

Mercedes Aguirre and Richard Buxton. *Cyclops: The Myth and Its Cultural History*. Oxford University Press, 2020, 456 pp., 94 images. ISBN: 978-0198713777.

This book explores the diverse ways in which Cyclopes have been portrayed in both literature and art throughout history, from their first manifestations in Archaic Greece to their most recent recreations in contemporary literature, theater, cinema, and art. The authors take into account the best-known narratives in which Cyclopes appear: the encounter between Polyphemus and Odysseus, as well as the love triangle involving Polyphemus, Galatea, and Acis, but they also include some less recurrent narratives, such as the ones portraying Cyclopes as metalworkers and builders. Three interrelated perspectives, stated in Chapter 1, are adopted to analyze the shifting developments of these narratives: context (literary and artistic productions express different meanings depending on the cultural context in which they are created), themes (the analysis of the main themes aims to create a solid base of the relevant features constituting the myth), and representation (the most significant trends are illustrated with examples belonging to the occidental artistic tradition). The book has two parts: the first one studies the Cyclops in antiquity, paying attention to the themes constituting the myth and its variations, and the second one is an exploration of the different ways in which the creature has been re-imagined after Antiquity, from the Medieval Ages to the Baroque and including, lastly, the modern re-creations of the myth. This work, therefore, is a thorough compilation of the main literary texts and visual representations of the myth but it also presents a critical view on the study of Cyclopes, advocates the investigation of lesser-known narratives and themes of the myth, and points out the never-ending and crucial bonds linking the present to the past. This review will present a summary of the book's contents, as well as highlighting some of the main arguments put forward by the authors during its development.

Before analyzing the main themes articulating Cyclopes' narratives, the authors explain, in Chapter 2, seven ways in which scholars have recently approached the myth. These include the following:

1. Studies aiming to explain the Homeric Polyphemus episode by establishing a comparison with folktales that it resembles. In this sense, scholars have not reached an agreement on establishing which text (the *Odyssey* or ones provided by folkloric tradition) served as the source of inspiration. The authors ask for caution when arriving at conclusions

on this topic, since it is difficult to establish a valid and not arbitrary corpus to prove the priority of one text over the other. Nevertheless, the book analyzes the existence of interesting overlaps between texts over the centuries.

2. Works arguing for the "real" location of the Cyclopes' caves. Despite the popularity of these studies, the authors question their interest: since it is in the essence of a myth to be disconnected from its physical origin, there is something hollow about such approaches.
3. Anthropological approaches that may be useful to understand the complex ways in which humankind, through myth-telling, views society as a whole and its members.
4. Studies on the relationships between images and text, providing evidence of both overlaps and differences between literary and artistic productions.
5. Scientific speculation on the origin of the Cyclops' single eye, a perspective which is dismissed by the authors.
6. Works aiming to explain the multiplicity of the Cyclopes' identities, a complex problem that needs further investigation.
7. Studies on the reception of the myth after antiquity.

Aguirre and Buxton proceed, then, to develop a thorough study on the main themes articulating the different existing narrations, starting Chapter 3 with an analysis of the different landscapes that determine the Cyclopes' occupations. They first examine those places associated with mason-Cyclopes. Authors like Euripides and Pausanias describe them as city-wall builders in Mycenae and Tiryns, or as the creators of funerary mounds, altars, and other objects. Depending on the source, these Cyclopes might come from Lycia or Thrace; the latter is of special interest, given its connotations as a land of barbaric wildness. They are described as "bellyhands," since they work with the sole purpose of gaining their sustenance. Metal-worker Cyclopes portrayed in the texts of Hesiod, Apollodorus, Callimachus, and Virgil are related to mason-Cyclopes. They belong to the underground world, live in caves and grottoes, establish various relationships with Mount Etna, and work on commission but can also become teachers of their skills.

Pastoral-Cyclopes are opposed to but also, in other ways, related to these Cyclopes. To further understand one of the most important narratives (the encounter between Polyphemus and Odysseus), the authors analyze the landscape of the territory inhabited by the Homeric Cyclopes. This place is one of those spaces in the *Odyssey* that belong to the “Wonderland,” the unknown. A complicated and nuanced relationship between the island, its inhabitant, and the sea is established in the Homeric narrative. The cave, nevertheless, continues to be the home and workspace of Polyphemus, as in the case of the smith Cyclopes. In following narrations of the myth (including those by Euripides, Theocritus, Virgil, Ovid, and Philostratus, among other writers), the critics focus their attention on variations on the treatment of these two spaces (the sea and the cave). In visual representations, the natural elements present in Polyphemus’ stories are mostly portrayed in a simple and schematic way, since they serve a symbolic purpose: to show the physical and symbolic distances between Polyphemus and Galatea. Other natural elements are used to signify the opposition between wildness and civilization. Lastly in this chapter, the authors discuss the relationships between Cyclopes and Sicily, a connection that other scholars have previously studied. Nevertheless, one subject has been partially overlooked in these accounts: the Cyclops is repeatedly linked to Mount Etna and fire, according to Aguirre and Buxton.

Chapter 4 pays attention to the characteristics and variations of the Cyclops’ physique. Although the main element associated with this creature today is monocularity (which is, of course, widely discussed in the book), Aguirre and Buxton emphasize other qualities, such as size, hairiness, and ugliness. On these matters, they start by commenting on the frequent and diverse appearances of extreme sized individuals (big or small) in myths, folklore, fantasy, and science fiction narratives. To express the hugeness of Cyclopes in art and literature, writers and artists make use of both comparison and perspective. Colossal size is related to excess in all senses, especially to gluttony, alcoholism, and strength. The critics discuss, on this last matter, existing overlaps between Cyclopes and Heracles. Hairiness, on the other hand, is linked to wildness, and both artists and writers often establish a link between the wild landscape inhabited by the Cyclopes and their hairy bodies. In visual representations, hair can be found either on the face or covering the entire body.

After analyzing size and hairiness in both literature and visual representations, the critics take on the task of explaining the meanings behind Cyclops’ monocularity and, to do so, they establish the symbolic significations of the eye from a cross-cultural perspective and explain, afterwards, the meaning of this element in the Greco-Latin context. On this matter, it is important to notice the polysemic nature of the eye: it can signify both protection (in Egyptian iconography, for example) and destructiveness (the belief in the “Evil Eye” is present in many cultures). This apparent contradiction also occurs in Greek sources, where the eye represents

the surveillance of the gods (Apollo) but is also related to destruction (Medea). The critics point out other overlaps between cultures, such as the presence of a third eye in both Hinduism and the iconography related to Zeus or the symbolic importance given to blinding in the Greco-Latin context. On this last matter, Aguirre and Buxton explain the relationship between sight and knowledge (Plato) and the often-portrayed paradox of the blind prophet: blindness signifies the presence of an individual’s extraordinary capacities (in music, poetry or divination), but it is often also a punishment for exceeding the limits set by the gods and fate. Other ocular oddities, commonly present in Greek art and literature, include the representation of independent eyes (especially on ships) and the descriptions of single-eyed individuals (a flaw often seen as a sign of otherness and a reason for mocking). Nevertheless, monocularity in Cyclopes is perceived as natural, not as the result of an accident.

Aguirre and Buxton proceed to analyze the Hesiodic and Homeric references to the eye of this creature and conclude that, there is a significant difference in the importance given to the description of this element. Hesiod emphasizes the centrality and circularity of the eye, whereas Homer does not consider these characteristics as something relevant: since this information is traditionally well-known, there is no need to draw special attention to it. The blinding process, on the other hand, is extensively described in the *Odyssey*, because it permits the introduction of important symbolic elements into the narrative (touch, the olive-wood stake, and teamwork, among others). They take into account texts by Euripides and other Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic authors in order to analyze the meanings behind the Cyclops’ single eye. In Euripides’ case, the blinding process is comparable to Orion’s story, since it is used to punish sexual transgressions. Aguirre and Buxton point out that the magnificent eye-ballet will increasingly gain the favor of both writers and artists. The direction of the Cyclops’ and other characters’ gazes develops as a main theme in the written articulation of the myth (present in Virgil’s and Ovid’s texts), as well as in visual representations. The topic of ugliness in antiquity is related to abnormalities of the shape and immoral conduct. Aguirre and Buxton point out that the Cyclops is not perceived as ugly because of his size— Greco-Roman gods are also described as big—but because of bodily deformity and other reasons, causing mockery and repulsion. In many narratives Polyphemus tries to compensate for his repulsiveness with his wealth (Theocritus) or simply denies it, as does Galatea to avoid the criticism of her Nereid friends (Ovid).

The book next analyzes themes related to Cyclopic lifestyle and includes discussions on subsistence, diet, social interactions and monstrosity. The authors explain the negative perception of herding in ancient thought, an activity related to instability, indolence and submission of humankind to nature. Nevertheless, the most extensive occupation of Cyclopes is herding and the *Odyssey* does not portray it negatively. Analyzing

the treatment of this topic in the Homeric text, the critics point out the puzzling changes that take place in Polyphemus' routine when the Greeks arrive, as well as the symbolic meanings present when Odysseus and his men escape under the rams. Although less prominent in Euripides' work, pastoralism is also a part of the Polyphemus-Acis-Galatea narratives, where the Cyclops often forgets his herd because of his incessant observation of his lover. The discussion on this topic in visual representations of the myth revolves around the different sizes of the animals in depictions of the escaping of the Greeks. Pastoralism partially dictates the Cyclops' diet since cheese and milk are very relevant in most of the narratives. On this topic, Aguirre and Buxton highlight the importance of food due to its symbolic meaning in both literature and anthropological studies. In Greco-Roman tradition, food serves a ritual purpose, as a sacrifice to deities. Even though Polyphemus does not care for the gods (as later discussed in the book), he still has his own dietary practices and rituals, which often affect the way in which he eats his human victims: raw or cooked, the various narrations and visual representations of the myth portray anthropophagy in different ways. The presence or absence of wine is also analyzed in Homer's and Euripides' texts. Food also plays a primary role in the other main story portraying Polyphemus, since the main reason that causes the Cyclops to love Galatea is, precisely, that she reminds him of milk and cheese.

On the topic of social interaction, Aguirre and Buxton note a distinct difference between Cyclopes who cooperate with one another (smiths and masons) and Cyclopes who do not (herdsmen). There is no political structure in the territory inhabited by Polyphemus and the different narratives of the myth show the lack of reciprocity in the form of lack of hospitality (the laws of hospitality are broken by both Polyphemus and the Greeks), communication problems (the Cyclops are unable to understand Polyphemus when he asks for help after the blinding), not-reciprocated gaze and not-correspondence of love in the Polyphemus-Acis-Galatea narrative. Having analyzed the implications of this theme in this last case, Aguirre and Buxton conclude that the representation of the consummation of love in visual arts is "imaginatively unsatisfying" (p.174), since it ruptures one of the most important themes articulating the myth. To conclude the chapter, they address different questions regarding Cyclopes' monstrosity. Although described as human, these creatures present physical abnormalities and conduct that draw them closer to other monsters. Another puzzling matter is the non-hereditary aspect of monstrosity: because Cyclopes often descend from gods and there is no description of their children, the causes of their physical abnormalities remain unclear.

There is ambiguity in the relationship between Cyclopes and the gods, as the book repeatedly points out. In Chapter 6, dedicated to this topic, Aguirre and Buxton discuss the divine nature of Cyclopes expressed in most sources (which consider them creatures born from Uranus and Gaia). There is not a clear agreement

on this aspect, however, since some texts describe Cyclopes as mortal. On the other hand, it is unclear whether all of them have a marine origin or if it is only Polyphemus who descends from Poseidon. The choice of this deity as the father of a Cyclops is not arbitrary: his offspring usually have an unconventional shape or monstrous characteristics. After explaining these relationships, Aguirre and Buxton address and analyze an existing contradiction: these creatures are closely related to divinity (because of their size and genealogy) but they do not pay tribute to the gods, nor do they respect or fear them. One very interesting source written by Nonnus portrays how the Cyclopes try to imitate the gods but fail and, consequently, lose the war against them.

Chapter 7 discusses the different etymologies behind certain names articulating the myth, such as "Cyclops," "Polyphemus," "Galatea," "Outis," and "Acis." Before studying each noun, the authors address the importance of etymology in Greek myths and their tradition, noting that it is possible to find many different etymologies for the same name and often one interpretation is not clearly more valid than another. They draw some of their most interesting conclusions from the study of Polyphemus' name which, interestingly, could be also applied to Odysseus, the one with "many voices" and conflicting identities. Aguirre and Buxton explain the language trick Odysseus plays on Polyphemus when he introduces himself as "Nobody." The examination of this hoax in its original Homeric language allows the reader to fully understand the brilliance of this passage and the importance of the final revelation of Odysseus' name at the end of book 9. Lastly, another interesting etymological discussion demonstrates the relationship of Galatea's name to both dairy products and calm sea.

The relationship between "the one whiter than milk" and Polyphemus is analyzed in Chapter 8, paying special attention to the different gaze games between the Cyclops, Galatea and Acis, which are described in various sources of the myth. The presence of the young lover not only creates the scope to explore love sickness (which occurs when Polyphemus' love is not reciprocated), but also jealousy in its many forms. Further discussion is added to a topic previously mentioned: Galatea's reciprocity or rejection of Polyphemus in both art and literature. In order to cure his lovesickness, the Ogre often turns to music, which can be, depending on the text, good or bad. Due to its pastoral connotations, the pan pipes become a staple instrument for the Cyclops, who uses them to seduce Galatea or to cure his love sickness, often failing at both tasks. A very interesting last note speaks about the presence of the theme of fire when describing Polyphemus' burning (or even, volcanic) love for the Nereid.

Chapter 9, the last one discussing the main themes present in the ancient sources of the myth, starts by presenting the different genres that shape Polyphemus' story, including epic, historiography, and satyr play. Aguirre and Buxton also point out the absence of tragic narrations of the myth: although the confrontation

between monstrous creatures and heroes may be found in Greek tragedy, the genre primarily explores inevitable familial catastrophe. As a result, encounters with monsters can be used as an excuse to speak about fate, not a main topic in tragedy. In order to find a rewriting of Polyphemus' story that explores more complex and ambiguous topics, one must wait until later on in the history of myth telling. When speaking about genre in art, Aguirre and Buxton note that, although some examples of context shaping the tenor of the artistic product may be found (the most interesting ones are discussed), it is generally difficult to make substantial comments on this topic and it is easy to fall into mere speculation. Narrative voice varies from one source to another shaping the different presentations of Cyclops' myth. Some interesting points are made when speaking about the ways in which Odysseus tailors his story, so it is well received by the Phaeacian hosts who are listening to it and the complexity of narrative voices in Virgil's, Theocritus', and Ovid's narratives of the myth. The second half of the chapter further develops a subject already introduced: comparisons and contrasts between different types of Cyclops. Although troubling for today's scholars, Cyclopean diversity is not considered a contradiction in ancient accounts. The discrepancies between Greek and Roman authors (Hesiod, Homer, Virgil, Statius and Euripides) involve themes such as social interaction (or lack thereof) or the different uses given to rocks. Nevertheless, overlaps between narratives can also be found when speaking about the importance given to touch, the repeated presence of the cave as a space related to isolation and primordiality and the use of fire as an element linked to both creation and destruction.

Aguirre and Buxton argue that this diverse range of characteristics and themes related to the Cyclops offered the opportunity to reconsider and rewrite the myth, attracting the interest of later writers and artists. The second part of the book further analyzes works created after Antiquity, starting with representations of Cyclopes developed during the Middle Ages and the Baroque. The authors consider three strands in medieval representations of monstrosity: discussion about the location of monstrous peoples, often believed to live far away; religious debate on the acceptance of monstrosity as a part of God's creation or the rejection of it due to its links to Cain or the Devil; and anthropological studies on physical abnormalities that make creatures monstrous, marking them out as wild. Aguirre and Buxton make an important point on the topic of othering: it occurs not only in occidental cultures, but also in other contexts. They analyze processes of de-civilization in Chinese and Ukrainian texts and point out the existence of skepticism towards the belief in monsters during the Middle Ages. Missionaries and personalities such as Thomas More and Thomas Blundeville rejected the possibility of encountering monsters but, despite these doubtful voices, the re-imagination of Cyclops' myth never ceased. In fact, allegorical and moralizing recreations of the encounter between Odysseus and Polyphemus or the relationship

between the Cyclops and Galatea flourish, due to the medieval scholars' interest in uncovering wisdom and truth in Greco-Roman texts. The interpretations of the myth are often plural and contradictory since multiple readings show the wisdom of the critic and the richness of the text. This part of the book analyzes the main allegorical readings of the myth developed in the Medieval period and the Baroque, taking into account both pastoral and metal-working Cyclops. Aguirre and Buxton argue the existence of a storytelling network that would allow us to explain the shared tale types throughout Europe and beyond, although it is difficult to draw a concrete map explaining the overlaps between the Cyclops myth and other similar tales in folklore. In art, many depictions of Polyphemus also have allegorical interpretations and it is common to find different scenes of the story juxtaposed, often adding modern touches to elements such as clothing and weapons. Later works often do not depict Cyclopes as monsters. Monstrosity and hybridism are better represented in gardens during the Renaissance and Baroque period since portraying excess in natural spaces was more acceptable than doing so in more decorous places. Aguirre and Buxton proceed to describe some of the most incredible sculptural ensembles depicting Cyclopes, which often included intricate engineering that allowed the structures to move or play music. The myth is also present in Baroque and Early Modern opera, among other musical genres.

Chapter 11 discusses modern Cyclopes. Two very different retellings of the myth are especially interesting: Giambattista Vico's academic formality in his explanation of the Cyclops' role in the development of humanity strongly contrasts with Victor Hugo's take on the myth in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Quasimodo is analyzed as an urban Cyclops, since Victor Hugo masterfully plays with different themes of the myth, including the network of gazes, fire, and the opposition between hearing and deafness to achieve a fruitful union between the grotesque and the sublime in his novel. During the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, artistic depictions of the myth are diverse, ranging from the breathtaking and raging Polyphemus painted by Arnold Böcklin to the dreaming or even child-like Cyclopes of Moreau and Redon. The myth makes a more subtle appearance in the works of Adolf Menzel and Maurice Denis. Towards the end of the XIXth century, the myth starts to be portrayed beyond the confines of the ancient narratives. In some works, it is difficult to determine a direct link to the myth and the title plays an important role in the interpretation of the piece of art. A perfect example of interpretative indeterminacy is discussed in relation to Redon's paintings, whose sources of inspiration include the myth but are not restricted to it: science, folklore and literature also may help to read his work. Cyclopes attract the attention of Surrealist artists as well, who consider the act of blinding as a symbol of introspection. Aguirre and Buxton also comment on the only work featuring a female-Cyclops (painted by Meret Oppenheim), and Jean Tinguely's and Niki de Saint Phalle's monumental kinetic sculp-

ture, among other contemporary works, before discussing the presence of the myth in modern literature and cinema. They take into account widely reviewed works, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, alongside less-studied works, including different post-colonialist re-writings of the myth. Finally, the authors note the different levels of convincingness displayed in existing cinematic depictions of the myth: although some examples lack the depth and complexity of artistic or literary manifestations, it is important to value their capacity to arouse

the viewer's curiosity towards Cyclopes and the study of myths.

The book satisfactorily answers the proposed question, "In what other ways have people imagined the Cyclopes, in the ancient world and subsequently?" (p. 373) and, although, as the authors note, more research is needed to fully understand the impacts of the myth after antiquity, it succeeds at explaining the relationships between literary and visual manifestations of the myth from Antiquity to contemporary times.

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