

# Sparing nothing: the representation of food in the odyssey

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Homer's epic *The Odyssey* is superimposed on the backdrop of a typical ancient Greek society. As the main character, Odysseus, and his companions travel from place to place on their way to their hometown of Ithaca, various people welcome them in a show of hospitality highly valued in ancient Greece. In large part, such hospitality involves the preparation of feasts, and the offering of each guest ample amounts of food. Some guests, however, naturally take advantage of this hospitality, thus showing their lack of discipline and manners. Although food is positively associated with the Greek tradition of hospitality, Homer uses it in a negative sense in *The Odyssey* to represent the gluttony, lack of self-control, and lack of civility found in various characters.

Upon docking their ship on the island of the Lotus-eaters, Odysseus' men engage in a gluttonous feast of lotus fruit, which causes them to neglect their duties to Odysseus. They are so hypnotized by the delicious taste that "any of them who ate the honey-sweet fruit...was unwilling to take any message back, or to go away, but they wanted to stay there with the lotus-eating people, feeding on lotus, and forget the way home" (IX: 94-97).

Odysseus, the leader of the group – and at this point the only man in full possession of his faculties – finally takes them back "weeping, by force, to the ships...in haste, for fear someone else might taste of the lotus and forget the way home" (IX: 98-102). Without Odysseus, the men would never have been able to find their way back to the ships, and their gluttony would certainly have led to their undoing.

Odysseus' men again show their lack of self-control by slaughtering Helios' cattle for dinner against the orders of Circe. This time, their actions result in disaster. Odysseus attempts to dissuade his companion Eurylochos from hunting the herds by reminding him of Circe's warning: "if you do harm them, then I testify to the destruction of your ship and your companions" (XII: 137-141). Eurylochos, however, disregards Odysseus' warning and tells the others,

All deaths are detestable for wretched mortals, but hunger is the sorriest way to die...Come then, let us cut out the best of Helios' cattle, and sacrifice them to the immortals...we will build a rich temple to the sun god Helios Hyperion...but if, in anger over his high-horned cattle, he wishes to wreck our ship...I would far rather gulp the waves and lose my life in them once for all, than be pinched to death on this desolate island (XII: 340-351).

The men feast on the finest of Helios' cattle, and seven days later they leave the island to embark on the next leg of their journey. Their grave misjudgment is not forgotten by Zeus, however; a great storm comes upon the ship and Odysseus' men are "thrown in the water, bobbing like sea crows, washed away on the running waves" (XII: 403-419). Odysseus mourns the fate of his companions, although he is forced to accept it; "even so he could not save his companions, hard though he strove to; they were destroyed by their own wild recklessness, fools, who devoured the oxen of Helios, the sun god, and he took away the day of their homecoming" (I: 6-9).

As Odysseus and his men continue on their journey, they meet many strange creatures, including the monstrous Cyclops, whose complete lack of civility is displayed by their propensity to eat people without hesitation. When Odysseus encounters one such Cyclops, Polyphemus, and tries to ask him questions, Polyphemus:

[springs] up and [reaches] for his companions, [catches] up two together and [slaps] them, like killing puppies, against the ground...then he [cuts] them up limb by limb and [gets] supper ready, and like a lion, without leaving anything, [eats] them, entrails, flesh and the marrowy bones alike (IX: 287-294).

In an attempt to intoxicate the monster, Odysseus then brings him some wine, which he “recklessly drains” three times (IX: 362). When Polyphemus finally becomes drunk, he falls asleep, “and the wine [gurgles] up from his gullet with gobs of human meat. This is his drunken vomiting” (IX: 371-374). This graphic imagery conveys the Cyclops’ brutality and gluttony as fearsome man-eating creatures.

Odysseus and his men also encounter a race of giants known as the Laistrygones; they seem to be nice people, until they devour some of the men. Upon being pointed in the direction of the Laistrygonian king’s house, Odysseus and his crew find the wife of Antiphates, a fearsome queen as big as a mountain peak. At once she summons King Antiphates, who promptly snatches up and eats one of Odysseus’ companions for dinner (X: 114-116). He then calls to the rest of the Laistrygonian giants, who come “swarming

up from every direction, tens of thousands of them, and not like men, like giants...pelting [the] men with man-sized boulders...and [carrying] them away for their joyless feasting” (X: 118-124). The fearsome creatures destroy all of the ships except that of Odysseus himself, and he barely escapes from the terrible island. Once again, by watching their friends being eaten, the crew of Odysseus experiences firsthand the gluttony so prevalent amongst wild and uncivilized monsters.

Perhaps the most insolent, disrespectful and gluttonous characters in the epic, the prospective suitors of Odysseus’ wife Penelope are often described in various stages of eating. In fact, in one of the very first references to them in the work, the goddess Athene complains about how they “ forever slaughter [Odysseus’] crowding sheep and lumbering horn-curved cattle” (I: 88-92). They also eat greedily at Penelope’s table, drawing resentment from the swineherd Eumaios, who grumbles, “ the fattened swine are devoured by the suitors, who have no regard for anyone in their minds, no pity...they forcibly eat up his property, and spare nothing...and they violently draw the wine and waste it” (XIV: 80-95). Odysseus is similarly angered when he comes home to discover the suitors sitting down to yet another feast, and he decides to murder them before they can indulge themselves once more. He shoots an arrow against Antinoos, who is “ on the point of lifting up a fine two-handled goblet of gold...moving it so as to drink of the wine” (XXII: 8-11) and it spears the suitor in the throat. As he is shot, Antinoos drops the goblet and “ with a thrust of his foot [kicks] back the table from him, so that all the good food [is] scattered on the ground, bread and baked meats together”

(XXII: 19-21). This scene is the culmination of the outrageous gluttony of the suitors and the symbol used to represent it throughout the epic – when the suitors are finally punished for their behavior, the food spills all over the ground, just as their blood spills from them.

The powerful symbol of food as an instrument of gluttony in *The Odyssey* suggests that gluttony is a thing to be avoided; indeed, those in the epic who indulge excessively unfailingly meet with death and destruction. Even Odysseus' own men fall into this trap, as demonstrated by the incidents in the land of the Lotus-eaters as well as in the land of Helios and his cattle. The only factor that saves the men from complete destruction is that their leader, Odysseus himself, is wise enough to abstain from excessive indulgence; he is able to drag his men back to the ship after their lotus feast, and he also escapes the island of Helios with his life, unlike his doomed crew. The fact that Odysseus ultimately triumphs in returning to Ithaka and conquering the suitors suggests that his wisdom in avoiding gluttony helped him in his journey, at least by maintaining his favor in the eyes of the gods. Odysseus' wise leadership and avoidance of the temptation of gluttony carries him to victory, and to a safe and triumphant homecoming.