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Isabella Nova<sup>1</sup>

## The Cyclops Comes to Sicily: The Western Setting of a Homeric Episode

Odysseus's encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus is one of the best-known episodes of the *Odyssey* today and it was very popular in antiquity as well. This contribution will focus on the geographical setting of the episode from a diachronic perspective: while in the *Odyssey* the location of the Cyclopes' land remains undetermined, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onward it was consistently identified with Sicily.<sup>2</sup> The geographical features of this Western setting will be explored through various literary texts, with the aim of emphasizing the relationship between these features and the portrayal of the Cyclops.

### The Homeric setting

The episode narrated in Book 9 of the *Odyssey* has been extensively discussed with regard both to its origin and composition. The comparison with several versions of a similar story, documented in different cultures, reveals that the motif of the blinding of a one-eyed giant is quite traditional:<sup>3</sup> the number and geographical distribution of these narratives shows that this subject was widespread, being either an autonomous invention in different

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<sup>2</sup> All the dates in this paper are BCE unless otherwise specified.

<sup>3</sup> These tales have been recorded from the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, but the majority of them were written down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They are attested all over Europe, Western and Central Asia, and North Africa. The tale-type is classified as "Tale of the blinded Ogre" (note 1137) in Hans-Jörg Uther, *The types of International Folktales: a Classification and Bibliography, based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2004), where a complete list of the variants is provided. Frazer collected 36 modern variants of this folktale in Apollodorus, *The Library*, with an English translation by James George Frazer, Appendix XIII: "Ulysses and Polyphemos," (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 404-55.

cultures, or the retelling of a popular story. Examining the main points of correspondence, the outline of this narrative can be roughly summarized as follows: a small group of men enter the dwelling of a one-eyed giant, who eats some of them. The survivors are trapped into the cave or house, so when the giant falls asleep, the survivors drive a stake into his eye and blind him. Then, in order to escape from the place, the main hero covers himself with the skin of a ram and makes his way out by mingling with the other animals.

The relationship between the Odyssean episode and the modern versions has been thoroughly investigated, but there is still much uncertainty regarding the form of the original version and the adaptation of this traditional theme to Greek mythology.<sup>4</sup> As recently noted by Aguirre-Buxton, the chronological and geographical distance between the *Odyssey* and the modern versions should warn against the simple transposition of this tale at a much earlier period as a background for the Homeric episode.<sup>5</sup> It is generally acknowledged, however, that the narration in Book 9 of the *Odyssey* is based on an archaic folklore story—though not coincident with any of the modern versions—then adapted to Odysseus's adventures with significant modifications.<sup>6</sup> Presumably, the one-eyed giant was linked to a mythological group already known to the Greek audience as the Cyclopes, and consequently his name (Polyphemus) may have

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<sup>4</sup> There is a wide bibliography on the topic, and its reconsideration is beyond the scope of this paper. The most relevant references are noted below.

<sup>5</sup> Mercedes Aguirre and Richard Buxton, *Cyclops. The Myth and its Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 47-59. As noted by Jonathan S. Burgess, *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 95: "one should not slip into the illusion that a pre-Homeric folktale can be reconstructed from modern analogues."

<sup>6</sup> The possibility of reconstructing the original version by the comparison with modern variants has been much discussed. For opposite positions, see e.g., Justin Glenn, "The Polyphemus Folktale and Homer's *Kyklôpeia*," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 102 (1971): 133-81; Jan N. Bremmer, "Odysseus versus the Cyclops," in *Myth and Symbol*, I, ed. Synnøve des Bouvrie (Bergen: The Norwegian Institute at Athens, 2002), 132-52.

been introduced in order to recall his popular role in traditional legends (meaning “the much famed” or “very famous”).<sup>7</sup> With regard to the plot, the Odyssean version shows some differences from the modern retellings. For the purposes of this paper, the most relevant difference in the Homeric account is the presence of the wine-offering.<sup>8</sup> In the other versions the giant simply falls asleep, while in the Homeric narrative Odysseus offers the special Maronian wine to Polyphemus, who gets drunk and falls asleep. The practical irrelevance of this motif for the development of the trick in the *Odyssey* suggests that it may either be a traditional feature or that it may have been derived from similar tales about using an enemy’s drunkenness against him.<sup>9</sup> The offering of a “hospitality gift,” however, must have seemed particularly important for a Greek audience, and this detail (the wine drinking, together with the vine growing) would prove to be significant in subsequent retellings of this episode.

As for the setting, the poet of the *Odyssey* imagined an undetermined land, simply indicated as *gaia*, close to an island (the Goat Island, *Odyssey*, 9.116-141).<sup>10</sup> After sailing away from the Lotus-

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<sup>7</sup> On the relationship between the Homeric Polyphemus and the other groups of Cyclopes, see e.g., Robert Mondi, “The Homeric Cyclopes: Folktale, Tradition, and Theme,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 113 (1983): 17-38; Alfred Heubeck, *Omero, Odissea: Libri IX-XII* (Milano: Mondadori, 2004<sup>10</sup>), 191-2; Bremmer, “Odysseus,” 139-43. As for the proper name, another possible, though less likely, option is “of many songs/voices”; see *Odyssey*, 2.150; 22.376; Hans Von Kamptz, *Homerische Personennamen: Sprachwissenschaftliche und Historische Klassifikation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1982, 88). See also Nikoletta Kanavou, *The Names of Homeric Heroes: Problems and Interpretations* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 118-9; Aguirre-Buxton, *Cyclops*, 514-15.

<sup>8</sup> See Burgess, *Tradition*, 97, 106-108; Heubeck, *Odissea*, 189-90.

<sup>9</sup> For the wine-offering in the *Odyssey*, see Georg Danek, *Epos und Zitat: Studien zu den Quellen der Odyssee* (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998), 177-78; Heubeck, *Odissea*, 206.

<sup>10</sup> While the Goat Island is just called *nēsos*, the territory inhabited by the Cyclopes is always referred to as *gaia* and nothing in the text indicates

eaters, Odysseus and his companions first arrive to this island, leave their fleet there (9.172-176), and afterwards they get to the Cyclopes' land with only one ship.

This *gaia* is described as extremely fertile, and rich in plants and vines that grow spontaneously. However, the people living there are characterized as solitary and unaware of laws and social conventions (9.106-115):<sup>11</sup>

Thence we sailed on, grieved at heart, and we came to the land of the Cyclopes, an overweening and lawless folk, who, trusting in the immortal gods, plant nothing with their hands nor plough; but all these things spring up for them without sowing or ploughing, wheat, and barley, and vines, which bear the rich clusters of wine, and the rain of Zeus gives them increase. Neither assemblies for council have they, nor appointed laws, but they dwell on the peaks of lofty mountains in hollow caves, and each one is lawgiver to his children and his wives, and they do not care about one another.

Κυκλώπων δ' ἐς γαῖαν ὑπερφιάλων ἀθεμιστῶν  
ἰκόμεθ', οἳ ῥά θεοῖσι πεποιθότες ἀθανάτοισιν  
οὔτε φυτεύουσιν χερσὶν φυτὸν οὔτ' ἀρώσιν,  
ἀλλὰ τὰ γ' ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα πάντα φύονται,  
πυροὶ καὶ κριθαὶ ἠδ' ἄμπελοι, αἳ τε φέρουσιν  
οἶνον ἐριστάφυλον, καὶ σφιν Διὸς ὄμβρος ἀέξει.  
τοῖσιν δ' οὔτ' ἀγοραὶ βουλευφόροι οὔτε θέμιστες,  
ἀλλ' οἳ γ' ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων ναίουσι κάρηνα  
ἐν σπέσσι γλαφυροῖσι, θεμιστεύει δὲ ἕκαστος  
παίδων ἠδ' ἀλόχων, οὐδ' ἀλλήλων ἀλέγουσιν.

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an island (even a larger one). The expression ἐπ' ἐσχατιῇ (*Odyssey*, 9.182) or ἐπ' ἐσχατιῆς (9.280), meaning “on the land's edge,” could suggest that the Cyclopes inhabited a well-defined land, conceivable as an island. In this sense see νήσου ἐπ' ἐσχατιῆς, “to the borders of the island,” at 5.238.

<sup>11</sup> All translations of the *Odyssey* are from Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1919).

In this initial presentation, the reference to mountains as the dwelling of the Cyclopes is surely meant to be a generic remark on their primitive way of living, aiming at representing their seclusion, because Polyphemus's cave is described as close to the seashore (σπέος εἶδομεν ἄγχι θαλάσσης, "we saw a high cave by the sea," 9.182). The solitary condition of the Cyclops is highlighted again right after by means of a simile with a mountain (9.190-192):

For he was created a wondrous monster and was not like a man who lives by bread, but like a wooded peak of lofty mountains, which stands out to view alone, apart from the rest.

καὶ γὰρ θαῦμ' ἐτέτυκτο πελώριον, οὐδὲ ἐώκει  
ἀνδρὶ γε σιτοφάγῳ, ἀλλὰ ρίψι ὑλήεντι  
ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων, ὃ τε φαίνεται οἶον ἀπ' ἄλλων.

The description of the Goat Island completes the geographical presentation, and it further characterizes the Cyclopes' lifestyle. This island is quite close to the Cyclopes' land ("neither close to the shore of the land of the Cyclopes, nor yet far off," γαίης Κυκλώπων οὔτε σχεδὸν οὔτ' ἀποτηλοῦ, 9.117), and its potential is presented through Odysseus's perspective: it would be suited for agriculture and human life, it would be productive and it could also offer a safe anchorage (9.131-139), but since the Cyclopes do not sail, they cannot benefit from these resources and the Goat Island stays "unsown and unploughed all the days" (ἄσπαρτος καὶ ἀνήροτος ἤματα πάντα, 9.123).<sup>12</sup> Clearly, the relationship with the environment shows a deep contrast between the Greek (and civilized) point of view and the primitive lifestyle of the Cyclopes.

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<sup>12</sup> In subsequent retellings of this episode, however, a nearby island is never part of the region where the Cyclopes live. For the narratological function of the Goat Island, see Irene J.F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 233-34. The Cyclopes' rudeness is particularly evident compared to the Phaeacians, who dwell in a similarly blessed territory and make the best use of it (7.112-131), see Heubeck, *Odyssea*, 193.

Although the Homeric narrative includes many geographical details about the place where the Cyclops lives, the precise location is not specified, and it remains in a fantastic dimension. The association of Odysseus's adventures with real geographical places is commonly dated back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, as a consequence of the Euboean colonization of the Mediterranean. It is highly likely that the popular epic songs about Odysseus's wanderings accompanied the actual challenges of the first colonizers from Euboea during their sea expeditions towards the coasts of Southern Italy, and the Western interpretation of his heroic adventures—previously unspecified—may well have originated in this context. As shown by Braccesi,<sup>13</sup> the Western localization of Odysseus's journey mostly matches the Euboean routes and foundation sites, for example the interpretation of Scylla and Charybdis as two monsters causing shipwrecks in the strait of Messina—close to the Euboean colonies of Zancle and Rhegium; or the setting of the Siren's rocks close to Cumae. Some of these geographical associations must have been already popular by the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century, as proven by some references in Hesiod's poetry.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of the Polyphemus episode, its folklore roots may have contributed to its early circulation both in Greece and in the Mediterranean area and, likewise, the colonizers' activities probably encouraged the identification of his land with the area of the Euboean settlements of Naxos, Leontinoi, and Catane.

### The setting in Sicily

Even though this association was surely older, the earliest author who explicitly situates the Cyclopes and the Laestrygonians in Sicily is Thucydides, and from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards this setting recurs in each retelling of the episode (Thucydides, 6.2.1):

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<sup>13</sup> Lorenzo Braccesi, *Grecità di frontiera: i percorsi occidentali della leggenda* (Padova: Esedra, 1994), 3-56; Braccesi, *Sulle rotte di Ulisse: l'invenzione della geografia omerica* (Roma: Laterza, 2010), 14-37. See also Jonathan S. Burgess, "Localization of the Odyssey's Underworld," *Cahiers des études anciennes* 53 (2016): 15-37.

<sup>14</sup> Hesiod mentions Agrius and Latinus as children of Circe and Odysseus (*Theogony*, 1011-1016) and places the Laestrygonians in Sicily in fr. 98. See M.L. West, ed., *Hesiodus. Theogony* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), 433-434.

Most ancient of all these who are reported to have settled in any part of the island were the Cyclopes and Laestrygones; as to whom, however, I am able to tell neither their stock, nor whence they come from nor whither they went, let it suffice as the story has been told by the poets, and as each man has formed his opinion about them.<sup>15</sup>

παλαιάτοι μὲν λέγονται ἐν μέρει τινὶ τῆς χώρας  
Κύκλωπες καὶ Λαιστρυγόνες οἰκῆσαι, ὧν ἐγὼ οὔτε γένος  
ἔχω εἰπεῖν οὔτε ὀπόθεν ἐσηλθον ἢ ὅποι ἀπεχώρησαν·  
ἀρκείτω δὲ ὡς ποιηταῖς τε εἴρηται καὶ ὡς ἕκαστός πη  
γινώσκει περὶ αὐτῶν.

Thucydides insists that he is not the first to locate the Cyclopes in Sicily and the mention of the ποιηταί (maybe Hesiod, as stated above, or other epic poets) suggests that this legend was already known before his time.

In later retellings of this episode, however, the Sicilian landscape seems to acquire specific meanings, depending on the version of the episode chosen by each author. Without strictly following the chronological order, I will focus first on bucolic poetry, because, even if the representation of Polyphemus as a lovesick shepherd is very distant from Homer, the Sicilian landscape has some of the fabulous features included in the *Odyssey*. I will then present the opposite perspective, namely Sicily as a harsh and unwelcoming setting, employed some years earlier by Euripides in his *Cyclops*.

### **An idyllic Sicily**

In adherence with some features of the Homeric description, the setting in Sicily was primarily seen as the epitome of Golden-age scenery. This interpretation was particularly apt for bucolic poetry, and became part of the legend of Polyphemus's love for Galatea. It is difficult to trace the origins of this tale, but it may be related to the mention, attributed to Duris of Samos (4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century),<sup>16</sup> of a shrine

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<sup>15</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Charles Forster Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

<sup>16</sup> Duris of Samos (76), fr. 58, in *Jacoby Online. Brill's New Jacoby, Part II*, ed. Ian Worthington (Leiden: Brill, 2009).



to the nymph Galatea built by Polyphemus on Mount Etna out of gratitude for the rich nourishment of his flocks and their abundance of milk. In turn, Philoxenus of Cythera (active in the 4<sup>th</sup> century) was the earliest known author to focus on the unhappy infatuation of Polyphemus for Galatea. According to what can be inferred from the extant ancient references to his composition (a dithyramb), he set the episode in Sicily, but the fragments do not preserve any details about the landscape.<sup>17</sup>

In the literary tradition that followed, the *locus amoenus* became a fixed *topos* in the courting of Polyphemus. This was the case for the memorable description by Theocritus (11.45-48):<sup>18</sup>

ἐντὶ δάφναι τῆνεϊ, ἐντὶ ῥάδιναὶ κυπάρισσοι,  
ἔστι μέλας κισσός, ἔστ' ἄμπελος ἄ γλυκύκαρπος,  
ἔστι ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ, τό μοι ἄ πολυδένδρεος Αἴτνα  
λευκᾶς ἐκ χιόνος ποτὸν ἀμβρόσιον προῖητι.

There are bays and slender cypresses; there is dark ivy  
and the sweet-fruited wine, and water cold, which  
wooded Etna puts forth for me, from her white  
snowfields, a draught divine.

The list of plants expands the Homeric description, where only laurels and vines are mentioned (*Odyssey* 9.183 and 9.110). The reference to Mount Etna, then, situates the scene in Theocritus's homeland, Sicily. Etna itself is described as "rich in trees" (πολυδένδρεος) and its snowflakes produce fresh water, defined as a "divine beverage" (ποτὸν ἀμβρόσιον), maybe also as a veiled hint to the fertility of the ground.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> On the dithyramb by Philoxenus, see Dana F. Sutton, "Dithyramb as Δραῦμα: Philoxenus of Cythera's 'Cyclops or Galatea'," *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, 13.1 (1983): 37-43; J.H. Hordern, "The Cyclops of Philoxenus," *The Classical Quarterly*, 49.2 (1999): 445-55.

<sup>18</sup> *Theocritus*, ed. and trans. Andrew S.F. Gow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>19</sup> On this description of the *locus amoenus*, see *Theocritus. A selection: Idylls 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 13*, ed. R. Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 235-7. See also Roberto Pretagostini, "Il Ciclope

With the passing of the centuries, the setting of the episode in Sicily and the fabulous features of the land had become so established that Diodorus, while describing the fruitful land of Sicily in connection with the local cult of Demeter, quotes the Homeric description of the Cyclopes' land (*Odyssey*, 9.109-111) as evidence of the overall famous fertility of the land (*Library of History*, 5.2.2):<sup>20</sup>

That the ancient inhabitants of Sicily, the Sicani, were indigenous, is stated by the best authorities among historians, and also that the goddesses we have mentioned (i.e., Demeter and Core) made their first appearance on this island, and that it was the first, because of the fertility of the soil, to bring forth the fruit of the corn, facts to which the most renowned of the poets also bears witness when he writes:

But all these things spring up for them without sowing  
Or ploughing, wheat and barley, and vines  
Which bear the rich clusters of wine,  
And rain of Zeus makes these grow for them.

Indeed, in the plain of Leontini, we are told, and throughout many other parts of Sicily, the wheat men call 'wild' grows even to this day.

τοὺς δὲ κατοικοῦντας αὐτὴν τὸ παλαιὸν Σικανούς  
αὐτόχθονας εἶναι φασιν οἱ νομιμώτατοι τῶν συγγραφέων,  
καὶ τὰς τε προειρημένας θεὰς ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ νήσῳ πρώτως  
φανῆναι καὶ τὸν τοῦ σίτου καρπὸν ταύτην πρώτην ἀνεῖναι  
διὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν τῆς χώρας, περὶ ὧν καὶ τὸν ἐπιφανέστατον  
τῶν ποιητῶν μαρτυρεῖν λέγοντα

ἀλλὰ τὰ γ' ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα πάντα φύονται  
πυροὶ καὶ κριθαί, ἡδ' ἄμπελοι, αἶτε φέρουσι  
οἶνον ἐριστάφυλον, καὶ σφιν Διὸς ὄμβρος ἀέξει.

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di Teocrito," in *Sicilia terra del mito: atti del Convegno nazionale di studi*, ed. G. Nuzzo (Palermo: Grafistampa, 2004), 49-58. These features were later imitated by Vergil, *Eclogues*, 9.39-43.

<sup>20</sup> Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History*, trans. C.H. Oldfather, (London: W. Heinemann, 1939).

ἐν τε γὰρ τῷ Λεοντίνῳ πεδίῳ καὶ κατὰ πολλοὺς ἄλλους  
τόπους τῆς Σικελίας μέχρι τοῦ νῦν φύεσθαι τοὺς ἀγροῖους  
ὀνομαζομένους πυρούς.

As can be seen, Diodorus was so firmly convinced that the Homeric lines referred to Sicily (even if the geographical reference, as we saw, is nowhere stated in the text), that he even used it as a confirmation of the features of the island. Moreover, he adds the detail of the wild growing wheat in his time as a further element that corroborates the Homeric (hidden) hint to the actual Sicily.<sup>21</sup>

This assumption by Diodorus is not surprising, since Sicily, at least from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, was commonly described with emphasis on features like fertility, abundance of water and fruits, and blooming vegetation. To quote only one example, the same association between the presence of the goddess Demeter and the fertility of the island expressed by Diodorus had previously been made by Pindar (*Nemean*, 1.13-15):<sup>22</sup>

Sow, then, some splendor on the island, which Zeus the master  
of Olympus,  
gave to Persephone, and with a nod of his locks assured her  
that he would exalt  
fertile Sicily to be the best of the fruitful earth with her lofty  
and prosperous cities.

σπειρέ νυν ἀγλαΐαν τινὰ νάσω, τὰν Ὀλύμπου δεσπότης  
Ζεὺς ἔδωκεν Φερσεφόνα, κατένευσέν τέ οἱ χαίταις,  
ἀριστεύοισαν εὐκάρπου χθονός  
Σικελίαν πείριαν ὀρθώσειν κορυφαῖς πολίων ἀφνεαῖς.

Thus, as far as we can tell, though the idyllic connotation of Sicily certainly owes much to the bucolic tradition, especially in the case of Theocritus, these features were already celebrated by other authors,

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<sup>21</sup> On the fertility of the plains close to Etna and their suitability for vine-cultivation, see Strabo, *Geography*, 6.2.3 and 6.2.6.

<sup>22</sup> Pindar, *Nemean Odes*, trans. William H. Race (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). On Pindar's celebration of Sicily, see Maria Cannatà Fera, "La Sicilia di Pindaro" in *Sicilia terra del mito*, ed. Giovanni Nuzzo (Palermo: Grafistampa, 2004), 33-47.

certainly due to the practical experiences of the Greeks in Sicily and their vivid impression of a blessed and fertile land.

Contrary to this widespread net of associations, Euripides presented the land where the Cyclopes lived as a harsh and unwelcoming territory with little to offer, and thus the Sicilian setting took a different connotation.

### **The Euripidean Cyclops on the rocks of Etna**

Epicharmus was probably the earliest author to set the scene of a play about the Cyclopes in Sicily. Although the surviving fragments do not preserve any detail on the location of his comedy, the fact that Epicharmus lived in Syracuse, and the existence of a tradition that linked Odysseus's adventures with the West strongly suggests that the poet chose Mount Etna as the dwelling of Polyphemus.<sup>23</sup> The Euripidean drama focuses explicitly on Sicily and Mount Etna, recalled several times in the play and identified as the site of Polyphemus's cave.<sup>24</sup> The following will concentrate on the features of this environment and Polyphemus's characterization within it.

#### *Sicily as the "Rock of Etna"*

The prominence of Etna is stated from the beginning of the play, where it is mentioned as a metonymy for the whole of Sicily. Silenus, who recites the first lines, tells us how he and the satyrs became the servants of Polyphemus and were forced to stay on the island unwillingly (Euripides, *Cyclops*, 19-22):<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Richard Hunter, ed., *Euripides. Cyclops* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 5. The Cyclops's episode was the subject of other (now fragmentary) comedies, but no indication of the setting has been preserved, see S. Douglas Olson, "Cratinus' Cyclops - and Others," *Dionysus ex machina*, 5 (2014): 55-69.

<sup>24</sup> The word Αἴτνη appears three times (*Cyclops* 130, 298, 660); Αἴτναῖος is used four times with reference to the land of Sicily (20, 62, 95, 114); and twice as an epithet for Polyphemus (366, 395). Συκελία appears twice (106, 114 – with Αἴτναῖος); Συκελός twice (95 – with Αἴτναῖος, 703).

<sup>25</sup> All translations of Euripides's *Cyclops* are from *Euripides. Cyclops and major fragments of Greek Satyric Drama*, eds. Patrick O'Sullivan and Christopher Collard (Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 2013).

an easterly gale descending on the ship threw us onto this  
rock of Etna, where the one-eyed children of the sea-god,  
the Cyclopes who kill men, inhabit their isolated caves.

ἀπηλιώτης ἄνεμος ἐμπνεύσας δορί  
ἐξέβαλεν ἡμᾶς τήνδ' ἐς Αἰτναίαν πέτραν,  
ἴν' οἱ μονῶπες ποντίου παῖδες θεοῦ  
Κύκλωπες οἰκοῦσ' ἄντρο' ἔρημ' ἀνδροκτόνοι.

This passage emphasizes the main features of this “Cyclopean” Sicily: its shocking lack of hospitality (its inhabitants are *androktonoi*, “men-killers”), and its desolation (expressed in the adjective *erēmos*). These aspects are recurrent in the play: due to the ferocious attitude of the Cyclopes, their land is called “no friend to guests” (ἄξενόν τε γῆν, *Cyclops*, 91) and the violent manners of its inhabitants are evoked through vivid expressions, such as “the man-eating Cyclopean jaw” (Κυκλωπίαν γνάθον | τὴν ἀνδροβορῶτα, 94-95) or “do they delight in killing and eating men?” (βορᾶ χαιρούσιν ἀνθρωποκτόνω; 127, literally: “do they delight in food made of killed men?”). The desolation of the place, then, emerges in its description by Silenus as a land where there are no cities, but only rocks empty (*erēmoi*) of men (115-116):

Od. But where are the city-walls and the fortification?  
Si. There are none. The headlands are bereft of men, stranger.

Ὅδ. τεῖχη δὲ ποῦ ἔστι καὶ πόλεως πυργώματα;  
Σι. οὐκ ἔστ' ἔρημοι πρῶνες ἀνθρώπων, ξένε.

The focus on the “loneliness” of the territory emerges also by means of the derived noun *erēmia*, which indicates the whole land of the Cyclops: “the Cyclops’s desolate land” (Κύκλωπος... ἔρημίαν, 622).

Moreover, in sharp contrast with the most usual description of Sicily in Greek literature, another significant feature of this Sicilian landscape is the “absence of Demeter,” i.e., agriculture, together with the “lack of Dionysos,” i.e., vine-cultivation (121-124):

Od. Do they sow Demeter’s crop? Or what do they live on?  
Si. On milk, cheese, and the meat of sheep.

Od. Do they have the drink of Bromius, the streams of the grape-vine?

Si. Absolutely not. For that reason, they inhabit a land where there is no dancing.

Ὀδ. σπείρουσι δ' — ἢ τῶ ζῶσι; — Δήμητρος στάχυν;

Σι. γάλακτι καὶ τυροῖσι καὶ μῆλων βορᾶ.

Ὀδ. Βρομίου δὲ πῶμ' ἔχουσιν, ἀμπέλου ῥοάς;

Σι. ἦκιστα· τοιγὰρ ἄχορον οἰκοῦσι χθόνα.

The fact that the Cyclopes live only on the meat and milk from their flocks implies that the land does not offer anything without effort and cultivation: in sharp contrast with the agriculture of Sicily mentioned above, the Euripidean setting does not include “Demeter’s crop” and “the drink of Bromius.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, in the Homeric account, the Cyclopes neither cultivate nor plough the earth (*Odyssey*, 9.108), yet they have grapes that produce wine (9.111).

The total ignorance of wine is a key-motif for the plot of the Euripidean play, enhancing the comic effect of the drunk Cyclops in this scene (*Cyclops*, 488-595), but at the same time it highlights the hard conditions of life on that land, describing further the place (i.e. Sicily) as unwelcoming and the Cyclops as unaware of social conventions.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the absence of wine and Dionysian rites give the satyrs a reason for complaining about the region they live in; they even depict it as a land without dancing (124).<sup>28</sup> This detail serves to underline once more the satyrs’ disdain towards the land

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<sup>26</sup> Agriculture and wine are some of the most important gifts of the gods to humans, frequently evoked together with Demeter and Dionysus in Greek literature; see O’Sullivan and Collard, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 148. The lack of agriculture in Sicily must have sounded strange to the audience, because of the island’s connection with Demeter and importance as a source of grain; see Hunter, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 123.

<sup>27</sup> See Luigi Enrico Rossi, “Il Ciclope di Euripide come κῶμος mancato,” *Maia* 23 (1971): 10-38; M. Napolitano, ed., *Euripide. Ciclope* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2003), 107-8, 138-39; R. Hunter, *Critical Moments in Classical Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 64-67.

<sup>28</sup> The absence of wine and Dionysian rites is frequently repeated in the play, see Euripides, *Cyclops*, 25, 63-81, 139-140, 163-168.

they are confined in, but it is worth noticing that the adjective *achoros*, “without dancing,” is elsewhere used in Greek drama to convey gloom and lack of joy.<sup>29</sup>

On the whole, these harsh features of the land define the setting of Euripides’s play as opposed both to the “idyllic Sicily,” fertile and prosperous, and to the “Golden-age” presentation of the Homeric scenery. The metonymic expressions referred to Sicily, such as “rock of Etna” (Αἰτναίαν πέτραν, 20) and “Sicilian Etnean rock” (Σικελὸν Αἰτναῖον πάγον, 95), enhance the relevance of Mount Etna in this scenery, suggesting also that the harshness of the volcano reflects on the whole territory. Being far from the Greek homeland, Sicily is presented as an uncivilized and barbaric land where customs are not respected and important social values are disregarded. Such features, ultimately, seem to be personified in its main inhabitant, Polyphemos himself: he is called “Etnean” (Αἰτναῖος, 366), and “the shepherd of Etna” (τὸν Αἰτνας μηλονόμον, 660), as if he embodies the harshness of this territory with his own attitude.<sup>30</sup> These aspects will be explored in the following two sections.

### *The impious Cyclops*

The absence of both Demeter and Dionysus matches the scorn of Polyphemos towards the gods and his utter disregard for any human values. This trait, already part of the Homeric characterization of the Cyclops (*Odyssey*, 9.273-278), is especially emphasized in Euripides’s

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<sup>29</sup> E.g.: “Ares, the breeder of tears, with whom there is no dance and no lyre” (ἄχορον ἀκίθαριν δακρυογόνον Ἄρη) in Aeschylus, *Suppliants*, 681, trans. A.H. Sommerstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); “the doom of Hades, with no wedding song, no lyre, no dances” (Ἄϊδος... μοιρ’ ἀνυμέναιος | ἄλυρος ἄχορος) Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1223, trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Says Patrick O’Sullivan, “Dionysos, Polyphemos, and the Idea of Sicily in Euripides’ *Cyclops*,” in *Greek Drama IV*, eds. J. Davidson and D. Rosenbloom (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 2011), 169-89: “the despotic and godless behaviour of Polyphemos, whose Aetnaean identity is emphasized at important moments in the play [should] be read as a further manifestation of a barbaric Sicily, confirming what has been said before his actual appearance” (186).

play, as evident from the verbal confrontation between Odysseus and Polyphemus at *Cyclops*, 285-346. This debate, similar to an *agōn*, features a conflict between two opposing sets of values.<sup>31</sup> Odysseus presents himself and his companions as suppliants (ἰκετεύομεν, 287) and evokes friendship and hospitality as reasons not to kill them: “do not bring yourself to kill friends who have arrived at your cave, and make an unholy meal for your jaws” (μὴ τλῆς πρὸς οἴκους σοὺς ἀφιγμένους φίλους | κτανεῖν βορὰν τε δυσσεβῆ θέσθαι γνάθοις, 288-290). Trying to appeal to Polyphemus’s sense of a common Greek origin, he recalls, unrealistically, that their fighting in the Trojan war defended Poseidon’s temples in Greece (290-294). Polyphemus’s land is anachronistically presented as a Greek territory that benefited from the victory of the Greek army at Troy (295-298):<sup>32</sup>

We did not surrender Greece’s cost to Phrygians, τὰ  
senseless disgrace†. You also share in these things. For  
the land in whose folds you live—under Etna the rock  
that streams with fire—is Greek.

τά θ’ Ἑλλάδος  
τῶσφρον’ ὀνειδῆ† Φρυξὶν οὐκ ἐδώκαμεν.  
ὦν καὶ σὺ κοινοῖ γῆς γὰρ Ἑλλάδος μυχούς  
οἰκεῖς ὑπ’ Αἴτνη, τῇ πυριστάκτω πέτρα.

This claim by Odysseus may have been perceived by the audience as an allusion to contemporary events. The definition of Sicily as “the recesses of Greece” (γῆς γὰρ Ἑλλάδος μυχούς, 297),<sup>33</sup> is surely meant as a hyperbole, while the stress on a military victory that granted freedom to all the Greek territories certainly matches the propaganda in use to describe the Persian wars.<sup>34</sup> At the same time these remarks may carry a reference to the Sicilian expedition.

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<sup>31</sup> On this debate see O’Sullivan and Collard, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 166.

<sup>32</sup> For the textual problem, see Seaford, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 160; O’Sullivan and Collard, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> For the meaning of μυχός here see Hunter, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 160.

<sup>34</sup> As Seaford, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 161, points out, the victory of the Athenians over the Persians was one of their justifications for their empire



Polyphemus's response, instead, focuses on his selfishness and opposition to the gods. He states that he is not threatened by Zeus's thunder (*Cyclops*, 320) and does not think that Zeus is a superior god to himself (321). Polyphemus explains his disregard for the gods by listing the resources that nature spontaneously offers him. As a result, the well-known Golden-age motif is reversed: Polyphemus says that whenever it rains he shelters in his cave, and when snow falls, he covers himself with the skins of wild animals and lights a fire (323-326). Moreover, the ground naturally produces grass for the cattle, his main source of nourishment (332-335):

The Earth brings forth grass willy-nilly to feed my flock. These I sacrifice to no one but myself – never to the gods – and to my belly, the greatest of divinities.

ἡ γῆ δ' ἀνάγκη, κᾶν θέλη κᾶν μὴ θέλη,  
τίκτουσα ποίαν τὰ μὰ παιίνει βοτὰ  
ἀγῶ οὔτινι θύω πλὴν ἐμοί, θεοῖσι δ' οὔ,  
καὶ τῇ μεγίστῃ, γαστρὶ τῆδε, δαιμόνων.

In an impious outburst, eating is presented by Polyphemus as a distorted "sacrifice" to his belly. Since it is inevitable that nature will grant him survival, he has no reason for caring about the gods.<sup>35</sup> Polyphemus's ungodly behavior, together with his dwelling on Mount Etna, is thus consistently evoked throughout the play. Even the killing of Odysseus's companions is defined as a sacrifice "far from an altar," with the rare word ἀποβώμιος (*Cyclops*, 365-366):<sup>36</sup>

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(Thucydides, 6.83). Paganelli, *Echi storico-politici nel 'Ciclope' euripideo* (Padova: Antenore, 1979), 99-102, remarks that in the 5<sup>th</sup> century the Trojan war was often presented as a defensive operation to avoid the enslavement of Greece, rather than an invasion, with the aim of better matching the parallel with contemporary events.

<sup>35</sup> Polyphemus's reasoning may echo contemporary philosophical beliefs about the mechanical development of the world without the intervention of the gods, see Paganelli, *Echi storico-politici*, 35-41.

<sup>36</sup> For the textual problem see Seaford, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 176; O'Sullivan and Collard, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 176-7. The scholiast explains the word with ἄθεος ("god-less"). See Paganelli, *Echi storico-politici*, 37.

Godless †sacrificet of victims,  
†which† the Cyclops of Etna †conduct†, as he rejoices in  
the meat from his guests for food.

ἀποβώμιος τᾶν ἀνέχει θυσίατ  
Κύκλωψ Αἰτναῖος ξενικῶν  
κρεῶν κεχαρμένος βορᾶ.

The same idea of an impious sacrifice is implicit in Odysseus's description of the killing of his companions, where Polyphemus is defined as "butcher from hell hateful to the gods" (τῶ θεοστυγῆι Ἰ Αἴδου μαγείρῳ, 396-397) and he uses the "sacrificial bowls of Etna" (Αἰτναῖά τε σφαγεῖα, 395), where the adjective Αἰτναῖος may further suggest the ritual objects as harsh and brutal.

*Punishment by Etna's fire*

Finally, Mount Etna is also involved in the last part of the play, when the Cyclops is blinded by Odysseus (*Cyclops*, 599-600):

Hephaestus, lord of Etna, burn out your evil neighbour's  
bright eye and be rid of him once and for all.

Ὀδ. Ἥφαιστ', ἄναξ Αἰτναῖε, γείτονος κακοῦ  
λαμπρὸν πυρώσας ὄμμι' ἀπαλλάχθηθ' ἄπαξ

Hephaestus is mentioned as Polyphemus's "neighbor" in accordance with the mythical tradition that placed his workshop underneath Mount Etna (e.g., Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 366-367). He is evoked as a personification of the fire that burns the Cyclops's eye, almost as a form of punishment: the fight between the fire-god, called "Lord of Etna" (ἄναξ Αἰτναῖε), and his evil neighbor (γείτονος κακοῦ) may represent a divine response to Polyphemus's impiety.

From the analysis of these passages, the association between a negative connotation of Sicily and the rude and uncivilized behavior of Polyphemus clearly emerges. It is tempting to search for the implications of such a representation for the Athenian public of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, however, the date of the play is unknown and the evidence does not seem sufficient to advance a definite answer. A reference to the Athenian expedition to Sicily, thus, cannot be confirmed. If the play was composed after 413, the "caves of Etna"

and their cruel inhabitants may have recalled the labors endured by the Athenian army and a negative description of Sicily may have matched the feelings of the audience. On the other hand, it may be argued that the sense of distress after such a failure would have prevented use of this topic in a drama.<sup>37</sup> An earlier date, right before the expedition or in its first year, instead, would overcome this difficulty and still acknowledge Euripides's interest in the Sicilian setting.<sup>38</sup> In any case, the whole issue remains controversial, and further consideration is needed to fully understand the significance of the Etnean landscape.

From a literary point of view, the "monstrous environment" is in perfect agreement with Polyphemus's barbaric behavior, and results in a comic distortion appropriate for a satyr-play.<sup>39</sup> The clash between the Euripidean representation of Sicily and the actual experience of the contemporary audience would have seemed to be a deliberate mockery and would have enhanced the comic effect. Finally, the figure of the Etnean Polyphemus can also be investigated from a mythological point of view, examining the parallels with other figures linked to Mount Etna in Greek myth. This point will be further explored in the last part of this paper.

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<sup>37</sup> O'Sullivan and Collard, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 40-41 and Hunter, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 44-45, assume a late date for the play, based on stylistic parallels with other plays, mostly Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, staged in 409, and on a possible resemblance between *Cyclops*, 222 and Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 1105, staged in 411. On the tragic defeat in Sicily as a motivation for staging a play see Nancy Worman, *Abusive Mouths in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 122. On the feeling of horror among the Athenian audience in remembering the Sicilian expedition, see Richard Seaford, "The Date of Euripides' *Cyclops*," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 161-72, esp. 172, who, after examining different criteria, suggests a date around 409.

<sup>38</sup> Paganelli, *Echi storico-politici*, 132-39, convincingly argues for date of 414-13. However, Dana Sutton, *The Greek Satyr Play*, (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1980), 114, gives an earlier date (424) based on similarities with Euripides's *Hecuba*.

<sup>39</sup> As noted by Sutton, *The Greek Satyr Play*, 153-54, Greek satyr plays are often set in the countryside or in "exotically alien lands."

### **Mount Etna in the Greek mythological tradition**

Other groups of Cyclopes were known in Greek mythology besides the Homeric ones.<sup>40</sup> Outside the Homeric tradition, they were famous for building the “Cyclopean” walls of Mycenae and Tiryns, and Euripides himself refers to them in several plays.<sup>41</sup> In Hesiod the Cyclopes are “similar to the gods” (θεοῖς ἐναλίγκιοι, *Theogony*, 142) and, as the children of Uranus and Gaia, help Zeus against the Titans by forging his weapons, thunder and thunderbolt.<sup>42</sup> They have only one eye in the middle of their forehead (*Theogony*, 139-146):

Then she bore the Cyclopes, who have very violent hearts, Brontes (Thunder), and Steropes (Lightning) and strong-spirited Arges (Bright). Those who gave thunder to Zeus and fashioned the thunderbolt. These were like the gods in other regards, but only one eye was set in the middle of their foreheads; and they were called Cyclopes (Circle-eyed) by name, since a single circle-shaped eye was set in their foreheads. Strength and force and contrivances were in their works.<sup>43</sup>

γείνατο δ' αὖ Κύκλωπας ὑπέρβιον ἦτορ ἔχοντας,  
Βρόντην τε Στερόπην τε καὶ Ἄργην ὀβριμόθυμον,  
οἱ Ζηνὶ βροντὴν τε δόσαν τευξάν τε κεραυνόν.  
οἱ δὴ τοι τὰ μὲν ἄλλα θεοῖς ἐναλίγκιοι ἦσαν,  
μοῦνος δ' ὀφθαλμὸς μέσσω ἐνέκειτο μετώπῳ.

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<sup>40</sup> In antiquity, the Cyclopes were categorized in three groups: “There are three groups of Cyclopes: the Cyclopes who built Mycenae, the ones in Polyphemus’s crowd and the gods” (Κυκλώπων γὰρ γένη τρία· Κύκλωπες οἱ τὴν Μυκλήνην τειχίσαντες· καὶ οἱ περὶ τὸν Πολύφημον· καὶ αὐτοὶ οἱ θεοί; Hellenicus of Lesbos (4), fr. 88, in *Jacoby Online. Brill’s New Jacoby, Part I*, ed. Ian Worthington (Leiden: Brill, 2009). See also Robert L. Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 53-56.

<sup>41</sup> E.g., Euripides, *Heracles*, 944; *Electra*, 1158; *Trojan Women*, 1088.

<sup>42</sup> According to Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.2.1, they also forged Hades’s helmet and Poseidon’s trident.

<sup>43</sup> Glenn W. Most, ed. and trans., *Hesiod. Theogony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Κύκλωπες δ' ὄνομα ἦσαν ἐπάνυμον, οὔνεκ' ἄρα σφέων  
κυκλοτερῆς ὀφθαλμὸς ἕεις ἐνέκειτο μετώπῳ·  
ἰσχὺς δ' ἠδὲ βίη καὶ μηχαναὶ ἦσαν ἐπ' ἔργοις.

This group of Cyclopes is recalled by Callimachus (*Hymn* 3.46-83), who mentions their proper Hesiodic names (Brontes, Steropes, and Arges) and considers them as helpers at Hephaestus's workshop in Lipari.<sup>44</sup> Strength and craftsmanship are the common features of the Hesiodean and wall-building Cyclopes, while the man-eating and barbaric Homeric ones seem to share with them only a name. As for the eyes, while Hesiod states that Zeus's helpers were one-eyed, a characteristic implied in the Homeric narrative, the same trait is never mentioned with regard to the wall-building Cyclopes.

Mindful of this entangled mythical tradition, Euripides probably conflated different elements. The placement of Polyphemus on Mount Etna and the reference to Hephaestus as his neighbor may show a familiarity with the tradition of their working together. Nonetheless, other parallels may explain the Euripidean account of Polyphemus, since he also shares some features with other groups of monsters, most notably the Giants. While keeping Poseidon's paternity, Euripides defines Polyphemus as τὸν μονῶπα παῖδα γῆς ("one eyed son of Earth," *Cyclops*, 648).<sup>45</sup> This genealogy may indicate a conflation between two different traditions. While the Homeric Cyclops was the offspring of Poseidon and the nymph Thoosa (*Odyssey*, 1.70-74), his descent from Gaia—not recorded elsewhere for Polyphemus—may recall the Hesiodic account, where the Cyclopes are mentioned among the children of Uranus and Gaia (*Theogony*, 147-149).<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the definition of Polyphemus as "Earth-born" may mark him as a chthonic monster, with reference to the features of the other offspring of Gaia in Greek myth.

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<sup>44</sup> Callimachus, *Aetia*, ed. Annette Harder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), fr. 113e.17.

<sup>45</sup> Poseidon is mentioned as Polyphemus's father throughout the play: e.g., Euripides, *Cyclops*, 21; 262; 286; 290.

<sup>46</sup> Pentheus is also defined as "Earth-born" by Euripides, *Bacchae*, 543-544; 995-996; 1015-1016; see O'Sullivan and Collard, *Euripides. Cyclops*, 216.

Euripides consistently portrays Polyphemus as impious and hostile to the gods, as noted previously. Though this element was already part of the Homeric narrative, it seems strongly emphasized in the play, suggesting a connection between Polyphemus and the sons of Gaia who had rebelled against Zeus, one of whom is Typhon. The close association with Etna and the punishment they suffer may link Polyphemus with Typhon in particular. He is the youngest son of Gaia according to Hesiod (*Theogony*, 821) and is imprisoned by the gods after his rebellion.<sup>47</sup> His story was first narrated by Hesiod (*Theogony*, 842-868) and, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, his imprisonment underneath Mount Etna inspired both Pindar and Aeschylus.<sup>48</sup>

In *Pythian 1*, Pindar describes at length Typhon's condition:<sup>49</sup> he was an "enemy of the gods" (θεῶν πολέμιος, *Pythian*, 1.15) and, therefore, he is buried underneath the volcano, which is likened to a column holding him down: "And the pillar of the sky holds him down, snow-covered Etna" (κίων δ' οὐρανία συνέχει | νιφόεσσ' Αἴτνα; *Pythian*, 1.19-20). In turn, Typhon throws out of the mountain jets of fire, which are called "Hephaestus's" by metonymy: "That monster shoots up the most terrible jets of Hephaestus" (κεῖνο δ' Ἀφαιίστοιο κρουνοῦς ἔρπετόν | δεινοτάτους ἀναπέμπει; *Pythian*, 1.25-26). This metonymy, though very common in Greek literature, is surely meant to also evoke the traditional association between the god Hephaestus and Mount Etna.<sup>50</sup>

Aeschylus presents the same punishment for Typhon, "crushed under the roots of Etna," while at the top of the mountain Hephaestus forges iron. The rage felt by Typhon will cause an eruption of the volcano (*Prometheus Bound*, 363-370):

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<sup>47</sup> The place of Typhon's imprisonment was not unanimously identified: in *Iliad*, 2.782, he is confined among the Arimi (in Cilicia); according to Hesiod, *Theogony*, 868, he was thrown into Tartarus.

<sup>48</sup> See also Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.6.3.

<sup>49</sup> Typhon is referred to elsewhere in the Pindaric Odes, e.g., *Olympian* 4.6-7. See Sabrina Colabella, "Aitna and Typho's Myth as a Poetic Paradigm" in *Pindar in Sicily*, eds. Heather L. Reid and Virginia M. Lewis (Sioux City, IA: Parnassos Press, 2021), 143-64.

<sup>50</sup> See Cingano in Pindaro, *Le Pitiche*, eds. P. Angeli Bernardini, E. Cingano, B. Gentili, and P. Giannini (Milano: A. Mondadori, 2012), 338.

And now he lies, a sprawled, inert body, near the narrows of the sea, crushed under the roots of Etna; on its topmost peaks Hephaestus sits forging red-hot iron, and from thence, one day, will burst forth rivers of fire, devouring with their savage jaws the smooth fields of Sicily, with their fine crops. Such rage is the rage in which Typhos will boil over.

καὶ νῦν ἀχρεῖον καὶ παράορον δέμας  
κεῖται στενωποῦ πλησίον θαλασσίου  
ἰπούμενος ῥίζαισιν Αἰτναίαις ὕπο·  
κορυφαῖς δ' ἐν ἄκραις ἤμενος μυδροκτυπεῖ  
Ἕφαιστος· ἔνθεν ἐκραγήσονται ποτε  
ποταμοὶ πυρὸς δάπτοντες ἀγρίαις γνάθοις  
τῆς καλλικάρπου Σικελίας λευροῦς γύας·  
τοιόνδε Τυφῶς ἐξαναζέσει χόλον.<sup>51</sup>

Both poets agree in presenting Typhon as an enemy of the gods and in linking his torment to the volcanic activity of Etna by placing him in its folds.

In Euripides's *Cyclops*, the volcanic activity is mentioned only once by means of the adjective "fire-streaming" (πυρίστακτος, 298), yet much emphasis is placed on Polyphemus's blinding by Etna's fire, which is called "Hephaestus" (*Cyclops*, 599), as punishment for the man-eater's impiety. Moreover, as noted by O'Sullivan, the very act of blinding is indicated by verbs meaning "burn" or "smoke": "may the Cyclops be consumed in smoke" (τυφέσθω Κύκλωψ, 655); "burn him in smoke! O burn the shepherd of Etna!" (τυφέτ' ὦ, καιέτ' ὦ | τὸν Αἴτνας μηλονόμον, 659-660).<sup>52</sup>

In addition to this "monstrous" connotation of the Cyclops, the parallel with the Giants also serves as a narrative theme of the plot. In the prologue, Silenus recalls the Gigantomachy as one of the toils he endured on behalf of Dionysos and boasts about his killing of Enceladus (*Cyclops*, 5-8):

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<sup>51</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> See O'Sullivan, "Dionysos," 185.

Then, in the battle against the Earthborn Giants, positioned on your right side as shield-bearer, and smiting Enceladus right in the middle of his wicker shield, I killed him

ἔπειθ' ὅτ' ἀμφὶ γηγενῆ μάχην δορός  
ἐνδέξιός σῶ ποδὶ παρασπιστῆς βεβῶς  
Ἐγκέλαδον ἰτέαν ἐς μέσῃν θενῶν δορί  
ἔκτεινα

Dionysus's fight against the Giants is well attested by other authors as well, but the fight between Silenus and Enceladus is not related elsewhere, because in the most popular version it is Athena who kills him (Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.6.8). This boastful recollection of a heroic adventure made by the shameless Silenus must certainly have sounded laughable to the public, but at the same time this adaptation of the plot may have been introduced by Euripides with the intention of drawing a parallel between Polyphemus and Enceladus. Thus, the fight of Silenus against an earth-born monster is presented as an antecedent for the subject of the play, namely, the struggle with another earth-born creature from whom, at the end, the satyrs will be able to escape together with Odysseus.

### **Conclusion**

From this analysis of how the Odyssean Polyphemus “came to Sicily,” some noteworthy points emerge. The reception of the episode shows that the land inhabited by the Cyclopes was already identified with Sicily in antiquity. The perception of this area varied, however, depending on the way the Cyclops himself was portrayed. The bucolic genre privileged the description of an idyllic Sicily, incorporating some features of the Homeric episode. The passage by Diodorus confirms that the association was easily made based on the main features of the island, considered as the land of Demeter. In contrast to this straightforward interpretation, only Euripides offers a different interpretation of the scenery. Sicily is mostly identified with Mount Etna and the whole territory is presented as a dystopia with barren soil, devoid of agriculture and vine-cultivation. This description clearly emphasizes Polyphemus's savage nature, while at the same time suggesting associations with other characters usually related to Mount Etna: Hephaestus and his Cyclopes-helpers



as well as the earth-born Typhon and his endless torment. Thus, the folklore episode of the encounter with a one-eyed giant, adapted and inserted into Odysseus's wanderings, remained open for further adaptation, acquiring new meanings with each retelling.