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MONSTER, LOVER, POET, SARACEN:  
Polyphemus in Late Medieval French Literature

by SILVIA HUOT

This essay will trace a varied series of treatments of the figure of Polyphemus, known to medieval readers principally through his appearance in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (13, 738–897; 14, 167–220).<sup>1</sup> I will explore his medieval 'metamorphoses' in three texts, roughly spanning the 14<sup>th</sup> century: the anonymous early 14<sup>th</sup>-century *Ovide moralisé*, Guillaume de Machaut's *Voir Dit* (c. 1362–1365), and Christine de Pizan's *Epistre Othea* (c. 1400–1401).

In the *Ovide moralisé*, as in Ovid, the story of Polyphemus is split between two books.<sup>2</sup> The giant's disastrous love for Galatea and his murder of her lover Acis come first, presented as a story passed between women: a woman's story of trauma and loss, told to another woman as a warning about the vengeful behaviour that a spurned male lover may resort to (13, 3689–4294). The blinding of Polyphemus by Ulysses, in turn, is a story passed between men: a horror story about the terrors found in foreign lands, a tale of survival and of male aggression and companionship (14, 1751–2100). The two are linked, however, not only because both feature the monstrous Cyclops, but also because Galatea herself alludes to the eventual blinding of Polyphemus when she explains that he ignored a warning about Ulysses, unable to imagine that any man could have power over him.

Polyphemus as lover, then, is a woman's story. It is told entirely by Galatea herself, in conversation with another woman (Scylla), and it illustrates the violence of male erotic passion and the dangers a woman faces in trying to resist it. In fact, the *Ovide moralisé* intensifies this message. Ovid's Galatea acknowledges that Scylla can refuse her more docile suitors with impunity, offering her own bitter experience as something lying outside the norm:

te tamen, o virgo, genus haut inmite virorum  
expetit, utque facis, potes his inpune negare;  
at mihi ...  
non nisi per luctus licuit Cyclopi amorē  
effugere. (*Metamorphoses* 13, 740–745)

[You truly, maiden, are wooed by a gentle race of men, and you can repulse them without fear, even as you do. But I ... was not allowed to shun the Cyclops' love without grievous consequence.]

<sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, transl. by Frank Justus Miller, two vols, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press / London: William Heinemann, 1916, reprint 1971 (The Loeb Classical Library 42/43). Text and translation are cited from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Ovide moralisé*, ed. by C. De Boer, *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, Afdeeling Letterkunde*, n.s. 37 (1936) and 43 (1938). Text cited from this edition; translations mine.



In the *Ovide moralisé*, however, the general rule seems to be that hell hath no fury like a bachelor scorned, and Galatea cites her experience as typical of the fate that doubtless awaits Scylla as well:

Je sui certaine et n'en dout mie  
 Que tu ne pues pas refuser  
 Longuement ne faire muser  
 La courtoise bachelerie  
 Qui te requiert de druerie  
 Qu'en la fin ne t'en mesaviegne  
 Et que courrous ne t'en aviegne.  
 Par moi meïsmes l'ai seü,  
 Esprouvé et aperceü. (OM 13, 3698–3706)

[I am certain and do not doubt that you cannot long refuse the courteous bachelors asking for your love, or string them along, without coming to misfortune and distress in the end. I know this, and have seen and experienced it, myself.]

The tale is thus a warning about the force of male desire and its penchant for fueling violent retribution. This aspect of the story, highlighted in the medieval poet's subtle reworking of Galatea's words, serves to support the allegorical reading in which the spurned suitor is the devil, aggressively combatting the preferred suitor, Jesus Christ. Within the narrative itself, however, what stands out in Galatea's story is its function as a record of personal pain and bereavement. In fact, in the *Ovide moralisé* as in Ovid, Scylla asks to hear the whole story, not in order to inform herself about the dangers she might face from an unwanted suitor, but in order to understand and comfort her friend:

A cest mot plore Galathee.  
 La pucele l'a confortee,  
 Qui li tert les iex et la face  
 Et dist que certaine la face  
 De la cause de sa dolour,  
 De son souspir et de son plore,  
 Celer ne li doit elle mie,  
 Car elle est sa loial amie. (OM 13, 3717–3725)

[At this point Galatea wept. The maiden consoled her, drying her eyes and her face, and said that she should clearly explain the cause of her grief, her tears and sighs; she should not hide it from her, since she was her faithful friend.]

The emphasis throughout, as in the Ovidian original, is thus on Galatea's experience: her fear and hatred of the Cyclops, her love of Acis, her terror when Polyphemus discovered the two of them together, and her grief at Acis's death. Polyphemus himself is constructed as the embodiment of voracious, destructive passion. As in Ovid, Galatea regretfully reflects on the power of love, which is able to move even a heart this ill-suited to romance: „Ha, come amours a grant puissance“ [Oh, how great is love's power] and „Bien set Venus



les cuers embler“ [Venus knows well how to steal hearts] (OM 13, 3744, 3764). On the one hand, love does seem to have some effect in ,taming‘ the monster, as for the first time he takes an interest in his appearance and attempts to comb his bristly, unruly hair and to trim his shaggy beard. He ceases to attack passing ships and is no longer a threat to sailors, being now completely obsessed with Galatea and oblivious to all else. Polyphemus has not lost his savagery, however. The violence that was once directed at other men is now focused on Galatea. And although she is the real target of the giant’s wrath and desire, his murderous rage is directed through her, and because of her, onto Acis. Galatea’s personal tragedy is that the man she loved was destroyed as a result of her own involuntary attraction of monstrous, horrific ,love‘.

The obsessive nature of Polyphemus’s desire is highlighted in his dismissal of the warning he receives about Ulysses, who will, he is told, some day steal his eye. But Polyphemus considers himself beyond danger from any male enemy, and vulnerable only to the seductive charms of women; as he exclaims: „Mon oeil ne m’embrera l’en mie, / Quar ja l’a ma dame et m’amie“ [He will not steal my eye, for my lady, my sweetheart, already has it] (OM 13, 3799–3800). The emphasis on the erotically desirable woman as the sole force powerful enough to ,steal‘ the Cyclops’s eye is heightened with the vernacular poet’s reiteration of „ma dame et m’amie“; the Ovidian text, though carrying the same implication, reads more simply, „altera iam rapuit“ [another has already taken it] (*Metamorphoses* 13, 775). The same false sense of security – the erroneous belief that only a hard-hearted woman can hurt him – is expressed in Polyphemus’s song, when he tells Galatea: „Toi seule criens, toi seule honore“ [You alone do I fear, you alone do I honour] (13, 4032). The implication is that love alone has the power to make the giant vulnerable, and it is only in the arena of erotic passion and jealousy that he can be hurt. Despite being framed as a story about female desire, aversion, and bereavement, then, the narrative does also carry an implicit motif of the dangers that love – or lust – poses to men. Not only is Acis murdered by a rival suitor, but Polyphemus himself is so consumed with desire that he loses the focus on male homosocial aggression that had once defined his being and rendered him invincible. The only threat he can comprehend is one that deflects Galatea’s love from himself to another man, and all of his aggressive energies are now channeled into eliminating this obstacle that stands between him and the object of his desire:<sup>3</sup>

Mes trop ai desdaing et pesence  
Que tu desprises moi jaiant  
Pour amer un chetif naiant,  
[...]

<sup>3</sup> The vernacular poet closely follows Ovid’s text, where Polyphemus voices his jealous anger in the same terms: „sed cur Cyclope repulso / Acin amas praefersque meis complexibus Acin? / [...] / ... modo copia detur: / sentiet esse mihi tanto pro corpore vires! / viscera viva traham“ (*Metamorphoses* 13, 860–865).



Se je le puis trouver en place,  
 Ma grant force li mousterrai;  
 Le cuer dou ventre li trerai. (OM 13, 4040–4042, 4048–4050)

[But I feel contempt and irritation that you scorn me, a giant, in order to love a pathetic worthless creature... If I can find him somewhere, I'll show him my great strength; I'll tear his heart from his breast.]

His obsessive fixation on the love triangle, and his inability to see beyond its contours, leave Polyphemus vulnerable to attack from outside its closed system.

This message remains implicit within the narrative itself, to be fulfilled only later, when his fateful encounter with Ulysses is recounted in Book 14. The allegorical commentary in Book 13, however, sets the stage for the giant's ultimate downfall by refocusing attention from female bereavement to male rivalry and conflict, with its reading of Polyphemus as the devil and Acis as Christ. It is the predatory violence of the monstrous giant against his male rival that is highlighted by the moralising poet, in other words, while the love story is displaced into the spiritual realm and dispensed with in only a few lines. Galatea, who is not even named in the gloss, is the human nature that was 'wed' to the godhead in the Incarnation of Christ, while the grotto in which they make love is the Virgin's womb:

Cele divine sapience  
 [...]
 Deigna par son pleisir amer  
 Home, c'est humaine nature,  
 Et tant mist s'entente et sa cure  
 En home amer outreement,  
 Qu'il se joinst à li charnelment  
 Ou ventre de la Vierge pucele,  
 Qui fu la fort roiche et la cele  
 Où la deïté se cela,  
 Quant elle se joinst et mella  
 Par amour à charnel nature. (OM 13, 4153, 4158–4167)

[That Divine Wisdom... deigned, for its pleasure, to love man, that is human nature, and was so focused on loving man absolutely, that it joined itself to him in the flesh in the womb of the Virgin, who was the steadfast rock and the cell in which the godhead concealed himself when he mingled and conjoined with carnal nature, through love.]

In this account, Galatea's active role disappears completely; „humaine nature“ is a passive entity that is actively sought out and loved by Divine Wisdom, represented here by Acis. It is this mystical union of God and humanity that the devil seeks to disrupt, playing his „frestiau de temptacion“ [pipe of temptation] (v. 4255) and ultimately causing Christ's death on the Cross. Acis's apotheosis into a river god, in turn, is glossed as Christ's Resurrection, the revelation of his divine nature, and the pouring forth of his cleansing



blood as baptismal waters (13: 4276–4294). Though the narrative is framed as a woman's story, the gloss turns it into the eschatological struggle of two male antagonists.

The tale of Polyphemus's blinding, in turn, is told by Achimenides, one of Ulysses's companions, and thus again, an eye-witness to the events he describes. There is no mention in either the *Metamorphoses* or the *Ovide moralisé* of love; Polyphemus is simply a monstrous, demonic figure who devours men, and is blinded by the heroic Ulysses. The emphasis is on Achimenides's wretched life when he is accidentally left behind by Ulysses and his men as they flee, and how grateful he is finally to be rescued by Aeneas. The commentary glosses Polyphemus, once again, as the devil; Achemenides as the repentent sinner; and Ulysses as Christ. If Acis represents the Passion of Christ and the Sacrament of baptism, Ulysses represents Christ triumphant, with his victory over the devil who seeks to swallow up the souls of all mankind. Between them, the two stories depict the homicidal, anthropophagic violence of the Cyclops, the obsessive fury of his love, the terrible vengeance he wreaks on the woman who spurned him and the man she loved in his stead, and the vengeance ultimately meted out on him by a heroic warrior. The glosses transpose this horror story into the sacred narrative of the battle between God and Lucifer for possession of the human race, as staged through the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ, and the Holy Sacraments that offer absolution from sin and eternal salvation from the devil's grip.

\* \* \*

The story of Polyphemus – both his blinding and his love for Galatea – reappears in another 14<sup>th</sup>-century text composed a few decades after the *Ovide moralisé*, Guillaume de Machaut's *Voir Dit*.<sup>4</sup> Machaut was undoubtedly familiar with both Ovid and the *Ovide moralisé*, but he made some notable changes in adapting the material to his own purposes. For one thing, the two episodes are now conflated into an account that charts the predatory behaviour, the disastrous love, and the blinding of Polyphemus in a single narrative framework (VD, 6742–7187). For another thing, the feminine orientation of Galatea's story is largely lost.<sup>5</sup> It is Guillaume's male secretary who tells the story, and he uses it to illustrate the dangers that will beset Guillaume if he tries to visit his beloved, Toute-Belle. After a lurid description of Polyphemus's behaviour, the secretary explains that even this destructive violence will seem like nothing compared to what highway robbers and bandits will do to

<sup>4</sup> Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre du Voir Dit*, ed. by Paul Imbs, rev. by Jacqueline Cerquilini-Toulet, Paris: Livre de Poche, 1999 (Lettres Gothiques / Le livre de poche 4557). Text cited from this edition; translations mine.

<sup>5</sup> I must respectfully disagree with Brooke Heidenreich Findley, who asserts that the *Voir Dit* heightens Galatea's „quasi-authorial role“ in comparison with the *Ovide moralisé*, presenting her as „the author of a tale in which Polyphemus's lyric voice is imbedded“; see *Poetic Heroines in Medieval French Narrative. Gender and Fictions of Literary Creation*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 (The New Middle Ages), 109.



Guillaume if he ventures out on the roads. The secretary first summarises the story: Polyphemus preys on passing ships and devours men; he falls in love with Galatea, and plays a love song on his panpipes; in his jealous rage, he murders Acis and tries to force himself on Galatea, but she escapes into the sea. The secretary then cites Galatea as a source for the story, explaining that she recounted how Polyphemus ignored the warning about Ulysses; this diverts him into narrating that story, which is not Galatea's story at all, of course, but that of Achimenides. Finally, he returns to Galatea and cites her as the source for Polyphemus's disordered, violent love song; the song is quoted in full from the *Ovide moralisé*, where of course it is Galatea who reports it. The death of Acis is described again, and the secretary concludes by reiterating his warning: this is what will happen to Guillaume if he makes his trip.

Galatea is still present, then, and she is even named as a source for the story; but she is much less important than in the original Ovidian version. The story is now one told by a man to another man. Moreover, Galatea's only explicit role is to report the warning to Polyphemus about Ulysses, and to recite his song: in other words, she ventriloquizes the words of other male characters, but does not explicitly tell her own story. It is not even Galatea's story anymore, anyway: rather than warning about the dangers that male passion creates for women, it focuses on dangers within the masculine world. The story is no longer framed as an account of how Galatea lost her lover; it is about how Acis was killed by a jealous rival, and how Polyphemus was later blinded by a foreign intruder. Machaut intensifies the movement away from Galatea that was already begun with the allegorical gloss of the *Ovide moralisé*. In fact, the secretary even inserts a misogynist note that is not present in either Ovid or the *Ovide moralisé*. Whereas Galatea commented simply on the power of love to captivate the Cyclops, the secretary redefines this as a sinister power that love bestows onto women:

Est-il rien que fame ne donte  
 Puis qu'Amors s'i veult consentir?  
 Trop peulent fames sans mentir. (VD, 6895–6897)

[Is there anything that a woman does not have dominion over, if Love consents to it? It's no lie, women have too much power.]

Explicitly, Polyphemus embodies male homosocial aggression, and this is accentuated by the illuminations in two of the surviving manuscripts, both of which depict his attacks on passing ships.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that the giant's attacks on ships cease when he falls in love – and thus do not occur within the framework of the actual narrative at hand – it is his violence towards other

<sup>6</sup> Illustrations of Polyphemus preying on sailors appear in Paris, Bibl. Nat. fr. 1584, fol. 285v; and Paris, Bibl. Nat. fr. 22545, fol. 184r. Both are located at v. 6742 of the Imbs and Cerquiglini-Toulet edition. The former is reproduced in Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre dou Voir Dit* (*The Book of the True Poem*), ed. by Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, transl. by R. Barton Palmer, New York, NY: Garland, 1998 (Garland Library of Medieval Literature 106), at their v. 6815.



men that is visually highlighted. And Polyphemus's murderous behaviour, in turn, figures the fate that awaits Guillaume if he travels to visit Toute-Belle:

Mais je vous promet et vous jur  
Qu'il ne vous merroit pas si dur,  
Se vous estiés entre ses mains,  
Com li pilleur. (VD, 7160–7163)

[But I promise and swear to you that he wouldn't mistreat you as badly, if you fell into his hands, as would the highwaymen.]

Like Acis, Guillaume will be an innocent lover, violently set upon by barbaric predators.

It has often been pointed out, however, that there is also a strong underlying message that contradicts this, in which Polyphemus himself is the figure that represents Guillaume.<sup>7</sup> Like Polyphemus, after all, Guillaume is a jealous lover, increasingly consumed with anxiety about rivals, and in constant need of proof that his beloved returns his affections. Like Polyphemus, he is so obsessed with desire that he risks disregarding warnings and endangering himself. Like Polyphemus, he is a poet, showering Toute-Belle with love songs; and whereas Polyphemus had but a single eye, Guillaume has only one functional eye. Of course, Polyphemus is a violent, chaotic version of these traits, and in that sense he is unlike the timid, frail Guillaume. But overall, the story does reinforce the reader's sense that Guillaume is somewhat inappropriate to the role of lover. He is not as extreme in his pretensions as the monstrous giant; but as an ailing, elderly poet he does not fit the profile of the aristocratic, courly lover that he aspires to become. And the narrative overlay also suggests that if Guillaume goes in search of Toute-Belle, he may not like what he finds: it may turn out that she is not in fact faithful to him, but that she has other admirers. And indeed as the story progresses, this is exactly what Guillaume is forced to accept.

<sup>7</sup> See William Calin, *A Poet at the Fountain. Essays on the Narrative Verse of Guillaume de Machaut*, Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1974 (Studies in Romance Languages 9), 180; Katherine Heinrichs, *The Myths of Love. Classical Lovers in Medieval Literature*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990, 169; Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, „Polyphème ou l'antre de la voix dans le Voir Dit de Guillaume de Machaut“, in: *L'Hostellerie de la pensée*, ed. by Michel Zink and Danielle Bohler with Eric Hicks and Manuela Python, Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995, 105–118; Cerquiglini-Toulet, „Polyphème et Prométhée: Deux voies de la 'création' au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle“, in: *Auctor et auctoritas. Invention et conformisme dans l'écriture médiévale. Actes du colloque tenu à l'Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (14–16 juin 1999)*, ed. by Michel Zimmermann, Paris: Ecole des Chartes, 2001 (Mémoires et documents de l'École des chartes 59), 401–410; Estelle Doudet, „Polyphème lyrique et Argus éloquent: La Poésie à la recherche de son pouvoir, de Guillaume de Machaut à la Renaissance“, in: *De vrai humain entendement. Essais sur la littérature française de la fin du Moyen Age*, ed. by Yasmina Foehr-Janssens and Jean-Yves Tilliette, Geneva: Droz, 2005, 29–41; Julie Singer, *Blindness and Therapy in Late Medieval French and Italian Poetry*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011 (Gallica 20), 180–183; Findley, *Poetic Heroines* (see n. 5), 109.



By strongly implying Guillaume's identification with Polyphemus without making this explicit, the secretary conjures up the spectacle of Guillaume's betrayal and disappointment, and his resulting rage and despair, without actually having to voice it. The interactions between the frame narrative and the double-edged exemplum that it contains, highlight the possibly uncomfortable fact that the person of the love poet is not necessarily identifiable with the fictional persona of lover – and that he will forget this at his peril.<sup>8</sup> And the further warning is not only that highwaymen will pose a threat to the elderly love poet if he takes to the roads, but also that it is best not to probe too deeply into the behaviour of one's lady, for fear of traumatic revelations. In fact, this very point is made explicitly at a later point in the *Voir Dit* with the exemplary tale of Apollo and Coronis (VD, 7719–8106). A pervasive misogynist tone, first struck in the secretary's comments about the seductive powers of women, informs this recurring insinuation of female infidelity – a message reminiscent of the more cynical passages of the *Roman de la Rose*.<sup>9</sup> Galatea's own object lesson – that the lethal power of male lust and jealousy pose a terrifying risk to women beset by unwanted suitors – is entirely lost from view.

The point of Machaut's reworking of the myth is not to make Polyphemus a sympathetic figure. Prey to an obsessive desire that spawns only rage and destruction as he targets a love object that can never grant him any solace or fulfilment, the Cyclops embodies the darkest aspects of the masculine psyche. Within the poetic economy of the *Voir Dit*, Polyphemus stands in counterpoint to the idealised model that Guillaume wishes to emulate: that of the courtly lover, consumed by the delicious tension and pleasurable pain of desire for a lady who, while seemingly receptive and favourably disposed, is nonetheless truly accessible only in the realm of poetry, dream, and imagination. The contrast is apparent even within Polyphemus's own song. Ovid models the first part of the giant's song on Virgil's Second Eclogue, itself a reworking of Polyphemus's love song to Galatea in Theocritus's Eleventh Idyll. Though Machaut would not have known Theocritus, he would certainly have been familiar with Virgil's poem, in which the shepherd Corydon first laments the cruelty of his beloved Alexis and enumerates the gifts that he could offer if the loved one would but grant his favours; but then consoles himself, realising that persistence is futile and that if he cannot woo Alexis with his gifts, he can surely find success with someone else: „ah, Corydon, Corydon, quae te dementia cepit? / [...] / invenies alium, si te hic fastidit, Alexim“ [Ah

<sup>8</sup> Cerquiglini-Toulet notes that the exemplum overall „illustre pour Guillaume le statut du poète lyrique dans son rapport au récit“ („Polyphème ou l'ancre de la voix“ [see n. 7], 107).

<sup>9</sup> Jean de Meun's narrator, for example, comments at one point: „Vos qui ne creiez vos amies, / sachiez mout fetes granz folies; / [...] / S'el jurent: 'Toutes somes vostres', / creiez les comme paternostres“ [„You who do not believe your sweethearts, should know that you commit a great folly; [...] If they swear, 'We are completely yours', believe them as an article of Faith“ (translation mine)], *Roman de la Rose*, three vols, ed. by Félix Lecoy, Paris: Champion, 1970–73 (Classiques Français du Moyen Age 92, 95, 98), II, vv. 15723–24, 15727–28.



Corydon, Corydon, what madness has gripped you? (...) You will find another Alexis, if this one scorns you] (*Eclogues* 2, 69, 73).<sup>10</sup> This means of averting disaster by transferring one's desire to a different object lies at the basis of Machaut's own *Dit de l'Alerion*, in which the first-person narrator moves through a series of ladies, each of whom in turn enables him to sustain his identity as desiring subject and love poet.<sup>11</sup> What matters in these poems is not to possess a specific love-object, but merely to love; and the poetic articulation of erotic subjectivity can continue unbroken through an endless chain of ladies, each a substitute for the absolute ideal of perfection that is really the poet's object of desire.

In Ovid's recasting of the song of Polyphemus/Corydon, however, the Cyclops oscillates between his fantasies of erotic desire and fulfilment, and his anger and frustration at Galatea's flight. He first praises her beauty and delicacy – „floridior prati“ [more blooming than the meadows], „matura dulcior uva, / mollior et cygni plumis“ [sweeter than ripened grapes, softer than swan's down] (*Metamorphoses* 13, 790, 795–876) – and then castigates her harsh resistance: „durior annosa quercu, fallacior undis“ [harder than aged oak, falser than water], „laudato pavone superbior, acrior igni“ [vainer than a praised peacock, more cruel than fire] (*Metamorphoses* 13, 799, 802). Retreating from these complaints, he enumerates his material wealth and manly beauty, and tries to entice her with the promise of gifts. But by the end he despairs once more and gives full voice to the corrosive effects of jealousy and explosive rage: if he cannot have Galatea for himself, his goal is to ruin her pleasure with Acis, not to find another object for his affections. The same trajectory features in the giant's song as it is elaborated in the *Ovide moralisé*, itself quoted in full in the *Voir Dit*. In these Ovidian-inspired texts, Polyphemus's song represents the violent and utter breakdown of the courtly model enunciated in the many courtly lyrics composed by Guillaume for Toute-Belle in the course of the poem, and the emergence of a horrific alternative response to the endless deferral of desire. In a sense, the hapless Guillaume emerges as a playfully parodic version of both models. As a poet and focus of public gossip and entertainment, he has none of the aristocratic privilege, overall stature, or shield of secrecy and privacy necessary for a successful enactment of the courtly paradigm. Like Polyphemus, he lacks the cultural attributes needed to embody the idealised poetic lover. And yet as a frail and timid cleric, he can also never be more than an impotent and slightly comical version of the jealous lover spurned.

\* \* \*

<sup>10</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues*, transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, and London: William Heinemann, 1974 (The Loeb Classical Library 63). Text and translation are cited from this edition.

<sup>11</sup> See my „Guillaume de Machaut and the Consolation of Poetry“, *Modern Philology* 100 (2002), 169–195.



My final example of the medieval Polyphemus is Christine de Pizan's *Epistre Othea*, a collection of 100 mythological exempla; each one is narrated briefly in four lines of verse, followed by prose glosses that give a few more narrative details and provide moral and allegorical commentary.<sup>12</sup> Polyphemus appears twice, as his two stories are once again separated: his blinding by Ulysses, and his love for Galatea. In Christine's treatment, the themes explored by Machaut – conflicting models of gendered subjectivity, the tension between idealisation and misogyny in the paradigms of courtly love poetry, the dangers inherent in trying to literalise poetic fictions – are less important. For her, Polyphemus becomes a vehicle for the moral elaboration of a chivalric code of conduct; and the miniatures that accompany the text further inflect this exposition with an overlay of ethnic and cultural difference.<sup>13</sup>

In his first appearance, Polyphemus is an allegory for the knight overtaken by sloth or cowardice; while Ulysses, who blinds him, represents the crafty and malicious enemy who will take advantage of a careless or distracted knight:

Ne soyes pas lonc ne prolice  
A toy gaitier de la malice  
Ulixés, qui l'ueil au geant  
Embla, tout fust il cler veant. (*Othea*, texte 19, p. 230)

[Do not be slow or distracted in protecting yourself from the malice of Ulysses, who stole the giant's eye, even though he was so clear-sighted.]

Both figures play essentially negative roles in Christine's moralization; as she explains,

le bon chevalier se gard que parece ne le laist surprendre aux baras et agais des malicieus, si que son oeil en puit estre ravy: c'est a savoir l'oeil de son entendement, ou son honneur, ou sa chevance, ou ce que il a plus chier, comme souvent aviengne mains inconveniens par parece et lacheté. (*Glose* 19, p. 231)

<sup>12</sup> Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. by Gabriella Parussa, Geneva: Droz, 1999 (Textes Littéraires Français 517). Text cited from this edition; translations mine.

<sup>13</sup> On the medieval treatment of racial and ethnic difference, see David M. Goldberg, "The Development of the Idea of Race: Classical Paradigms and Medieval Elaborations", *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 5 (1999), 561–570; Robert Bartlett, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001), 39–56; Lynne Tarte Ramey, *Christian, Saracen, and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2001 (Studies in Medieval History and Culture 3); Debra Higgs Strickland, "Monstrosity and Race in the Late Middle Ages", in: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. by Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle, Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012, 365–386; and my "Others and Alterity", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, ed. by Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 238–250.



[The good knight takes care that sloth does not allow him to be overtaken by the wiles and traps of malicious ones, so that his eye might be stolen; that is to say, the eye of his understanding, or his honour, or his personal profit or what is most precious to him, as many hindrances can often arise through sloth and cowardice.]

The miniature faithfully illustrates the text and its gloss (fig. 1). Polyphemus is a knight in armour, and the wily Ulysses creeps up on him from behind, taking advantage of his distraction to steal his eye: a clear portrayal of malice visited upon a knight unable or unwilling to defend himself. But the miniature also supports an alternative reading in the liberties it takes with the clothing and appearance of the two antagonists, and these added details make a clear ethnic distinction between Ulysses and his victim.



Fig. 1: Ulysses steals Polyphemus's eye. Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*.  
© The British Library Board. London, British Library, Harley 4431, fol. 105r.



Though fair-skinned, Polyphemus is marked as a Turk or Saracen by his headband, his scimitar, his distinctive twisted and knotted belt, his long divided moustache dangling from either side of a clean-shaven upper lip, and his extravagant double-pointed beard.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, his club reminds us that the original Polyphemus was actually a savage giant who lived in a cave and devoured raw human flesh. This double focus underscores the identification of both the Saracen and the giant as representing a failure to embody the ideals of knighthood: both figures could be seen, if somewhat differently, as aping the outward signs of knighthood while lacking the core inner virtues that give chivalric identity its real meaning. The rambunctious energy of the Cyclops might seem a far cry from sloth, but not if we understand the term as pertaining to spiritual sloth rather than physical laziness. Indeed, in the prose *Lancelot*, Lancelot explicitly cites sloth as the trait that prevents an otherwise capable man from attaining the moral virtues essential to knighthood.<sup>15</sup>

Mais les teches del cuer m'est il avis que chascuns les poroit avoir, se pereche ne li toloit, car chascuns puet avoir cortoisie et deboinareté et les autres biens qui del cuer muevent ... por che quit je que l'en nel pert se par pereche non a estre preus. (*L*, vol. VII, 248)

[But it seems to me that anyone can have the qualities of the heart, if sloth doesn't prevent it, for anyone can have courtesy and worthiness and the other good things that pertain to the heart ... and so I believe that it is only through sloth that one fails to be noble.]

<sup>14</sup> For a similar use of ornate, fanciful armor, turbaned headdresses, and exotic moustaches as a means of assimilating Trojan heroes to Turkish warriors in a set of 15<sup>th</sup>-century tapestries depicting the Trojan War, see James Harper, "Turks as Trojans; Trojans as Turks: Visual Imagery of the Trojan War and the Politics of Cultural Identity in Fifteenth-Century Europe", in: *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages. Translating Cultures*, ed. by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 54), 158–166. Harper specifies the motif of the half-moustache as "an attempt to convey Turkish Otherness" (164). Jean-François Kosta-Théfaine notes the use of the belted robe, turban, and double-pointed beard as signs of Eastern exoticism in an early 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, in "The Pierpont Morgan Library Manuscript M.723: Illustrations of Hayton's *La Fleur des histoires d'Orient*", in: *Travels and Travelogues in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Jean-François Kosta-Théfaine, New York, NY: AMS Press, 2009 (AMS Studies in the Middle Ages 28), 135–154. For illustrations showing both Tartars and examples of various 'monstrous races' with double-pointed beards – and sometimes long, drooping moustaches as well – in manuscripts of Marco Polo's *Devisement du Monde*, see Debra Higgs Strickland, "Text, Image, and Contradiction in the *Devisement dou monde*", in: *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, ed. by Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Amilcare Iannucci, Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2008, 23–59.

<sup>15</sup> *Lancelot: Roman en prose du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. by Alexandre Micha, nine vols, Geneva and Paris: Droz, 1978–83 (Textes Littéraires Français). Text cited from this edition; translations mine.



Polyphemus, like many Arthurian giants, exemplifies this 'slothful' failure to cultivate true virtue, without which a powerful physique cannot, in and of itself, lead to chivalric nobility. Lancelot is not necessarily the source for Christine's imagery, but the passage does illuminate her moralization of the giant.

But the Saracen iconography also hints at a deeper underlying message. Though the text refers twice to the malice of Ulysses, the visual image of a European nobleman despoiling a Saracen knight suggests that we might, in fact, identify with Ulysses as the real hero of an allegory grounded in Crusading fantasies. Through this carefully orchestrated combination of text and image, Christine exploits the dual reputation of Ulysses in medieval tradition as both hero and trickster.<sup>16</sup> Recasting the textual reference to malicious trickery, the miniature offers us a figure of idealized courtly masculinity reaping honour from the defeat of an exotic and formidable enemy. And that enemy, the Saracen race, simultaneously comprises the barbarity of giants and the allure of a rival culture that offers lucrative prizes for anyone who could conquer it: advanced technologies; luxury objects such as spices, carpets, and fabrics; medical and scientific learning, and the preservation of Classical philosophy. It is interesting, in fact, that Christine's illustration depicts Ulysses as literally *stealing* Polyphemus's eye. This is not exactly what Ulysses does in the other texts, where the point is to 'rob' the Cyclops of sight by destroying his eye, not to take the eye itself as a prize. In the enticing fantasy offered by the combined effects of text and miniature, it is the Saracen giant who has lost his competitive edge by lapsing into a lethargic, morally 'lazy' sensuality – Christine does not need to remind her readers that Polyphemus ignored the warning about Ulysses because he was so obsessed with his lust for Galatea – and allowed his European adversary to gain the upper hand. If the knightly reader of the text is encouraged to guard against vice, it is not only so that he will not be robbed of his honour or livelihood, but also so that he can be worthy of participating in this greatest of all possible adventures, modern equivalent of the classical or Arthurian hero's 'crusade' against giants and other monsters: the conquest of the Islamic kingdoms.

Christine's second use of Polyphemus focuses on his unrequited love for Galatea and his murder of Acis. Here Polyphemus, identified only as a giant and not as a Cyclops, mirrors numerous Arthurian giants in his violent, though unsuccessful, effort to abduct a beautiful maiden. But he is also, once again, depicted as being of an alien race (fig. 2).

<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet notes the ambiguous way that Polyphemus and Ulysses figure implicitly as opposing models for Guillaume as lover and poet in the *Voir Dit*; see „Un engin si subtil“: *Guillaume de Machaut et l'écriture au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Genève: Slatkine, Paris: Champion, 1985 (Bibliothèque du XV<sup>e</sup> Siècle 47), 166–168. As she comments, „si Ulysse est pour le Moyen Age le symbole de l'intelligence, il l'est aussi pour la ruse“ (168).





Fig. 2: Polyphemus attacks Acis and Galatea. Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*.  
© The British Library Board. London, British Library, Harley 4431, fol. 122r.

The stylish haircut, fashionable clothing, and European complexion and features of Acis contrast notably with the giant's swarthy complexion, black curly hair, and knotted headband. As before, the giant's status as outsider identifies him with Western Christendom's archrivals in Muslim Africa and Asia. As one definitively excluded from love or marriage, Polyphemus represents a foreign race whose culture and religion similarly place them off-limits as lovers or marriage partners. As a threat to the life of an aristocratic youth, embodying physical violence and malice, the giant can be imaginatively conflated, more specifically, with the Saracen enemies that threatened European knighthood throughout the Crusade era. In the allegorical gloss, the giant represents the moral and spiritual dangers of abandoning oneself to the indulgent pleasures of erotic love. The underlying assumption – borne out in countless medieval romances featuring the bodily aggression, amorality, and materialistic orientation of giants – is that the ability to rise above worldly concerns, placing one's



faith in spiritual fortitude and the fate of the immortal soul, is something a giant cannot grasp.<sup>17</sup> In this he further resembles the Saracens of medieval French literature, who are typically portrayed as the devotees of a religious cult grounded in the literal and the bodily at the expense of the spiritual.<sup>18</sup>

I pointed out that Christine's treatment of Polyphemus and Ulysses was somewhat ambivalent; whereas Ulysses is explicitly identified as a figure of malice in the text, the visual image suggests that he is also to be seen as the hero with whom the male reader identifies. The treatment of Polyphemus and Galatea is equally ambivalent, though in a different way. Christine filters the Ovidian story through its reworking in the *Voir Dit*, so that it becomes in the end uncertain whether the real focus is Acis or Polyphemus himself. Like Machaut, she retains the focus on male sexual rivalry: Galatea is now completely sidelined. Her only role is to mediate the violent encounter between the Saracen giant and the courtly knight; her own perspective, her own experience, disappear from view. And like Machaut, Christine enables more than one reading of the giant himself. Polyphemus is the danger that will beset a man in love, but that danger is simultaneously external and internal:

S'au dieu Cupido es subgez,  
Gard toy du geant enragez,  
Que la roche ne soit boutee  
Sur Acis et sur Galathee. (*Othea*, texte 59, p. 283)

[If you are subject to the god Cupid, beware the enraged giant, lest the rock be thrown at Acis and Galatea.]

The passive voice construction makes the text slightly cryptic: is the point that the knight must prevent the giant from attacking, or that he must not launch an attack himself? As in the *Voir Dit*, we may find ourselves wondering: is the reader being warned not to be like Acis, or not to be like Polyphemus?

In fact, both lessons emerge from the two-part commentary. The initial moral gloss is a warning not to immerse oneself in the pleasures of the flesh, thereby ignoring dangers, and losing the ability to defend oneself:

Si est a entendre que le bon chevalier se gard en tel cas d'estre surpris de tel qui ait poissance et voulement de lui grever. (*Othea*, Glose 59, p. 283)

[Thus it is to be understood that the good knight should beware, in such a case, of being ambushed by someone who has the power and the will to hurt him.]

<sup>17</sup> On the bodily extravagance of giants in medieval literature, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants. Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 (Medieval Cultures 17).

<sup>18</sup> See Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East. European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009, 200–279; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, „On Saracen Enjoyment. Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England“, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001), 113–146.



In the second part of the commentary, however, the emphasis is not on external danger, but on internal moral or spiritual corruption:

Que du geant se gard qui a Cupido est donnez, c'est que le bon esperit se gard que nulle ymaginacion n'ait au monde ne aux choses d'icellui, ains ait tous jours souvenance que toutes choses mondaines sont de pou de duree. (*Othea*, Allegorie 59, p. 283)

[That he who has given himself to Cupid should beware the giant, means that a good intelligence must take care that it does not dwell on the world or the things pertaining to it, but should always bear in mind that worldly things are fleeting.]

In that sense, the giant is not only the image of the external dangers that threaten the insouciant, self-indulgent lover. He is also a mirror of what a man must avoid becoming: one driven mad by his obsession with carnal desire. Either way, the lesson is to avoid giving in to lust and pleasures of the flesh, but this may be because they will drive a lover into violent passions and jealous rages, or because they will weaken his resolve and reduce him to sensual lethargy and distraction. In either case, moral and spiritual dangers are visually identified with the worldly, brutal life-style of an 'infidel' culture. Ultimately, then, Christian knights are warned not to become so weakened with carnal pleasures that they are unable to stand and defend themselves and their faith in the face of real bodily, moral, or spiritual danger, appropriately figured as the wrathful Saracen giant. Though differently framed, the two exempla featuring Polyphemus work together, both textually and visually, to reinforce a common message.

In conflating the Cyclops with the Saracen, Christine continues the thread running through all of the examples we have seen: that of Polyphemus as one excluded from the great game of love. His delusion is apparent in the contrasting portraits of the giant elaborated respectively by Galatea and by Polyphemus himself in both Ovid and the *Ovide moralisé*. Polyphemus vaunts his virile and handsome appearance – „certe ego me novi liquidaeque in imagine vidi / nuper aquae, placuitque mihi mea forma videnti“ [lately I saw my reflection in a clear pool, and I liked my features when I saw them] – while Galatea describes him as „ille inmitis et ipsis / horrendus silvis et visus ab hospite nullo / inpune“ [that savage creature, whom the very woods shudder to look upon, whom no stranger has ever seen save to his own hurt] (*Metamorphoses* 13, 840–841, 759–761). The sinister humour is heightened still further by the fact that, in attempting to trim his beard and comb his unruly locks, Polyphemus must resort to using a scythe and a rake, as no other tools are large enough or sturdy enough for the job. The miniature in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript 5069 of Paris, Bibl. de l'Arsenal, depicts the giant's attempts at good grooming, accompanied by a rubric that wryly explains the scene:

Ci endroit raconte la fable comment .i. jaient se pigne d'une herce, et cope sa barbe d'une sarpe pour ce qu'il vouloit sembler plus bel a Galatea qu'il amoit (fol. 193v; cf. fig. 3).



[Here the fable tells how a giant combs his hair with a rake, and cuts his beard with a scythe, because he wanted to seem more handsome to Galatea, whom he loved].

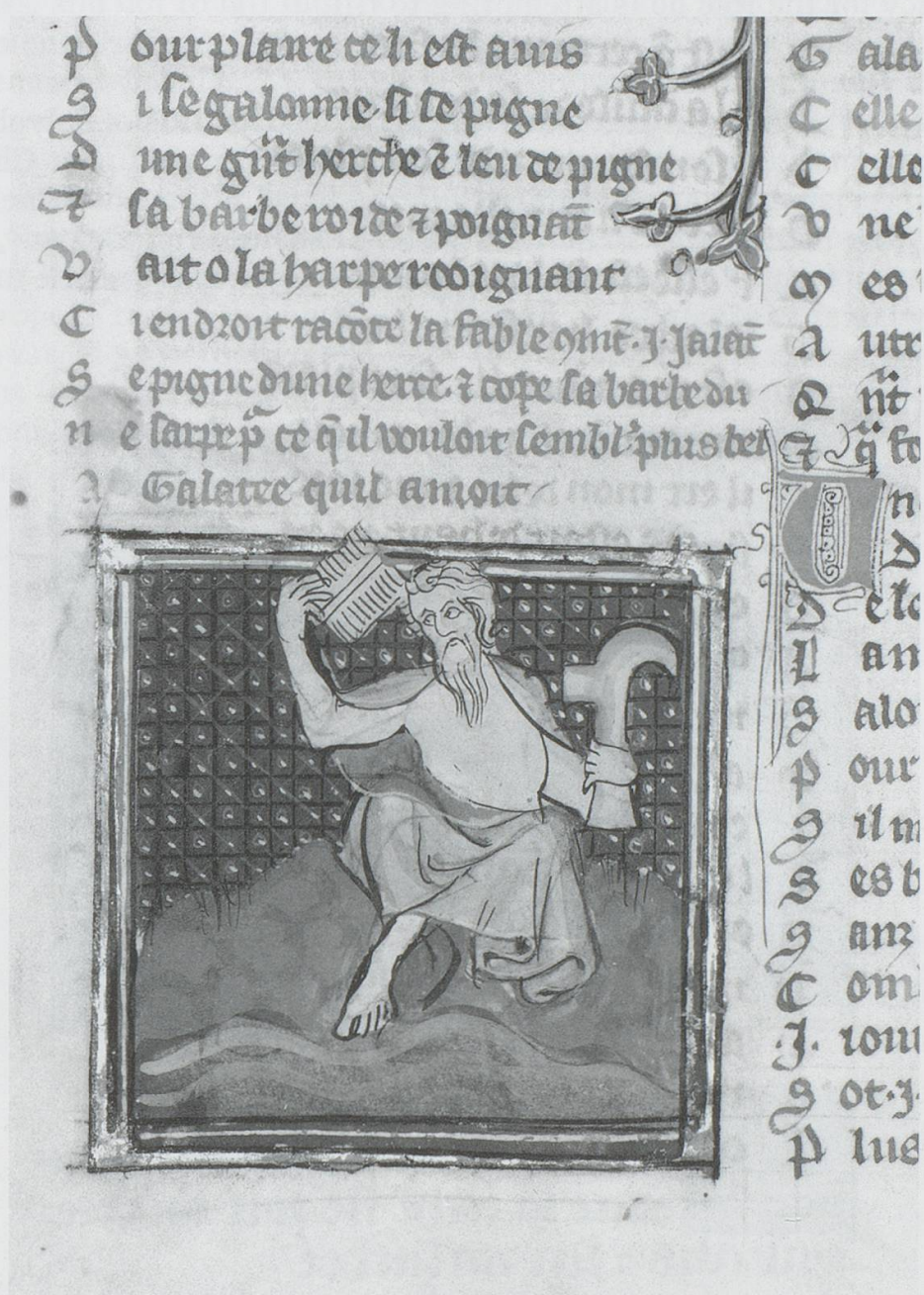


Fig. 3: Polyphemus combs his hair. *Ovide moralisé*. Paris, Bibl. de l'Arsenal, MS 5069, fol. 193v.

The spectacle of the half-naked giant, clad only in a loosely draped cloak, attempting to manipulate an over-sized comb in his efforts to appear 'bel' and suitable for love, serves only to highlight how totally unsuitable he is for the amorous life. Whether we take the Cyclops's difference to be one of race, culture, or species, the fact remains that he will never be able to compete with the handsome young man on whom Galatea has set her heart. Machaut, while ignoring any possible overtones of race or ethnicity, maintains the im-



age of the Cyclops as one ill-suited to love for reasons of temperament and bodily appearance, and uses him to comment ironically on Guillaume's own inadequacy for the role he is attempting to fill.

In making the racial difference of the Cyclops explicit, Christine explicitly realises a potential interpretation of the barbaric, excluded 'other' that was only hinted at in previous texts. Interestingly, the depiction of Polyphemus as Saracen is consistent only in the early manuscripts made under Christine's direct supervision. In later manuscripts produced after Christine's death, however, this nuance was sometimes lost; the manuscript Coligny, Bodmer MS 49, dating from 1460, for example, depicts Polyphemus as little more than a slightly larger version of Acis himself (fol. 90r; cf. fig. 4).



**S** E a cupido es subget  
 Garde toy du geant enragies  
 Que la roche ne soit bouter  
 Sur atis z sur galathee.  
 Glose

**G**alathee fut vne nymphe ou vne  
 deesse qui auoit vn iouenceau no-  
 me atis. vn geant de layde estatu-  
 re estoit en amour de galathee  
 qui amer ne le saignoit. Et

Fig. 4: Polyphemus attacks Acis and Galatea. Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*. Fondation Martin Bodmer, Coligny (Génève), MS 49, fol. 90r.



Here the iconography still supports the double reading of two complementary warnings: not to make oneself vulnerable by sinking into the oblivion of erotic bliss, and not to fall into excessive passion and fits of jealousy. But the added dimension of identifying the embodiment of irrational passion with the Saracen enemy is lost. Perhaps Christine was responding to the cultural crises and issues of her time when, shortly after the disastrous European defeat by the Ottomans at Nicopolis (1396), she chose to identify an infamous figure of savagery with those who had so recently decimated the flower of Christian chivalry. Some sixty years later, it may have seemed more important to focus on the text as a set of moral lessons entirely focused on the virtues and vices of the European reader. In any case, the foregoing examples have allowed us to trace the varied ways that Polyphemus was used by late medieval writers. As monstrous lover and deluded love poet; as the victim of feminine charms; as a dangerous predator threatening the lives of aristocratic men, or as himself the victim of male treachery and aggression; or as the representative of an enemy race whose encroachments into Europe were causing increased alarm: in a myriad of ways the Cyclops served as a focal point around whom literary, cultural, and political issues could be crystallised.



