

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 20
Issue 2 *June*

Article 4

June 1984

Death and Rebirth, Sexuality, and Fantasy in Homer and Joyce

Donald Palumbo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 20, no.2, June 1984, p.90-99

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Death and Rebirth, Sexuality, and Fantasy in Homer and Joyce

by DONALD PALUMBO

ITS TREATMENT of sexuality—whether sublimated, overt, or even pornographic—is a distinctive characteristic of fantasy literature. Perhaps the primary psychological appeal of fantasy is its tendency to exorcise fear of the unknown by revealing the unknown, if only to the subconscious, to be always a variant of the familiar while treating it—safely containing it—in familiar, consciously “known” and recognized, formats. The greatest universal human unknown is death. While fantasy alleviates our fear of death obliquely by ever suggesting that the unknown in general is merely the familiar transformed—and directly through depictions of life after death, forms of immortality, and both actual and symbolic resurrections—it simultaneously releases us from the thrall of death through its treatment of sexuality. For it is in fantasy most specifically that sex—the precursor and symbol of life, of renewal, of the survival of the species (an immortality of sorts) despite the deaths of individuals—is presented, in the contexts of these other psychic palliatives, as death’s antidote.

By far the most fantastic segment of *Ulysses* is the hallucinatory “Circe” or nighttown episode, the longest of the novel’s chapters and that in which themes, images, catch phrases, and references from throughout the work swirl like debris in a maelstrom. The episode takes place in Bella Cohen’s Purdon Street Brothel, and is thus the episode most concertedly and overtly concerned with sexuality. Yet it is also obsessively suffused with death and rebirth events, symbols, metaphors, and allusions. And it contains numerous technical and situational similarities, as well as allusions, not only to *The Odyssey*, but also to the “Walpurgis Night” section of Goethe’s *Faust* and to Flaubert’s *Temptations of Saint Anthony*, other fantastic works that contain central death and resurrection motifs.

While there is much more that is fantastic in *The Odyssey* than what is encompassed by Odysseus’ adventure on Circe’s Island, Joyce concentrates the fantastic elements of *Ulysses* in the “Circe” episode, although some do occur elsewhere (e.g., “Cyclops”). In doing so, and thus linking the fantastic in *Ulysses* with sexuality through an episode that primarily consists of a series of death and resurrection fantasies, Joyce not only further elaborates the Odyssean parallels that suffuse

Ulysses, but also demonstrates his sense that the subconscious appeal of fantasy is its exorcism of our fear of death (whether this results from the more generalized mitigation of our fear of the unknown or not), suggests that sexuality is another link between fantasy and this easing of the fear of death, and provides an illuminating interpretation of *The Odyssey* that focuses on the interrelationship of sexuality, fantasy, and death, not only in the Circe adventure, but in the entire epic. While concentration of death and resurrection motifs may seem more appropriate to the "Hades" episode, that they are far more numerous and prominent in "Circe" is itself a parallel to *The Odyssey's* structure, for his interlude with Circe contains Odysseus' trip to Hades. Death and rebirth motifs in *The Odyssey*, as in "Circe," are repeatedly so set in a context of sexuality. And in both *The Odyssey* and "Circe," fantasy is associated with or replaces sexuality—already depicted as victorious over death—while it is also itself a vehicle of escape from death. A heretofore unacknowledged but essential element of the Odyssean parallels in *Ulysses* as a whole is the confluent association of sexuality with the concept of death and rebirth, in a context of fantasy, evident in "Circe."

The plot of *The Odyssey*—the adventure in the unknown world that leads us home, the fabulous voyage back to the familiar—is the archetypal symbolic action of all fantasy, here appropriately resurrected to the conscious level of narrated event, if fantasy does indeed depend for its effect on subconsciously revealing the unknown and fearful to be the familiar and tamed. *Ulysses* too is Bloom's adventure in the outside world, Dublin, that leads to home, #7 Eccles Street. It too works essentially as fantasy does—disguising the familiar as the unfamiliar—through clothing its Odyssean parallels in its at first mystifying grab-bag of innovative narrative techniques. Even its celebrated use of allusion, through which much of the Odyssean parallel is forged, is a facet of that parallel. As is customary in an epic, *The Odyssey* is itself highly allusive: while it refers widely to Greek mythology and legend, it makes repeated and elaborate reference to Agamemnon's history, for example, in suggestively contrasting his ill-fated return home to Odysseus' successful return, much as *Ulysses* contrasts (as a mock epic) Bloom's return to Odysseus'. And this confluence of the unfamiliar and prosaic is like the sexual experience itself, an adventure that can be at once both unknown and familiar, seductive because it is both novel and commonplace, and (for the male) a biological trip "home" as well, to the womb.

Of course, *The Odyssey* is quintessentially both fantastic and familiar. As an epic it conveys a well-known story in a formulaic manner. And the fantastic and real—i.e., familiar—worlds are pointedly equated when Odysseus first sets eyes again on his kingdom:

The landscape then looked strange, unearthly strange
To the Lord Odysseus. . . .

He stood up, rubbed his eyes, gazed at his homeland,
And swore . . .

“What am I in for now?
Whose country have I come to this time?”
(XIII, 194–200)¹

Ithaca is as strange to him as any fantastic realm he has visited; and the realistic threat it harbors in the suitors is as deadly as the fantastic dangers of Scylla and Charybdis, the Cyclops, or Circe.

As Charles Segal notes, “The universal fact of change in human life is symbolized in the *Odyssey*, as throughout Western literature, by the journey itself. . . . Some of the recurrent motifs that involve or accompany transition . . . are *sleep*, the *bath*, *purification*, and the *threshold*. All . . . are somehow associated with the mystery of passage between worlds, and all belong to the realm of experience where known and unknown cross.”² All, thus, are associated with the mysteries of birth and death and the confluence of the fantastic and familiar. Other recurrent motifs in the poem that symbolize change or transition in human life are water crossings, which occur at least seventeen times, and changes of clothing, which occur at least fifteen times and are usually associated with bathing.

Bathing is often pointedly symbolic of rebirth. Odysseus’ birth is recalled as Eurykleia bathes him (XIX). And Athena rejuvenates Penelope in bathing her as she sleeps (XVIII), Odysseus as he is being bathed by Eurynome (XXIII), and, finally, Laertes after he is bathed and dressed by the Sikel woman (XXIV). Odysseus’ seaborne arrival in Phaeacia, like his earlier, seabedabbled arrival in Ogygia and later awakening after a sea voyage in Ithaca—which also signals a return of order to the realm—are likewise symbolic rebirths.

The poem’s two most significant purifications—Zeus’ blasting Odysseus’ ship with lightning, thus killing what remains of his crew to punish them for slaughtering Helios’ oxen (XII), and Odysseus’ cleansing his palace halls with fire after he has killed the suitors (XXII)—are clearly associated with death. And thresholds are repeatedly crossed to signal transitions from known to unknown worlds, and vice versa, and twice are metaphorically associated with death: Melampous, who died in battle, never had “to cross the doorsill into dim old age” (XV, 244); and Odysseus first tests his bow and then slaughters the suitors while standing “on the broad doorsill” (XXI, 124; XXII, 2) of his palace.

Most significantly, however, both of Odysseus’ overt sexual escapades are also closely associated with these and other symbolic and actual deaths and resurrections. After Circe transforms his men into swine and then back into men “younger, more handsome, and taller

1. Homer, *The Odyssey*, tr. Robert Fitzgerald, Anchor Books (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963). All passages from *The Odyssey* are from this translation.

2. Charles Segal, “Transition and Ritual in Odysseus’ Return,” *The Odyssey*, tr. and ed. Albert Cook, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1974), pp. 466–69.

than before" (X, 94)—a first symbolic death and rebirth—and after Elpenor dies in falling from her palace roof, Odysseus shares Circe's bed for a year. Then, before she consents to his leaving, Circe insists Odysseus visit Hades—another, unmistakable death and rebirth symbol, which Circe later jests makes Odysseus "twice mortal" (XII, 23)—to consult Tiresias' shade. While in Hades, Odysseus also sees Elpenor's ghost—one of many reappearances in the poem of one already dead—and then returns to Aeaea, Circe's island, to bury Elpenor's body. As the Circe interlude fully contains the trip to Hades, the poem's most prominent death and rebirth symbol is framed by sexuality.

After Zeus drowns the rest of his crew, Odysseus washes up on the shore of Ogygia—yet another symbolic rebirth—and lives there for seven years as Calypso's husband. Calypso finally offers Odysseus immortality if he will stay with her as her lover forever, but he spurns this offer to continue his quest for home. Here normal, human sexuality with Penelope is substituted for immortality with the nymph. In fact, immortality is presented here in a thoroughly negative light: that "Calypso" means "she who conceals" suggests that immortality, like Ogygia, would be Odysseus' eternal prison, and Calypso his jailer.

Moreover, Gabriel Germain argues that Odysseus' earlier adventure with the Cyclops is a disguised rite of sexual initiation that entails a symbolic death and rebirth.³ That Odysseus and twelve of his men must cross Polyphemus' massive "doorsill" (IX, 245) to enter the earth, his cave, where six are killed and eaten before Odysseus and the rest eventually re-emerge, does suggest another classically symbolic death and rebirth that entails metaphorical interment and resurrection. The heated, pointed shaft with which Odysseus bores the Cyclops' single eye is, likewise, not too far-fetched a phallic symbol.

And a further connection between erotic desire and death can be found in the suitors' similar reactions to Penelope and Odysseus. Of course, the suitors' ill-mannered courtship of Penelope precipitates their deaths. And, as Segal points out, "The desire of the suitors is described with the phrase 'but thereupon their knees were loosed' (XVIII, 212). The phrase refers not only to erotic desire, but also to death or to the sinking despair at the fear of death. In fact, this very expression describes the suitors' reaction when Odysseus prepares to turn the deadly bow upon them" (XXII, 69). A similar phrase, "loosening the limbs," *lysimeles*, is an epithet of *Eros*, love, in early Greek poetry, an epithet of *thanatos*, death, in Euripides' *Suppliants*, and an epithet of sleep in *The Odyssey* (XX, 57).⁴

And sleep and awakening is the most obvious recurring symbol and metaphor of death and rebirth—as well as the most fitting transition between the fantastic and real worlds—in the poem. Flanking the Circe/

3. Gabriel Germain, "Polyphemus and African Initiation Rites," *The Odyssey*, Cook, pp. 425–28.

4. Segal, pp. 472–73.

Hades adventures are two crucial occasions when Odysseus is disastrously betrayed by his crewmen as he sleeps: when they open Aiolos' bag of winds (X), the act that precipitates Odysseus' years of wandering, and when they slaughter Helios' oxen (XII), the act that precipitates their deaths. As Odysseus leaves Phaeacia for Ithaca, "slumber, soft and deep like the still sleep of death, weighed on his eyes" (XIII, 79-80); and Penelope, in Ithaca, later rises from the enchanted sleep wrought by Athena wishing for a "death as mild" (XVIII, 202).

Nearly half the books of the poem, particularly those near the beginning, commence with daybreak or a character's waking, end with nightfall or a character's falling asleep, or both. Complementing Odysseus' sleeping as he leaves Phaeacia and awakening again—as from a dream—in his now unfamiliar home, Ithaca (XIII), the opening books set in Ithaca conclude when Penelope falls into a dream at the end of Book Four while Book Five—which introduces both Odysseus and the fantastic, unfamiliar world, itself like a dream—begins with dawn breaking on Ogygia as Odysseus sleeps. Hermes, God of travellers and sleep, then arrives on Ogygia with both the message that sets Odysseus' return in motion and "the wand with which he charms asleep—or when he wills, awake—the eyes of men" (V, 47-48), to awaken Odysseus from fantasy to reality. Hermes reappears at the beginning of Book Twenty-Four, with the same wand and nearly the same lines, to escort the slain suitors to Hades. As Segal observes, "These passages and the recurrence of Hermes and his wand at the two ends of the journey home make the entire return appear under a great metaphor of sleeping and waking,"⁵ which is itself a symbol for death and rebirth. The underlying theme of the quest myth—and of fantasy generally—is revealed to be the cyclical, controlled alternation of order and chaos, day and night, waking and sleeping, life and death.

While sleep also frames Odysseus' stay in Phaeacia, the story of his travels Odysseus tells there—which contains all his adventure's most fantastic elements—replaces sleep, as the Phaeacians pointedly eschew sleep (XII, 370-74) and stay awake until dawn to hear it. As it supplants sleep, fantasy here symbolically supplants death. (And, metaphorically, the most fantastic—and therefore unknown, fearful—elements of the poem thus appear safely as dreams within a dream.) Finally, after they first make love again once order is restored in Ithaca, Odysseus repeats this performance in telling "all that story" through the night to Penelope, who "could not close her eyes till all was told" (XXIII, 307-08). Here fantasy, which occurs in the same bed, is associated with sex as both by turns supplant sleep, already metaphorically and symbolically associated with death. And the ability of Odysseus, the "master of improvisation" (XIV, 191), to tell a fantastic tale has

5. Segal, p. 471.

already repeatedly saved his life. It enables him to keep his identity secret until he attacks the suitors—as he tells false tales while in Ithaca to Athena, to Eumaeus, and (initially) even to Penelope—just as the lie concerning his name had aided him in his earlier escape from death on Polyphemus' island.

The “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*, which occurs in the hours around midnight as well as in a whore house, suggests much more strongly than does *The Odyssey* that night is naturally associated with sex as well as (through its association with sleep) fantasy and death. Thus, it more clearly reveals simultaneous relationship among all three concepts. However—amidst scores of impossible physical transformations, while sex is universally discussed and imagined in nearly all its possible permutations, and even though thirty shillings is dutifully paid—no sex act (other than a little light petting) ever really occurs. Fantasy—primarily concerning sex, death, and resurrection—completely replaces sex (which is more specifically what one expects in a brothel) as the night's occupation, just as fantasy replaces sleep as Odysseus tells his tale to the Phaeacians and to Penelope.

The transformations in this episode, its changes—which alone substantiate its claim to being fantasy—parallel another specific aspect of the Circe interlude in *The Odyssey*: the sorceress' changing men into swine. Moses Duglacz, porkbutcher, becomes a “ferreteyed Albino, in blue dungarees” (464).⁶ A beagle becomes the “ghouleaten” corpse of the freshly buried Paddy Dignam (472). Bloom's deceased grandfather, Virag, turns into a moth (517), a dog (519–20), a scorpion (521), a snake, and a bird (522). Bella Cohen, whore-mistress, is transformed into a man (530) as Bloom, by turns, becomes a woman, a pig, a cow, the aged Rip van Winkle, and himself at the age of sixteen (540 ff.). And Stephen becomes a vulture as his father, Simon, turns into a buzzard (574). These are only some of the more striking physical transformations in the chapter.

The episode's sexual content, which is almost entirely imaginary, is likewise a parodic echo of Odysseus' sexual relationship with Circe on Aea. Bloom's sexual fantasies, while primarily sado-masochistic (528–45), also encompass transvestitism, eonism, voyeurism (566–67), masturbation, and a number of strange scatological fetishes (467). Passing reference is also made to lesbianism, homosexuality, and bestiality (569). And Bloom imagines a trial at which he is accused of making a series of bizarre sexual advances to Gerty MacDowel and several respectable Dublin ladies (457–71). The most normal sexual act he imagines is Blazes Boylan athletically fornicating with Molly, Bloom's wife, as Bloom himself watches them through a keyhole and masturbates. The episode's language is, in spots, unflinchingly frank and

6. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, The Modern Library New Edition (New York: Random House, 1961). All page references are to this edition.

Anglo-Saxon; and primarily on the basis of this chapter the novel was banned in the United States until 1933.

Yet Bloom's sexual fantasies are tied to, and overpowered by, his and Stephen's fixations on death and resurrection fantasies, which frame and thus contain them. Almost run down by a trolley on his way to the brothel (435), Bloom continuously alludes in his thoughts to famous murder trials, heroic deaths, Judas Iscariot's suicide, historical massacres, and military battles from the Zulu, Boer, Crimean, and Russo-Turkish Wars (456–58, 470–71, 484, 588, 589, 593, 596, 600). While imagining that he is Lord Mayor of Dublin, Bloom also imagines both that a crowd of adoring sightseers dies at his feet as a wall collapses on them and that his enemies are killed by cannon fire (485). At a later point, Stephen terms Bloom's and Lynch's dance with the whores a "Dance of Death" (579); and Zoe, one of the whores, plays the Dead March from Handel's *Saul* on the pianola (555), which Stephen perceives as a coffin (561). At the episode's conclusion, Stephen loses consciousness after a row with two soldiers—a symbolic death—and is then carried off, with Bloom, in a hearse by a gravedigger (607–08).

Bloom had earlier thought of the Dead March in the "Hades" episode, at Paddy Dignam's funeral; and the "Circe" episode allusively—as well as structurally and symbolically—suggests Odysseus' experience in Hades as strongly as it does his experience with Circe, which frames the trip to Hades. Like Odysseus questioning his mother's ghost in Hades, Stephen in the brothel questions his mother's ghost about the cause of her death (581), for instance. Later, Stephen hails Sisyphus (587), another of the shades seen by Odysseus.

Imagined resurrections of the dead—a more dramatic allusion to Odysseus' experience in Hades—is an even more pronounced element of this long episode, however, than are these death references. Not only do Paddy Dignam (472), Stephen's mother (579), and Bloom's grandfather, Virag (511), return from the grave, but Bloom's father and mother, Rudolph and Ellen (537–38), and Stephen's schoolmasters, Father Dolan and Don John Conmee (561), also appear. Shakespeare (567) and Tennyson (588) are likewise resurrected. And, at the last of the episode's several climaxes—as Dublin becomes an embattled, burning hell (complete with Pandemonium, Satan's palace)—"The midnight sun is darkened. The earth trembles. The dead of Dublin . . . arise and appear to many" (598). The last event of the chapter is the appearance of Bloom's dead son, Rudy—who carries a slim cane, an echo of Stephen's ashplant, and a white lambkin, one of the chapter's dozens of allusions to Christ (609). In the context of the entire novel's repeated association of Bloom with Odysseus, the father, and Stephen with Telemachus, the son, this final apparition is the symbolic resurrection that immediately follows Stephen's symbolic death.

Of course, the episode is replete with more subtle references to resur-

rection as well. Stephen enters the brothel chanting in Latin an antiphon for Easter Sunday (431) and, in the midst of his recurrent chanting, alludes to the symbolic resurrection of the body and blood of Christ in saying "bread and wine" (433). Bloom's observation that it is "the witching hour of night" (445) alludes to a soliloquy from *Hamlet* that—prophetic of the chapter's final climax—continues, "When churchyards yawn and Hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world" (III, ii, 407–08). Later, in reference to Bloom, J. J. O'Molloy quotes Hamlet's father's ghost (463), as does, still later, the spirit of Paddy Dignam (473). There are at least a dozen allusions to *Hamlet* in this episode alone. Bloom also alludes to Arthur Griffith's *The Resurrection of Hungary* (484), observes that "absence makes the heart grow younger" (486), and "explains . . . his schemes for social regeneration" (490). The recurring term "metempsychosis," meaning "transmigration of souls" and a reference to reincarnation, turns up repeatedly in this chapter (473, 490), among others. And Stephen both thinks of a variation on his fox riddle that disinters from her grave the "grandmother" the original version had buried (558) and, later, refers to his resurrected mother as a "lemur" (580), a ghost that rises from its grave at night.

Most strikingly, however, Bloom—who is repeatedly compared to Christ in this chapter (e.g., 486, 495, 496, 498)—himself undergoes four imaginary, symbolic deaths and resurrections. Bloom is first sentenced to death by hanging for his sex crimes (471), but the execution is interrupted by the resurrection of Paddy Dignam, who soon alludes to a folksong that concerns a man who is buried and then rises from the dead (474). Later, accused of being "a fiendish libertine," Bloom is about to be lynched by a mob (442) but is found on medical examination to be both a "*virgo intacta*" and with child. He subsequently bears octuplets (a strenuous virgin birth), becomes the New Messiah, and performs several miracles. Eventually pilloried and stoned as a false Messiah, however, Bloom is then set afire only to reappear among "*phoenix flames*," clothed in Christ's vestments, and parodying Christ's words on the road to Calvary in saying, "Weep not for me, O daughters of Erin" (498). (The phoenix is a specific emblem of Christ as well as a generalized symbol of death and resurrection.)

Finally, Bello (the masculated bella) commands Bloom to commit suicide. Her offer to "give you a rare old wine that'll send you skipping to Hell and back" (543–44) alludes not only to Circe's instructions to Odysseus concerning the way to Hades and back, which include advising the use of wine as a libation, but also to Christ's harrowing of Hell on the day between his crucifixion and resurrection. Bloom then dies, is mourned, and his remains are cremated, but he immediately reappears, quite alive, in conversation with the nymph in the painting that hangs over his and Molly's bed—i.e., with the Calypso of the novel's Odys-

sean parallels—who accuses him of kissing her (546). The first two of these deaths and resurrections are pointedly precipitated by Bloom's sexual indiscretions, and the last occurs amid obvious reference to them and to his most elaborately displayed perversion, sado-masochism.

The chapter also contains several quite specific associations of sexuality with death and resurrection. Virag alludes to sex as the cause of man's loss of immortality and fall from paradise (519). And when the Croppy Boy is finally hanged—an echo of Bloom's earlier condemnation to death by hanging—"A violent erection of the hanged sends gouts of sperm spouting through his death clothes" (594). Indeed, death and resurrection is equated here with sexual dysfunction and "getting it up" again. Bloom's penultimate death and resurrection is immediately followed by sexual banter in which his final "farewell" is derided by Zoe's "till the next time" and a reference to premature ejaculation (499). When she then warns him, "Don't fall upstairs," he replies, "The just man falls seven times," (501)—an allusion to *Proverbs* 24:16: "A just man falls seven times and rises up again," which is a promise of salvation.

And just as Bloom is finally cremated only immediately to appear again unscathed, so too does the world and all of creation, respectively, come to an end during the episode, at least figuratively, without significantly impeding events. After Lynch's Cap proclaims "Extremes meet. Death is the highest form of life," the Antichrist arrives, amid a flurry of allusions to the Biblical apocalypse, and ushers in The End of the World—complete with Elijah's second coming (504-07). As if in commentary on The End of the World's failure even to slow the party down, Stephen remarks, "In the beginning was the word, in the end the world without end," (509) and Mananaan MacLir, Irish god of the sea, invokes the Hindu gods of destruction and creation, Shiva and Shakti (510), who between them assure the never-ending cycle of existence. Later, Stephen "chants to the air of the bloodoath in *Dusk of the Gods*" (560); and *Götterdämmerung* symbolically occurs at the climactic moment when Stephen shouts "Nothung!"—an allusion to Siegfried's sword—and "lifts his ashplant high with both hands and smashes the chandelier. Times livid final flame leaps and, in the following darkness, ruin of all space" (583). This does bring festivities to a halt, but Stephen recoups and a few pages later exclaims, "Damn death, long live life!" (591).

Joyce's weaving these death and resurrection fantasies and references among the sexual fantasies and byplay in this episode, the novel's most fantastic, accomplishes several ends. It is a part of the Odyssean parallel suffusing the novel in that Odysseus' trip to Hades occurs as a part of his adventure with Circe. It replicates more generally the subtle interrelationships among sexuality, death and resurrection, and fantasy evident throughout *The Odyssey*. And, in focusing so intently on the confluence

DONALD PALUMBO

99

of sexuality and death/rebirth motifs in a fantasy context, it demonstrates a particularly modern understanding of a psychological locus of fantasy's appeal—exorcism of the fear of death—and the intimate connection of this source of fantasy's appeal with its characteristic depiction of sexuality.

Lorain County Community College
Elyria, Ohio