5. live apart, do not share food, drink, conversation
- 6. Polyph. does not even have a woman or family (i.e. Enkidu)
- 7. Polyph. son of Poseidon: sea as dark, primal, violent, barren opposite of the land, where there is agriculture and cities

Contempt of Zeus, god of hospitality ¶ not just that he eats, men, but bad table manners: bolts them like a mt lion ¶ later, grotesque detail of the vomiting: p. 223.

A parody of the feast that binds men in good society, an **anti-feast**, a feast for one while many look on, a feast where the host feasts on the guests, a feast where the host eats like a lion. And there is more: for the proffered wine, Polyph. gives Od. the guest-gift that he will eat him last. The contempt of this anti-feaster for the gift-giving society that informs Homeric culture (and by extension of **Zeus**, as P. says explicitly) could not be clearer.

Hospitality as central to **civilization**. In this story, we see what life would be like if we did not have laws, agriculture (and the building of houses and settled life that goes with agriculture), assemblies, society-- if we kept apart and to ourselves -- and if we ignored the rule of hospitality, Zeus Xenios.

Contrast not so much b/t wild and cultured, but wholly naturalized state vs. civilized state: a picture of what man would be like if he did not adopt the central tenets of civilized life, and instead chose to life alone among his flocks.

Clear importance of society, getting together, enjoying the feast, the song, the dancing, the tales told to one another through the endless night. (Who is telling this tale, and in what context!?)

3. Food and the Feast.

Food is ambiguous in and of itself: man-eaters of course, but also cf. p. 186: when Od. is offered food by Alkinoos, he says: "The belly's a shameless dog, there's nothing worse. Always insisting, pressing, it never lets us forget-- destroyed as I am, my heart racked with sadness, sick with anguish, still it keeps demanding, 'Eat, drink!' It blots out all the memory of my pain, commanding 'Fill me up!'"

Food, like death, is basic to being human. Distinguishes us from the immortal gods: thus we have red blood, they have ichor (eating ambrosia, drinking nectar). The need for food can be a bad thing, a kind of slavery: think of the cattle of Helios (12). But food is also a part of the **feasting**. Interestingly, the gods eat no food, but they do feast.

What is essential to the **feast** is, then, no so much the food itself, but the society that communal feasting creates, the giving of the food by the host to the guest; the guest's happy acquiescence in the gift; the song and talk and stories and other good things that accompanies the food.

Importance not in the eating by in the society formed thereby. **A celebration of being human together, a celebration of being civilized, or civilized life.**

And that is, I think, why 1 in 30 lines in the Od. refers to food or the feast.