

Man into Woman into Swine: Transformations in Joyce's *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*

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In the Circe episode of *Ulysses* Leopold Bloom is transformed in two ways simultaneously, he is turned into a swine and into a woman.

BELLO

Down! (*he taps her on the shoulder with his fan*) Incline feet forward! Slide left foot one pace back! You will fall. You are falling. On the hands down!

BLOOM

(*her eyes upturned in the sign of admiration, closing, yaps*) Truffles!

(*With a piercing epileptic cry she sinks on all fours, grunting, snuffling, rooting at his feet: then lies, shamming dead, with eyes shut tight, trembling eyelids, bowed upon the ground in the attitude of most excellent master.*) (U 15.2846-55)

Let us take a look at the original myth. Odysseus arrives at Circe's island with his companions. On the first day he sets out to explore and sees the smoke rising from Circe's palace. On the way back to the ship he comes across an enormous stag and kills him for provisions. On the next day the group is divided, one sub-group is sent to Circe's palace and there transformed into swine. One of the group escapes and warns the others. Odysseus sets out to rescue his friends. He meets Hermes who offers him the plant *moly* as an antidote to Circe's magic. The god orders Odysseus to sleep with the sorceress, but first he has to make her promise that she will do him no harm. Things work out as predicted and Odysseus winds up in bed with Circe. Afterwards his friends are re-transformed, and for the next year the voyagers stay on Circe's island. Odysseus finally decides that he wants to return and is sent to Hades to consult Teiresias about Poseidon's wrath and his chances to reach Ithaka. After the trip into the underworld he returns for a brief visit to bury Elpenor. Then he leaves for good.

The discrepancy between Joyce's text and the original Homeric episode is obvious. Instead of the companions the hero himself (Bloom) suffers the transformation, and for the next pages his femininity is far more important than the animal-aspect.

Digressions from the Homeric myth are not exactly rare in *Ulysses*—as testified by the inclusion of the Wandering Rock episode originally belonging to the Argonaut-myth—complete faithfulness towards the mythological source could hardly be expected. The adaptation of myth into a modern context will in all probability call for alterations or else produce a stale text.

And, of course, there are some perfectly reasonable possibilities, why Joyce might have introduced these changes of his source. One might be, that the transformation of the "hero" fuses the saviour of the myth with the victims—in accordance with the motifs of Christ and Parnell. And the

simple transformation into a swine would deprive Bloom of his language, on the one hand providing Joyce with an excellent opportunity to enlarge on his onomatopoeic abilities in the transcription of animal voices (e.g. the cat in the Calypso episode), on the other hand, however, disrupting the text to some extent.

Many other reasons may be found, but this is not what I am concerned with here. Instead I want to take a look at the consequences the alterations might have on a re-reading of the *Odyssey*—bearing in mind the question in how far Joyce himself might have been guided in his digressions by clues found in his mythological source.

Odysseus is a somewhat unusual mythical hero. W. B. Stanford devotes a whole chapter of his book *The Ulysses Theme* to the various ways in which Odysseus departs from the prototype of the hero. Among other things he stresses the interest in food, the desire for knowledge, the cautious approach of danger.¹ I want to add yet another digression from the mainstream hero. In many episodes Odysseus is almost detached from the action, the catastrophes being mostly caused by the companions who, accordingly, have to suffer the worst consequences. They transgress Aiolos rules concerning the sacks of wind, they enter the harbour of the Laestrygonians while Odysseus remains in safe distance, and they violate the prohibitions of Teiresias in regard to the Bulls of Helios. As a result it is they, who are slaughtered by the Laestrygonians, they are turned into swine, and they are smitten with madness after they have killed the sacred beef.

This last example in particular is rather non-typical. Madness can frequently be found in Greek mythology, but usually it is the hero himself who is driven insane in consequence of some transgression (as for example Hercules, who violates the rules of hospitality and is smitten with madness in result). Furthermore it is usually the hero who disobeys the laws and rules of the gods and has to suffer some punishment (as for example Jason and Medea, who commit the murder of Apsyrtos and have to be ritually cleaned when their ship refuses to carry them).

The alteration in *Ulysses*, turning Bloom himself into the victim of the transformation, thus conforms to the more usual type of hero. According to Robert Graves, the *Odyssey* was probably created from two sources, (a) Odysseus' return to Ithaca and (b) an allegorical voyage in the attempt to escape death by some hero whose name might have been Ulyxes.² Even if one does not accept the clear division between the two sources as found in Graves' analysis, one can hardly avoid the common assumption, that the author or authoress of the *Odyssey* drew heavily on earlier myths. These earlier myths or tales are lost, but it is highly improbable, that the unusual type of hero did appear in all of the sources, one rather has to suspect that the hero of the earlier variants—including the Circe episode—would have been of the more active sort. Joyce's meddling with his source may in fact be a reconstruction of a former variant.

But how can we account for the double transformation into woman and swine? Let us return to the myth once more.

The transformation into swine comes without warning and does not result from any violation of rules. Yet, there is some indication, some hint, that there might have been something of that kind. When Odysseus in his role as the saviour sets out to rescue his companions he meets Hermes, who explains the future proceedings. He gives Odysseus the magical herb, explains its power, and adds that Circe, seeing that her magic fails, would try to seduce Odysseus. Our hero is ordered to go to bed with the sorceress, but first she must promise not to do him any harm. This possible harm is

specified as ἀνῆγοα which means that she might attempt to un-man him. In Charles Lamb's adaptation, used by Joyce, we find the term "effeminate" in Hermes' warning. In the following encounter everything happens as predicted and Odysseus in fact goes to bed with Circe even before his friends are re-transformed. This sexual act is far more explicit than any other in the *Odyssey* (e.g. the Calypso affair), the story emphasises our hero's male virility. The threat of being unmanned is inverted, the hero's potency stressed.

Hermes' predictions include a warning, and in the *Odyssey* (e.g. Aiolos or the Bulls of Helios) as in myth in general, warnings are invariably ignored, rules are to be violated. The structural elements "prohibition/violation" are almost necessarily correlated. So the idea that the transformation takes place as the consequence of some transgression is not too far fetched. The imaginary variant for the moment would read as follows.

Odysseus arrives at Circe's island, he goes ashore (alone or with his friends) and meets Hermes who either warns him or forbids something. The warning is not heeded or the prohibition violated, as a result Odysseus is possibly unmanned. There is hardly a conclusive way to reconstruct, what violation of rules or neglect of warnings might have taken place in the context of the Circe episode in our variant. In Joyce's text the temporary loss of the potato seems to serve in this instance, another digression from the source, indicating that Joyce had some failure of the hero in mind. Another possibility might be that the order of Hermes, to sleep with the sorceress, is an inversion of the former prohibition.

The island of Circe seems to be a place of death. Plants and animals are sacred to Hekate, yet it may be noted, that pigs were also sacrificed to Demeter and that the priestesses in the cult of the Great Mother occasionally wore the masks of swine.³ The pattern by which a former mother goddess is degraded into a death-goddess and her priestess into a witch is not unusual in mythology and seems to apply here. Therefore one might consider the possibility that Circe in an earlier life was a priestess of a mother-goddess, that as such she was sacred and that some violation or rape took place. Alternatively, the transgression might have been the killing of the stag when Odysseus first enters the island. The enormous size and the huge antlers of this stag are emphasised and it may be taken into account, that the hind of Artemis, captured by Hercules, was as big as a bull, had huge antlers and thus looked like a stag. The killing of an animal sacred to the goddess would resemble the slaying of the bulls of Helios—and the genealogy of Circe given in the *Odyssey* claims that she was the daughter of Helios.

But the penalty for whatever transgression took place, i.e. unmanning, is not exactly a transformation into a woman, the question how the swine enter the picture remains open and in addition we do not know how the necessary re-transformation might have taken place.

The word used in this episode for swine is σὺς,⁴ but there is another one in Greek: χοῖρος. In the *Odyssey* it does appear in the context of Eumaios (Od. 14.81), and Samuel Butler in his book *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, which Joyce certainly knew, claims that the pig-stys of Circe and Eumaios resemble each other.⁵ The word χοῖρος has two different meanings, (a) a young pig, and (b) the female genitals, primarily the hairless genitals of young girls, but also the depilated genitals of adult women, especially hetaerae or prostitutes, the latter were even called χοιροπῶλαι, i.e. piggie-merchants.⁶ The second meaning is most often found in obscene puns, and comedies—Henderson cites various examples from Aristophanes⁷—and

thus in contexts similar to the Circe episode of *Ulysses*. This word now connects the two transformations of Joyce's *Ulysses*, i.e. into woman and into swine, and its full translation appears in Circe, referring to Bella, the adult whore: "sowcunt" (*U* 15.3489).⁸

Imbedded into the Circe episode is Odysseus' voyage to Hades. There he has to meet Teiresias, who is supposed to give advice on how to pacify Poseidon. The advice given is obscure, as it refers to a time, when the immediate problem of our hero will already be solved, that is, after his return to Ithaca. Admittedly, Teiresias also gives some advice about the voyage back, that is, about the bulls of Helios, still his main point seems to be besides the point.

When Odysseus arrives at Hades and after he has spoken with Teiresias he first encounters the souls of women—and women only. Of course, his dead mother is of importance to him, but there follows a long list of other women he sees and talks to. Moses Finlay informs us in his reconstruction of the homeric society, *The World of Odysseus*,⁹ that women had no place in the ceremonial meals, yet in this episode, women are the first who are allowed to drink the blood of the sacrificed animals. Only after an intermezzo, a rapture in the narration at Alkinoos' palace, does the tale proceed and now the souls of the dead men appear.

Samuel Butler took the interest in the dead women as an indication, that the author of the *Odyssey* was in fact an authoress, namely Nausikaa. But in the context of my hypothetical variant another possibility appears. Teiresias is the one person in Greek mythology who actually suffered transsexual transformation. This happened when he encountered a pair of snakes copulating and with his club killed the female. The re-transformation occurred when seven years later he killed the male snake in a similar situation. Both killings took place on the mountain of Kyllene, the birthplace of Hermes, who, on Circe's island, warns Odysseus. So, Teiresias would have been the person to be asked for advice concerning transsexual change. We come to the outline of the hypothetical variant. In the Ulyxes myth, or whatever the source for the episode might have been, the hero arrives at Circe's island and is warned, not to violate the rules of the place, i.e. not to, let's say, touch the priestess/sorceress or not to harm the sacred animals. He violates the rule and is transformed into χοῖρος, either a woman or a metaphor for a castrate. Maybe s/he even becomes a priestess of the Great Mother for some time, wearing the mask of a swine. S/he later seeks advice on how to change back to his/her original state and is sent to Teiresias, who is the one person able to give this advice. When s/he arrives in the altered state, s/he first exclusively addresses women. After the advice is given and acted on, the re-transformation takes place and the hero is now eligible to talk to the souls of the dead men as well. The voyage of the polytropic man, back to Circe or onwards to escape death, can then proceed.

According to my hypothesis, in the creation of the *Odyssey* as we know it, the transformation was altered, the hero of the episode was turned into the detached type and thus it is now the companions who are transformed merely into swine. Teiresias' advice, now without any possible significance, was changed, although we can still detect a faint trace of the club he killed the snakes with in the boat's oar Odysseus has to carry inland.

Of course, there is no way to know, whether a variant as the one outlined ever existed, whether some prohibition concerning the island and Circe was stated, and whether a sexual transformation was hinted at—let alone ever took place. And, of course, there is always the possibility that Joyce never thought about anything like a mythological variant but simply hit upon the

ambiguity of the word χοῖρος in Aristophanes or simply heard about it and then used it for his own ends. But once we take Joyce's text and the marginal clues in the *Odyssey* seriously, that is where they will take us, and at least they make an interesting story.

Notes

1. W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme* (Oxford, 1963) chapter 5.
2. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, 1955) 170.1. Stanford also notes this possibility, but rather stresses a variety of former variants (Stanford 8ff).
3. See the Graves introduction.
4. The word appears in one of Joyce's letters to Frank Budgen, in which he discusses his understanding of the magical plant "moly." Moly, the gift of Hermes "saves in case of accident. This would cover immunity from syphilis (σὺ φίλος = swine-love?)." (*Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. R. Ellmann [New York, 1975] 272.)
5. Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1967) 195.
6. Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (New Haven, 1975) 131.
7. Henderson 131.
8. Joyce was certainly aware of such obscene double meanings. I am grateful to R. J. Schork who has referred me to *Finnegans Wake* 585.24-27: "Totumvir and esquimeena, who shall separate fetters to new desire, repeals the act of union to unite in bonds of schismacy. O yes! O yes! Withdraw your member. Closure." The Greek noun σχίσμα—"cleft," "split," "the vulva"—is here obviously used in more than one sense.
9. Moses I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, trans. of *Die Welt des Odysseus* (München 1979) 131.