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Odysseus and the Cyclops: Constructing Fear in Renaissance Marriage Chest Paintings

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Abstract: Recent scholarship addressing access to Homer's epics during the Italian Renaissance has illuminated the unique importance of visual narratives for the dissemination and interpretation of material associated with the Trojan War and its heroes. This article looks at early fifteenth-century images deriving from the Odyssey that were painted for marriage chests (*cassoni*) in the popular Florentine workshop of Apollonio di Giovanni. Focusing on Apollonio's subnarrative of Odysseus' clash with the Cyclops Polyphemus (the *Cyclopeia*), I argue that Apollonio showcased this archetypal tale of a failed guest–host relationship to explore contemporary anxieties associated with marriage, an institution that figured prominently in the political and economic ambitions of fifteenth-century patriarchal families.

Keywords: cassone; Apollonio di Giovanni; narrative painting; Renaissance; Homer; Odyssey; Odysseus; Polyphemus; Xenia; hospitium; marriage; dowry

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Recent scholarship addressing access to Homer's epics during the Italian Renaissance has illuminated the unique importance of visual narratives for the dissemination and interpretation of material associated with the Trojan War and its heroes. Fifteenth-century fascination with Odysseus (Latin, Ulysses), the eponymous hero of the *Odyssey*, is attested to by paintings created to embellish the *cassoni* (marriage chests) assembled in Apollonio di Giovanni's thriving Florentine workshop. Unfortunately, "reading" these works in the social context for which they were constructed has been hampered by a paucity of quattrocento Homeric exegesis; Greek literacy in Western Europe fell along with the Roman Empire, and its loss proved a frustrating obstacle to humanists eager to experience Homer's work firsthand and free from the distortions of translators. In 1440, Florentine chancellor Leonardo Bruni despaired, "for 700 years now, no one in Italy has been able to read Greek."[1] Unable to appreciate Homer qua Homer, quattrocento commentators revered him as a font of enlightenment whose significance lay primarily in the nourishment of later literary and philosophical traditions.[2] Angelo Poliziano, at the time unequalled in Florence as both a scholar of ancient Greek texts and an advocate for their study, celebrated the poet primarily as "the seer, the author and source of all learning and wisdom."[3] Renaissance classicists believed his influence to have achieved its full florescence in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the exemplar nonpareil of the epic form, and Robin Sowerby and others have

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1 Quoted and trans. from (Bruni 2010, p. 812). For the attempts of prominent quattrocento humanists to grapple with ancient Greek and its translations, see (Kircher 2014); and (Botley 2004).

2 See, for example, (Ford 2007); and (Grafton 1992).

3 Angelo Poliziano, "In Explanation of Homer," quoted and trans. in (Clarke 1981, p. 63). See (Poliziano 2007); also (Poliziano 2004, pp. 68–109).

demonstrated that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century interest in Homer was born of, and principally fueled by, a profound absorption with Virgil.[4]

The limitations that resulted in Homer being "praised rather than analyzed" (Pontani 2007, p. 379) were likely to have freed painters and their patrons to selectively construct narratives whereby the *Odyssey* could be rendered relevant and palatable to Renaissance viewers. Michelle Zerba has convincingly argued that Apollonio included details in his paintings that, though not found in Homer's text, would be recognized as culturally significant by his audience.[5] She observes that the painter's medium allowed him to centralize and expand upon the roles played by the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa in his narrative, thereby incorporating her into "an idealized reflection of the Florentine marriage ritual." (Zerba 2017, p. 847) In this way, he facilitated viewer identification with the characters and events of ancient epic, linking "visual and literary art with the living world of women." (Zerba 2017, p. 835)

Nausicaa and the Phaeacians belong to the second half of the *Odyssey*, among the human women and cultures Odysseus returns to *after* his 'wanderings' among the fantastical and supernatural. The following study is rooted in the argument that Apollonio not only reconstructed the *Odyssey's* human milieux to engage with the complexities of Renaissance betrothal and marriage, but the nonhuman milieux as well. As his depictions of Odysseus' encounters in the latter realms are too numerous to be treated in a single article, I will focus on the adventure with which Apollonio began all of his known *Odyssey* narratives: the hero's clash with the Cyclops Polyphemus (the *Cyclopeia*). I suggest that Apollonio showcased this archetypal tale of a failed 'guest–host relationship' (Greek, *xenia*; Latin, *hospitium*) to explore contemporary anxieties associated with the institution that figured most prominently in the political and economic ambitions of fifteenth-century patriarchal families: The arranged marriage of children. The narratives he constructed reflect not only the aspirational, but also the fraught nature of alliances forged by marital unions—the success of which, like the 'guest–friendships' of antiquity, was heavily dependent on the good faith of strangers.

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Apollonio's extant *Odyssey* panels are now in the Art Institute of Chicago (Figure 1), the collection of the Royal Wawel Castle in Kraków (Figures 2 and 3), and the Frick Pittsburgh. Consensus holds that the works (ca. 1430–1440) were painted by the master himself and were originally set into the fronts of elaborately painted and gilded *cassoni* commissioned as gifts by wealthy Tuscans for their newlywed children.[6] Constructed in pairs, these large, lavish chests played both a symbolic and utilitarian role in the lives of patrician family members. Initially, they were filled with some of the luxury items that comprised the bride's painstakingly negotiated trousseau and dowry.[7] The heavily laden *cassoni* were then carried ceremonially from the house of the bride's father to that of her new husband, where they were used for storing clothing and other household goods. As fixtures in the marital bedroom, marriage chests were available to be viewed not only by the men, women, children, and servants of the household, but by extended family, friends, and other visitors. These viewers would have brought a wide range of experience (educational and otherwise) to their understanding of *cassone* paintings; the following analysis does not, therefore, preclude the possibility of alternate 'readings' of the *Cyclopeia* narrative that would reflect this breadth of experience.

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4 (Sowerby 1997). See also (Wilson-Okamura 2010, esp. pp. 124–32). Of course, the myth of Troy endured in other literary forms; see (Dué 2005); and (Montiglio 2011).

5 (Zerba 2017). This phenomenon has also been recognized in Apollonio's treatment of Virgil's *Aeneid*; see, for example, (Franklin 2014); and (Morrison 1992).

6 For attribution history and dating of these panels, see (Miziolek 2006, p. 58).

7 For scholarship and comprehensive bibliographies related to Renaissance *cassoni* and their decoration, see (Baskins et al. 2008); (Franklin 2006); and (Baskins 1998).

Figure 1. Apollonio di Giovanni, *The Adventures of Odysseus* (1435–40), *cassone* front, tempera on panel (by permission of The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY).

Figure 2. Apollonio di Giovanni, *The Adventures of Odysseus* (1430–40), *cassone* front, tempera on panel, by permission of Kraków, Royal Wawel Castle.

Figure 3. Apollonio di Giovanni, *The Adventures of Odysseus* (1430–40), *cassone* front, tempera on panel, by permission of Kraków, Royal Wawel Castle.

The decisive majority of painted *cassone* narratives drew on ancient Latin and late medieval Italian texts that, being widely read, could be effectively employed to engage—in a manner that variously reinforced or challenged—the social and political power structures of Tuscan republics. Many of these narratives treated themes relevant to marriage and/or gender relations and expectations, and thereby became continuous reminders to present and future members of the household of the far-ranging ramifications of marital unions. As Homer's *Odyssey* was *not* a commonly read text, visual narratives featuring Odysseus represent not only an art historical conundrum, but a neglected facet of the *nachleben* of a canonical Western epic.

Of course, any patron who did have an interest in commissioning imagery related to the *Odyssey* had potential access to a variety of readable ancient and medieval source materials. Various of Odysseus' exploits had become legendary by the time humanists endeavored to tap their ancient source, and this material was employed to diverse literary ends. Medieval vernacular romances, for example, relied primarily on the Latin prose narratives of Dictys of Crete and Dares of Phrygia, as well as a highly condensed version of the *Iliad* (*Ilias latina*) written in Latin hexameters by Baebius Italicus

in the first century AD.[8] The *Cyclopeia* Virgil included in the *Aeneid* would certainly have been familiar. Further, although the *ad verbum* translations commissioned of the native Greek speaker Leontius Pilato by Giovanni Boccaccio (at Francesco Petrarch's request) were widely decried, few attempts were made to improve on Pilato's efforts, and Petrarch's annotated manuscript, comprising the whole of the *Iliad* and most of the *Odyssey*, was copied and read throughout the quattrocento.[9]

Apollonio's Chicago panel comprises a complete narrative that evenly divides the hero's adventures between tales related in the wanderings (*apologoi*) section of the *Odyssey* (Books 9–12) and those that follow his return to the human world.[10] The two Kraków panels expand upon the Chicago panel; conversely, the latter may represent a condensed version of the former.[11] The Frick panel is the surviving second half of a pendant pair and, because it deals primarily with Odysseus' homecoming to Ithaca via Phaeacia, will not be discussed here.[12] As most documented *cassoni* have been destroyed or dismantled, surviving panels are thought to represent a large body of lost work; as such, *Odyssey cassone* imagery would have played a role in both reflecting and shaping Renaissance reception of Odysseus (and, to some extent, Homer) in patrician households. Apollonio's narratives are the more potentially consequential for having been developed without the benefit of visual precedents; neither illuminated manuscripts nor independent paintings of the adventures of Odysseus are believed to have been available to fifteenth-century Western Europeans before Apollonio painted his *cassoni*.[13]

The Chicago and first Kraków panel both begin with episodes from the *Cyclopeia*, followed in the Kraków narrative by *apologoi* scenes in which Odysseus meets Circe, Scylla, the Sirens, Hermes, and Calypso. Of the Chicago panel wanderings, only the *Cyclopeia* and Sirens are foregrounded, while Circe and Calypso are minimally referenced in the background. Visually dividing the realms of the fantastical from the human in both the Chicago and Kraków narratives is a scene in which the goddess Ino hovers over the naked Odysseus, who, bereft of fleet and companions, is poised to drown beside his destroyed raft. She hands him a veil that will protect him until he is able to reach the Phaeacian shore, where he is shown meeting the Princess Nausicaa and her attendants. He is then depicted riding with the princess in a triumphal chariot and feasting with her parents and their courtiers as an honored guest. The final scenes show Odysseus' return to Ithaca, where his wife Queen Penelope is weaving in order to hold at bay the suitors who seek to usurp her husband's throne. Odysseus is then shown with his old servant (the first to recognize him), and, in the Kraków panel, driving the suitors out of Ithaca.

It should be noted that, in choosing to begin his narratives with the *Cyclopeia*, Apollonio either omits or transposes much of the material in Books 1–8 of the *Odyssey*. The first four books of the epic (the *Telemacheia*), which describe the spiraling destruction of the Ithacan court and the voyages made by Odysseus' son, Telemachus, to find his father, are eliminated altogether. Penelope's plight is moved to the end of the *cassone* narratives, as are Odysseus' experiences among the Phaeacians, which flank the *apologoi* section of Homer's text. It is also notable that the *Cyclopeia* is not even the first wandering to

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8 For a good overview of ancient and medieval treatments of the character of Odysseus, see (Stanford 1963). See also, for example, (Dué 2005); and (Montiglio 2011).

9 Florentine Chancellor Coluccio Salutati, for example, found these translations, in which Latin was interpolated word-for-word above the Greek, "barbarous and unsophisticated ... bloodless and inelegant." Quoted from a letter written to Antonio Loschi in 1392, trans. Sowerby, "Humanist Failure," (Sowerby 1997, p. 57). Sowerby finds Pilato's work to read "strangely with many awkward and unidiomatic Latin expressions" that "do not consistently provide a reliable key to the primary meaning" (Sowerby 1997, p. 186). For the humanist response to Pilato, see also (Pertusi 1964); (Sowerby 1996); and (Fabbri 1997). Pier Candido Decembrio's partial revision (c.1440) and Lorenzo Valla's prose translation of the *Iliad* (c.1444) did little to improve on Pilato's; see (Sowerby 1997, "Humanist Failure," p. 186). Petrarch's Pilato manuscripts are now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (ms lat. 7880(1) and 7880(2)).

10 This panel's pendant has not been identified; its subject matter therefore remains unknown.

11 A fourth panel adaptation of the first Kraków panel is now in the Museo Stibbert, Florence. The current whereabouts of two other similar adaptations are unknown, though they have been preserved through photographs. *Odyssey* panels have been catalogued by (Schubring 1923); and (Callmann 1974).

12 The only figure depicted from the *apologoi* in this panel is Calypso, who prepares Odysseus' boat for his journey home. Another small fragment of a *cassone* painting attributed to Apollonio and identified as *Scene from the Odyssey: Calypso and Hermes* is in the Harvard Fogg Museum.

13 (Callmann 1974, p. 17); (Miziolek 2006, "'Odyssey' *Cassone* Panels," p. 66). For the Kraków panels, see also (Miziolek 2016).

be related in the *Odyssey*, but the third. Apollonio has chosen to bypass Odysseus' encounters with the Kikonians (whom the Greeks rape, murder, and pillage soon after leaving Troy) and the Lotus-eaters (whose apathy-inducing flowers are ingested by a number of the hero's men). These tales were most likely omitted because they reflect negatively on Odysseus' character and capacity for leadership. The Kikonian episode demonstrates Odysseus' penchant for violence in the service of personal gain and glory, an inclination that did not accord with the cardinal virtues of temperance and justice promoted by Renaissance humanists.[14] The adventures with the Kikonians and Lotus-eaters both chronicle the escalating tensions between the increasingly disdainful Odysseus and the men who frequently chose not to follow his orders.

The selective excision of much of Odysseus' journey aligns with his absence from *uomini famosi* (famous men) compendia and portrait cycles. These literary and pictorial genres proliferated during the Renaissance in emulation of the ancient phenomenon of employing models of virtuous behavior to communicate unchanging moral truths.[15] There is, therefore, no indication that Odysseus was perceived as exemplary at the time Apollonio's *cassone* panels were painted. In spite of the structural parallels recognized as existing between the epics of Homer and Virgil, the characterization of their heroes differed in a number of crucial respects. Aeneas, a shining model of civic duty, loyalty, and selfless leadership, was acclaimed a *vir perfectus*—an exemplar whom the Florentine humanist Cristoforo Landino believed Virgil created to be "completely perfect in all respects so that we all would consider him to be a unique example of how to lead our lives."[16] As Jane Everson notes, the struggle of Virgil's hero is a public one, concerned "with universal issues of politics and society—how to establish peace, rule with justice, defend the right." (Everson 2001, p. 62) By contrast, Odysseus' journey is framed as a predominantly personal ordeal in which he often exhibits extremes of vanity, selfishness, deceit, and impulsivity. As a leader, he is frustrated by the behavior of his men and distances himself from their failings and frailties. It was for this very reason, W. B. Stanford argues, that the Romans of antiquity established an origin myth whose genealogy flowed from Aeneas rather than Odysseus, while William Scovil Anderson observes, "it would have been inconceivable [for the Romans] to disregard the guilt of a leader who returned alone without his men."[17]

Access to ancient *Oydssey* commentary appears to have been negligible during the tre- and quattrocento, and the scattered and complex observations of the late medieval luminaries Dante and Petrarch, who did not read Greek, were most strongly informed by Virgil's *Aeneid* and Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum*.[18] While undoubtedly of interest to quattrocento humanists, their responses to Homer's adventurer were highly personal and lay primarily in the perception of a shared but problematic desire to surrender the soul to an all-consuming quest for knowledge. Dante notably consigns Odysseus to the eighth pit of the eighth circle of hell for, among other things, the fraudulent cunning that enabled him to engineer the Trojan Horse—the character trait of which Odysseus is most

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[14] A prominent and often-cited exemplar of these virtues in Renaissance Florence was the Roman general Scipio Africanus. Although a brilliant military mind, he was most frequently commemorated in the visual arts for refusing both to deflower a young virgin and accept ransom for her return. "The Continence of Scipio" was celebrated in *cassone* panels as well as in portraits of *uomini famosi*, which functioned as visual analogs of *viri illustri* encomia. The inscription beneath one such portrait reads, "A young girl was offered to me, superb booty; I would have been conquered, but I, who beat my enemies in war, conquered myself with reason: thus, I am worthy of a double triumph." For this and other Scipio imagery, see (Baskins 2002, inscription on p. 113); also (Kanter 2000).

[15] For Renaissance *uomini famosi/donne illustri* cycles, see, for example, (Joost-Gaugier 1982, 97–115); and (Franklin 2006).

[16] (Bizer 2011, p. 21). For the tradition of reading Aeneas as a *vir perfectus*, see, for example, (Pöschl 1950); (Grendler 2002, pp. 235–72); (Kelly and McLaughlin 1995); (Kallendorf 1989); and (Wilson-Okamura 2010, pp. 208–12).

[17] (Stanford 1963, pp. 128–29); (Anderson 2005, p. 16).

[18] For the limited humanist awareness of ancient *Odyssey* exegesis, see (Pontani 2005). The body of modern scholarship addressing earlier criticism is vast and nuanced; essential early works include (Stanford 1963); and (Clarke 1967, Art of the Odyssey). See also the four-volume anthology (De Jong 1998). Also valuable is the review of this collection by (Myrsiades 2001). For recent scholarship on Dante's treatment of Odysseus, see (Holmes 2008); (Fumagalli 2001, pp. 19–30); (Freccero 1986, esp. 136–51); and (Padoan 1977). For recent Petrarch scholarship, see (Fenzi 2003); and (Cachey 2009).

proud, and the scheme about which he encourages poets to sing. It is not surprising, therefore, that these influential thinkers do not appear to have had a direct impact on *cassone* iconography.

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The *Cyclopeia* that initiates each of Apollonio's narratives is deconstructed into a nearly identical series of three events, a mode of presentation that encourages the viewer to examine each scene before assessing either the trilogy as a whole or the role of the trilogy in the complete *cassone* narrative. The *Cyclopeia* trilogy, which will be discussed in detail below, comprises: (1) A macabre depiction of anthropophagy wherein the Cyclops Polyphemus eats two struggling Greeks while being offered a bowl of wine by Odysseus; (2) the blinding of the sleeping Cyclops; and (3) the Greeks' escape from his cave, hidden beneath sheep that are being let out for pasture. Throughout Apollonio's *Cyclopeia*, Odysseus is surrounded by admiring, gesticulating observers to whom he appears oblivious. They may represent the Greeks he is attempting to liberate from the Cyclops' lair; as Odysseus himself is meant to be trapped in the cave, narrative logic has, to some extent, been sacrificed to clarity of storytelling. However, because the observers never attempt to help Odysseus with his rescue plan, their primary function may be to model, for the viewer, an appreciative response to the hero's efforts.

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Homer's *Cyclopeia* begins when the Greeks approach the island of the Cyclopes and Odysseus wonders if this legendary race of giants is savage or hospitable. Unable to temper his curiosity with caution, he docks and leads a group of men into an empty, but clearly inhabited cave. The Greeks make themselves at home, and when the astonished shepherd Polyphemus returns to find them feasting on his cheese, Odysseus voices his expectation of receiving the hospitality and 'guest gift' due to strangers. He emphasizes the sacred nature of the Cyclops' duty to his visitors, reminding him that Zeus himself will avenge any neglect.[19] This speech angers Polyphemus, who, declaring that he will follow his own heart, blocks the cave's entrance and eats two of the men.

Apollonio's vision of Polyphemus differs markedly from that of Homer, who describes him as being "a monstrous wonder made to behold, not like a man, an eater of bread, but more like a wooded peak of the high mountains" (*Od.* IX.190–92 [142]). The painter's metamorphosis of Polyphemus from mountain to man may nonetheless have been influenced by literary precedents. Virgil's *Aeneid*, considered by quattrocento readers to be superior in every respect to its Greek antecedents, is the obvious place to begin looking for correspondences between Apollonio's iconography and classical epic imagery.[20] While Virgil's hero, Aeneas, never actually sees the Cyclopes himself, he does rescue a man who has: Odysseus' follower Achaemenides, whom the Greeks have accidentally left behind on the island. Achaemenides represents Polyphemus as being single-eyed and towering, a description that, although brief, allows for a physical kinship between the Cyclopes and humankind that Homer's does not.[21] The painter may also have turned to Virgil for his potent portrayal of cannibalism; Achaemenides speaks of the Greeks' "warm joints quivering within [the Cyclops's] jaws" (*Aen.* 3.812–13 [75]), a detail that aligns with *cassone* imagery of human legs protruding, apparently kicking, from the giant's mouth (Figures 4 and 5). The soon-to-be victim shown wriggling in Polyphemus' left hand further reinforces Virgil's implication that Polyphemus ingested living men without first killing or dismembering them.

19 " . . . you might give us a guest present or otherwise some gift of grace, for such is the right of strangers . . . Zeus the guest god, who stands behind all strangers with honors due them, avenges any wrong toward strangers and suppliants," *Od.* IX.267–71 (144).

20 There is a vast body of scholarship addressing Renaissance veneration of the *Aeneid*; for recent work, see (Celenza 2016); (Wilson-Okamura 2010).

21 *Aen.* 3.802 (75). On the kinship of Homer's Cyclopes to man, see, for example, (Brown 1996, p. 21); and (Segal 1992, p. 494).

In Homer's *Odyssey*, however, the Cyclops "cut [the men] up limb by limb and got supper ready" (*Od.* IX.291 [144]), washing his meal down with milk.[22]

Figure 4. Apollonio di Giovanni, *The Adventures of Odysseus*, detail Figure 1.

Figure 5. Apollonio di Giovanni, *The Adventures of Odysseus*, detail Figure 2.

In the second scene of Apollonio's *Cyclopeia*, Polyphemus, having accepted Odysseus' offer of strong wine, falls asleep and leaves himself vulnerable to the treachery of his would-be guests. Here the painter appears to draw once more on Achaemenides' spare account: "We surrounded him on

[22] Homer repeats that Polyphemus "prepared the men for dinner" two additional times; see *Od.* IX.311 (145) and *Od.* IX.344 (146). Most critics believe that Homer's Polyphemus cooked the men before eating them; see, for example, (West 2005–2006, pp. 141–2); and (O'Sullivan 1987, p. 18). For a conflicting view, see (Schein 1970, pp. 74–5).

every side and with a pointed weapon pierced his eye."[23] The simplicity of this statement can best be appreciated in contrast with the vituperative schadenfreude that pervades Odysseus' account in the *Odyss*ey:

> When the beam . . . was nearly at the point of catching fire and glowed, terribly incandescent . . . [the men] seized the beam of olive, sharp at the end, and leaned on it into the eye, while I from above leaning my weight on it twirled it, like a man with a brace-and-bit who bores into a ship timber . . . So seizing the fire-point-hardened timber we twirled it in his eye, and the blood boiled around the hot point, so that the blast and scorch of the burning ball singed all his eyebrows and eyelids, and the fire made the roots of his eye crackle. As when a man who works as a blacksmith plunges a screaming great ax blade or plane into cold water . . . even so Cyclops' eye sizzled about the beam of the olive. He gave a giant horrible cry and the rocks rattled to the sound, and we scuttled away in fear. He pulled the timber out of his eye, and it blubbered with plenty of blood, then when he had frantically taken it in his hands and thrown it away, he cried aloud to the Cyclopes.[24] (*Od.* IX.378–99 [147])

The disparity, not only in length, but in tone and emphasis, between Virgil and Homer is striking; Achaemenides glories neither in the act of violence nor the anguish of the wounded Cyclops. Apollonio echoes this subdued tenor by denuding the *Odyssey's* prolonged act of brute force to an apparently effortless, bloodless, and even painless procedure. The beam forcefully wielded by many strong men has become, for Apollonio, a small stick that Odysseus delicately inserts into the eye of the unresponsive giant. Any serious attempt to reflect Homer's vision of Odysseus' experience could not appear so devoid of passion.

The last scene of Apollonio's *Cyclopeia* depicts the final phase of Odysseus' plan: A man, straddled by a sheep, crawls out from the Cyclops' cave. The blinded shepherd, feeling only his flock's fleece, does not realize his captives are escaping. Although this maneuver was not recounted in the *Aeneid*, Virgil's influence can still be discerned; as Miziolek observes, Apollonio's Polyphemus is depicted holding "the lopped-off pine" described by Virgil (*Aen.* 3.854, (76) but not by Homer.[25] This pine staff brings the painter's *Cyclopeia* narrative to an abrupt visual close on the Kraków panel, while another strongly vertical element (Odysseus lashed to his mast to avoid being tempted by the Sirens' song) serves the same function on the Chicago panel. The *cassone Cyclopeia* thus ends on a note of triumph; Odysseus' victory may verge on the pyrrhic, but his leadership bona fides have been reinforced by his encounter with Polyphemus.

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The visual contrast between Apollonio's sumptuously dressed hero and the naked, man-eating Cyclops supports both ancient and modern readings of Homer's *Cyclopeia* as a contemplation on barbarism and civility.[26] At the core of these readings lies the ancient Greek concept of *xenia* ('guest–host relationship' or 'guest–friendship'), the tacit code of hospitality meant to insure the safety of both travellers and hosts. Social pressure to observe *xenia* was strong during the classical period, as the care and protection extended to strangers not only implied an expectation of reciprocal treatment if and when it became relevant, but a continuing obligation of mutual aid between families

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[23] *Aen.* 3.822–23 (75).

[24] Modern criticism is mixed on the morality of the blinding; Murphy (1997), argues that it "constitutes a reaffirmation *a contrario* of social order" (p. 40), while Brown argues that it cannot be justified because "the rules of hospitality do not apply to the Cyclopes" (p. 23).

[25] (Miziolek 2006, "The 'Odyssey' *Cassone* Panels," p. 68).

[26] See, for example, (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 35–62); and (Vidal-Naquet 1991). My thanks to an anonymous reader for the following insightful observations: "[In this context] Ulysses' dress makes him look like an allegory of a dowry: he is, after all, covered in what look to be coins . . . [also] the representation of cannibalism and of a nude (and, let's be frank, erect) Polyphemus raises all sorts of questions about marriage and eroticism in the context of a *cassone*."

for generations to come.[27] While Renaissance readers had limited access to Greek texts that elucidated the complex expectations associated with *xenia*, they would have known Latin writers who expounded on the Roman equivalent, *hospitium*. Cicero, Livy, and Seneca all wrote on the sacred nature of *hospitium*, Seneca deeming it one of the most sacred aspects of humanity and Cicero calling it "a most hallowed thing."[28] Oscar E. Nybakken observes that the effectiveness of this convention depended "almost entirely on the element of moral appeal ... an element of obligation derived from deeply rooted and widely accepted principles of divine and natural law." (Nybakken 1946, p. 249) Adherence to *hospitium* distinguished the civilized from the savage; as John Nicols writes, "Though the open abuse of *hospitium* may not have been an indictable offense, publicly violating its conventions was perceived to be uncivilized or, more accurately, something only a wild beast would do." (Nicols 2011, pp. 425–26)

The relevance to fifteenth-century viewers of the ancient values associated with *hospitium* may account for the emphasis Apollonio placed on the *Cyclopeia* in his marriage chest narratives. The objectives of the institutions of *xenia* and marriage were, as Elizabeth Vandiver observes, similar in that both were "systems whereby extra-familial alliances [were] formed," and violating either constituted an "outrage against the structures of society." (Vandiver 2012, p. 149) Although the laws regulating various aspects of quattrocento marriage distinguish it from the unlegislated reciprocity of *xenia/hospitium*, tacit trust and adherence to shared expectations were no less necessary to the functioning of the intergenerational networks established through nuptial unions. The Florentine merchant and scholar Matteo Palmieri, in his influential dialogue *Della vita civile* (c. 1431–38), celebrates the Florentine tradition whereby those "related by marriage ... charitably assist each other, conferring upon each other advice, favors and assistance, which in the course of life, result in actions, advantage, and bear abundant fruit."[29]

The hope of acquiring such advantages is reflected in the level of effort devoted to successful participation in the Florentine marriage market. The intensity of the betrothal, and even pre-betrothal, processes has been documented by a rich cache of letters, diaries, contracts, lawsuits, and moral commentary written by Apollonio's contemporaries.[30] Detailed and often agonized assessments of the potential social, personal, and financial costs and benefits of establishing bonds with other family networks were carefully weighed before any marital negotiations were initiated. It was considered essential that a betrothal be mediated by a coalition of reliable familial and extra-familial members who would, thereby, acquire a vested interest in its success. That such diligence could reap substantial reward is affirmed by Apollonio's idealized marital imagery. His ceremonial triumphs and banquets, indicative of the unconditional support of the bride's parents and their extended cohort, portend a favorable merger of legal and extra-legal benefits for all concerned. The painter's foregrounding of the first meeting of Princess Nausicaa and Odysseus (center, Figures 1 and 3), in which they engage in the reciprocal courtesy of civilized strangers, underscores that the happy outcome was contingent on mutual adherence to the principles of *xenia*.

Of course, even the most painstaking inquiries could not guarantee that the ties of marriage would aid, or even fail to harm, every interested party, and fears of allying oneself with unforeseen hardship were universal. This anxiety is reflected in Leon Battisti Alberti's dialogue *Della famiglia (On the Family)*, in which one interlocutor observes: "Sometimes the links of family have proved a trouble and disaster to the man, who has had to support both his own family and that of the girl he married ... As the new husband you cannot keep them without harm to yourself, nor can you send them away without

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[27] For recent scholarship and references relevant to *xenia*, see (Vandiver 2012).

[28] For a review of the proximate and extended obligations of *hospitium* and the ancient writings that elucidate them, see (Nicols 2011). Nicols quotes and translates Cicero ("*quod sanctissimum est*," *In Verrem* 2.2.110), p. 424, and Seneca ("*duo sacratissima inter homines ... hospitium et adfinitas*": "two things are most sacred amongst men ... hospitality and close relationships," *Con*. 8.6.17), pp. 424–25.

[29] (Molho 1994, p. 344). For the original Italian, see (Palmieri 1982, p. 161).

[30] For recent work and references, see (Kirshner 2015, esp. pp. 55–73); (Krohn 2008); and (Molho 1994).

incurring censure."[31] It was commonly believed (though not universally practiced) that a fundamental step to forestalling such conflict was social homogamy—marriage between members of the same socio-economic echelon.[32] In addition to avoiding the friction inherent in a relationship in which one party feels demeaned through association with the other, such a union would be less likely to benefit from the shared "identities, interests, concerns, and destinies" of social equals.[33] An appropriate match was determined not only by wealth and political status, but by *gentilezza*, a word denoting cultured refinement in abilities, interests, virtue, and taste.[34] The psychological chafing that resulted from the need to sacrifice the latter for want of the former is documented in the well-preserved correspondence of the widow Alessandra Macigni Strozzi and her son Filippo. Lacking a sufficient dowry to marry her daughter Caterina into a family she deemed to be of equivalent social merit, Alessandra resigned herself to a union with the nouveau riche Parenti family.[35] The justifications she offers for her decision clearly read as putting a brave face on a regrettable situation.

A ubiquitous source of tension between families united by marriage was the bride's dowry (*dote*). From its initial agglomeration, to the terms of its surrender to the groom's family, to its future disbursement, restitution, or renunciation, the dowry was an intergenerational source of tension within and between extended families.[36] Alberti vividly describes the quagmire awaiting a husband who fails to secure the entirety of his wife's dowry before the wedding night:

> If, as new husbands usually do, you don't want to lose their still precarious favor, you may ask your in-laws in restrained and casual words [about the balance of the dowry]. Then you are forced to accept any little excuse they may offer. If you make a more forthright demand for what is your own, they will explain to you their many obligations, will complain of fortune, blame the conditions of the time, complain of other men, and say that they hope to be able to ask much of you in greater difficulties. As long as they can, in fact, they will promise you bounteous repayment at an ever-receding date. They will beg you, and overwhelm you, nor will it seem possible for you to spurn the prayers of people you have accepted as your own family. Finally, you will be put in a position where you must either suffer the loss in silence or enter upon expensive litigation and create enmity. (Watkins 1969, p. 119)

Julius Kirshner documents that a Florentine husband who found himself in this position could legally refuse to shelter or support his wife, choosing instead to "drive [her] away and send her back to her father's house" (as suggested by lawyer Paolo di Castro) or "deny her basic necessities" (advocated by jurist Alessandro Strozzi) (Kirshner 2002, pp. 99–100). Francesco di ser Benedetto Marchi, a lawyer who, like "countless Florentine husbands," continued to live with his wife while awaiting the balance of her dowry, reported on his tax returns that he was in "financial hell." (Kirshner 2002, p. 100) Even when a dowry was paid in full, a legion of unanticipated events could affect the way in which, over the course of a marriage, it was spent, managed and invested. After the death of one or both spouses, dotal inheritance claims often embroiled families in ruinous litigation and sundered longstanding ties of kinship.

Other forms of property brought to the marriage (for example the bride's non-dotal assets, intended for her use but under the de-facto control of her husband) were also liable to perpetuate

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31 Lionardo, in Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, Book Two (begun c. 1432), trans. *Renée* (Watkins 1969, p. 117).

32 For extended discussions of social homogamy, see (Brucker 1986, esp. pp. 94–108); and (Molho 1994).

33 In his study of Rinuccini marriages, Molho determines that "movement was not the prevalent marriage pattern among members of the Florentine propertied classes" whose marital unions were "more like cautious side steps rather than slides downward or climbs upward on the social scale (Molho 1994, p. 286)."

34 Vespasiano di Bicci uses *gentilezza* in this way throughout his biographies of famous men; see (Fiorentino 1951). For examples and analyses of quattrocento ideas of *gentilezza*, see (Stefaniak 2008, esp. pp. 127–29).

35 See (Strozzi 1997, pp. 28–37); also (Crabb 2000); and (Fabbri 1991).

36 A wealth of documentation attests to the frequent recourse to litigation, arbitration, and other legal measures in the interest of resolving dowry disputes. In addition to Kirshner, 2015, see (Kuehn 2016), and (Kuehn 1991); also (Chabot 2011). Foundational for study of the Florentine Renaissance dowry is (Klapisch-Zuber 1985).

animus.[37] Prominent among these were the cost to the groom's family of lavish wedding celebrations, nuptial gifts of clothing and jewelry for the bride, and household furnishings.[38] Preachers and lay moral commentators, using time-honored rhetoric condemning the innate greed and vanity of women, railed against the damage these expenditures wrought on patrimonies. By the time a couple had settled in their new home, diverse seeds of resentment had been sown which could, as Molho observes, result in acrimonious battles over property that dragged on "for interminable court hearings over the course not of just months and years, but even of decades." (Molho 1994, p. 248) Widowhood, remarriage, infertility, illegitimacy, and the possibility of having many children (especially daughters) survive into adulthood could all exact a bitter toll on families and their resources.

I suggest that Apollonio integrated images of Odysseus' widely-varied experiences of *xenia/hospitium* into his *cassone* narratives in order to engage both the hopes and the fears that inhered in Renaissance attempts to secure long-term prosperity through marital unions. The prominent portrayal of his losses in the *Cyclopeia* presents a vivid contrast to the gains he later realizes in Phaeacia. In each case, Odysseus relinquished responsibility for his own wellbeing (and, in the former instance, that of his men) in the expectation that others would feel the moral obligation to assume it. The Phaeacian royal family, whose dress and rituals indicate a social station that parallels Odysseus' own, set aside their personal interests in favor of their guest's, and provide him with gifts and transport home to Ithaca; Polyphemus, whose societal assumptions and conventions were, at least initially, opaque, is revealed to act only out of self-interest. Apollonio's decision to humanize the Cyclops' appearance is significant here, as this iconographical choice reduces the viewer's likelihood of exonerating the giant's behavior on grounds of insuperable "otherness" (an animated geological formation may be forgiven its disregard for the mores of men), while also emphasizing the danger of consorting with people whose ways are not transparently one's own. Although, like families joined by marriage, the futures of Odysseus and Polyphemus are inextricably intertwined, neither party attempts reconciliation or compromise, but rather seeks the destruction of the other.

Although Apollonio's vis-à-vis depiction of the host and his guest transforms Polyphemus into a self-aware cannibal, neither Apollonio nor Homer portray Odysseus as a naïve victim who should be absolved from contributing to the deaths of his comrades. From the beginning, he had voiced doubts as to the Cyclopes' nature, pondering the question of whether they were "savage and violent, and without justice, or hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly" (*Od.* IX.175 [141]). Nonetheless, he allowed faith in the efficacy of his eloquent piety and rationality to supplant the apprehension that his host would not adhere to his own social conventions. Apollonio's elegantly attired leader presents as a man who ought to have acted more responsibly to ensure the safety of his dependents; a civilized patriarch, whose command of a fleet of ships speaks to his wealth and breeding, should be adept and circumspect in his negotiations with strangers. Viewers familiar with Homer's text would also know that Odysseus was himself guilty of flouting important tenets of the guest–host relationship from which he hoped to profit. In the first instance, while it was incumbent upon a 'host' to offer visitors a seat at his table, visitors were expected to await an invitation before crossing the threshold.[39] Further, Odysseus famously withholds his identify from Polyphemus. Although it was not strictly obligatory for a stranger to introduce himself, it was considered to be a "demonstration of his own willingness to [one day] return the hospitality of his host." (Reece 1993, p. 25) Finally, having failed to exploit *xenia* to his advantage, Odysseus takes the morally questionable step of subverting the very code from which he hoped to profit. With the intention of inebriating and subsequently maiming the Cyclops, he offers him wine in the guise of a host gift: "I brought it for you, and it would have been your libation had you taken pity and sent me home" (*Od*. IX.349–350 [146]). Even as Polyphemus'

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37 For non-dotal assets, see (Kirshner 2015, pp. 55–73), and (Kirshner 1993).

38 See (Kirshner 2015, pp. 55–73).

39 For recent work and bibliographies on the theme of hospitality in the *Cyclopeia*, see (Newton 2008); and (Reece 1993).

barbarism is rendered more chilling by his distinctly human presence, Odysseus' calculated posturing hints at a savagery lurking beneath his cultivated veneer.

* * *

In Homer's epic, once the captives have fled to their ship and set sail, their impulsive leader cannot resist hurling taunts at the receding Cyclops. Polyphemus, still "suffering and in bitter pain" (*Od.* IX.440–441 [148]), heaves "the peak of a great mountain" (*Od.* IX.481 [149]) in the direction of the jeering voice, creating a wave that washes the ship back to shore. The Greeks, as they attempt a second frantic escape, beg in vain for their commander to stop provoking the giant. Odysseus' final harangue concludes with a proud proclamation of his heretofore-concealed identity, and although the seamen manage to evade the boulder thrown in response to this revelation, they cannot escape the consequences of Polyphemus' subsequent prayer to his father Poseidon. In this prayer, most frequently characterized as a curse, the Cyclops asks that, if Odysseus must find his way home, "let him come late, in bad case, with the loss of all his companions, in someone else's ship, and find troubles in his household" (*Od.* IX.534–535 [151]). Poseidon ultimately obliges, and Odysseus' followers are sentenced to death for the actions of their leader.

Christopher G. Brown observes that "readers of Homer who believe that the *Odyssey* is a poem concerned with right and wrong should be troubled" by the gods' decision to grant Polyphemus' prayer for revenge. (Brown 1996, p. 2) Fifteenth-century humanist patrons, educated to interpret epic poetry in strongly moralistic terms, would be hard pressed to either ignore or rationalize this show of divine disfavor towards Odysseus.[40] Apollonio does not, however, complicate Odysseus' heroism by depicting the denouement of Homer's *Cyclopeia*, thereby allowing his *cassone* narratives to end on a note of triumph (the escape from the cave). Odysseus, though flawed, appears as the unmistakable savior of his men. The painter allows the suffering for which Odysseus bears at least partial responsibility to be left behind on the Cyclopes' island; the curse and its aftermath do not haunt the idealized marriage imagery that follows. The question of whether or not Odysseus deserved to survive his men, much less go on to enjoy the fruits of civilized society, does not arise.

In later depictions of Odysseus' adventures, however, the balance of virtue between the antagonists is far more equivocal. Sixty to eighty years after Apollonio's *cassone* panels were executed, a large narrative was painted as one in a series of at least three paintings depicting Odysseus' adventures (Figure 6). As this anonymous early sixteenth-century panel, now in Vassar College, is too large for a *cassone*, it was most likely meant for display on a wall as a *spalliera* panel.[41] The series has yet to be studied in terms of cinquecento reception of Homer, whose epics, by this time more widely read in Greek, had become a more common source of material for both literary and visual artists. For purposes of comparison with Apollonio's work, however, it is notable that the Vassar painting does not begin with the *Cyclopeia* or any other tale that might situate Odysseus' adventures within a larger narrative context of *xenia*/*hospitium* or marriage.[42] The *spalliera* imagery is further dissociated from the theme of trust and civility among strangers by the curious omission of any reference to Polyphemus' murderous over-reaction to uninvited guests. Whereas Apollonio's *Cyclopeia* presents as a concise cause-and-effect sequence, the anonymous painter does nothing to associate the giant's bad behavior with his blinding by the Greeks. As a result, the righteousness of Odysseus' cause evaporates. He continues to diminish as the narrative proceeds; always a distinctive presence on Apollonio's

[40] For early Renaissance reading of epic poetry in "stark, black-and-white terms", see (Kallendorf 2007, p. 33); and (Kallendorf 1999).

[41] Little work has been done on this series beyond the reassessment of its attribution, which has been variously assigned to Piero di Cosimo, Francesco Granacci, and Antonio Pollaiuolo. See catalog entry by Osvald Siren and Maurice Walter Brockwell in (Siren and Brockwell 1917, pp. 101–3); and (McKnight 1924).

[42] The figures on the left third of the panel are identified in the catalog as "Athena in the sky wreaking devastation on the walled city of Troy," and "Ajax Oileus blasted by an angry Poseidon."

cassoni, he appears as one of a swarm of diminutive aggressors in the *spalliera* painting. Odysseus' status as a hero, leader, and morally upright man is most significantly compromised by the image chosen to close both the *Cyclopeia* and the panel: Polyphemus preparing to heave a boulder at the Greeks' fleeing ships. Despite his maiming, the prodigious Cyclops appears stolid and indomitable, while the scarcely detectable Odysseus bobs uncertainly on the waves. His fleet, signifier of the limitless scope of civilized humanity, will soon be pulverized by elemental forces and divine anger.

Figure 6. The Master of the Johnson Assumption of the Magdalen, *The Adventures of Odysseus: The Blinding of Polyphemus* (early 16th century), *spalliera*, tempera on panel, by permission of Vassar College.

Shorn of this ill-omened ending, Apollonio's opening narrative becomes an invitation to engage with the ethics and wisdom of a man who will ultimately evolve from an undisciplined adventurer to a successful patriarch. In reconstructing and prioritizing the *Cyclopeia* in his *Odyssey* narrative, Apollonio di Giovanni employs the power of shared anxiety to create a bridge between the classical past and fifteenth-century viewers. In the context of *cassone* imagery, designed to strengthen the identification of a nascent patrician household with the community that labored to create it, early Renaissance viewers would have recognized many sources of fragility inherent in marital alliances: Suspicions that easily surface in the presence of the unknown; ideals that require continual reconciliation with circumstances; harm realized through escalating antipathy and retribution; calculated risks associated with both upholding and transgressing societal expectations; incalculable costs and benefits of betrayal. Perhaps, at its core, Apollonio's *Cyclopeia* is an admonition to the Florentine patriciate to be both worthy of trust and wary of those yet to earn it.

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