

Plutarch's Morals

***On boasted wisdom, fortitude,
magnanimity, and temperance***

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Circe offering cup to Odysseus (1891) John William Waterhouse, Oxford



Train of thought

- A satire on the boasted wisdom, fortitude, magnanimity, and temperance of man, in the form of a dialogue between Ulysses in the island of Circe, and Gryllus, whom she had changed into a swine, and who now prefers his swinish condition to a return to the human form; Ulysses asks Circe for permission to restore his companions to the human shape.
- Circe will grant the request if the men themselves desire it.
- Gryllus, one of them, is brought forward to answer in behalf of the entire company.
- He refuses, and gives his reasons.
- He says that by making him and his companions beasts, Circe has done them a great favor.
- Beasts have more fortitude than men; they fight in fair, open combat, without trick or artifice; they are no cowards, they never cry for mercy.
- Beasts are courageous and daring, even the females; while the courage of men is artificial, and women are timid.
- Beasts are more temperate and chaste than man; they indulge their appetites only in a natural way, and at the proper season.
- Beasts do not value silver or gold.
- They have no adventitious desire.
- Their senses are more accurate.
- Men are incontinent: they indulge unnatural and excessive appetites; are never satisfied.
- Beasts are satisfied with one kind of food, and this procured without difficulty; they have nature for their teacher, and could teach men many useful lessons.



ULYSSES, CIRCE, GRYLLUS

1 ULYSSES All these things, Circe, I believe that I have learned and well remember. But I would willingly ask thee, whether thou hast any Grecians here, which being men thou hast transformed into wolves and lions.

CIRCE Very many, dearest Ulysses, but wherefore do you ask the question?

ULYSSES Because in good truth I am of opinion I should gain a high reputation among the Greeks, if by thy favor I could restore these men to human shape again, and not suffer them through any negligence of mine to wax old in the bodies of beasts, where they lead a miserable and ignominious life.

CIRCE Surely, this man, fool as he is, believes it requisite that his ambition should be unfortunate not only to himself and his friends, but to those that nothing belong to him.

ULYSSES Thou art now jumbling and mixing another villanous potion of twittle twattle, and wouldst plainly turn me into a beast too, if thou couldst make me believe that it were a misfortune to be transformed from a beast to a man.

CIRCE What hast thou made thyself better than a beast, who, forsaking an immortal life, free from the miseries of old age, with me, art making such haste through a thousand threatening calamities to a mortal and (as I may say) old wife, pursuing an empty good and a shadow instead of real truth, and all this, thinking to be more conspicuous and famous than thou art.

ULYSSES Well, Circe, let it be as thou sayest; for why should we be always contending about the same thing? However, do me the favor to restore these men, and give them into my custody.

CIRCE By Hecate, not so fast neither; these are no ordinary fellows. But ask them first whether they are willing. If they refuse, do you, being such an eloquent gentleman, discourse them and persuade them; if you cannot persuade them, being too hard for ye at your own weapon, then let it suffice ye that you have ill consulted your own and the good of your friends.

ULYSSES Blessed woman, wherefore dost thou mock me thus? For how can they either talk or hear reason, so long as they are asses, hogs, and lions?

CIRCE Be of good comfort, most ambitious of men; I will so order the business, that they shall both understand and discourse; or rather, let one suffice to hear and return answers instead of all the rest. Look ye, here is one at hand; pray talk to him.

ULYSSES Prithee, Circe, by what name shall we call him? Who is this fellow of all the men in the world?

CIRCE What's this to the purpose? Call him Gryllus, if you please; and for my part, I'll leave ye together, that ye may not suspect him for speaking contrary to his mind to please me.



2

GRYLLUS Save ye, Mr. Ulysses.

ULYSSES And you too, by Jove, Mr. Gryllus.

GRYLLUS What is't your worship would have with me?

ULYSSES Knowing you were all born men, I pity the condition ye are now in; and I pity ye the more, for that being Greeks ye are fallen under this misfortune; and therefore I made it my request to Circe that she would restore ye again to your former shape, as many of you as were desirous, to the end ye might return home again with us.

GRYLLUS Hold, Mr. Ulysses, not a word more of this, I beseech your worship. For we all contemn thee, as one that none but fools call cunning, and as vainly vauntest thyself to be wiser than other men, and yet art afraid of being changed from worse to better; like children that are frightened at physician's doses and hate going to school, although the medicines and the precepts make them healthy and learned of diseased and fools; just so thou refusest to be transformed out of one thing into another. And now thy bones rattle in thy skin for dread of living with Circe, lest she should transform thee into a hog or a wolf; and thou wouldst persuade us living in plenty of all enjoyments not only to forsake these blessings, but to abandon her that has so well provided for us, to sail along with thee, and to become men again, the most miserable of all creatures.

ULYSSES In my opinion, Gryllus, this same wicked cup has not only deprived thee of thy shape, but of thy sense and reason too; or else thou art got drunk with those opinions which are everywhere exploded as nasty and villanous, unless some voluptuous pleasure of custom and habit has bewitched thee to this body.

GRYLLUS Neither of these, O king of the Cephallenians. But if thou art come hither to dispute, and not to rail and swagger, we shall soon convince thee, having experience of both manners of living, that our way is to be preferred before that which thou so much applaudest.

ULYSSES Nay, then go on; I'll listen with both ears to hear this paradox discussed.

3

GRYLLUS Have at ye then, sir. But it behooves us to begin first with those virtues which you so presumptuously assume to yourselves, and for which you so highly advance yourselves before the beasts, such as justice, prudence, fortitude, &c. Now answer me, thou the wisest among mortals; for I have heard thee telling a story to Circe of the territory of the Cyclops, that being neither ploughed nor planted by any person, it is so fertile and generously productive, that it bears all sorts of fruits and herbs spontaneously. Now which do you prefer, this country, or your own goat-feeding stony Ithaca, which being cultivated with great labor and hardship, yet answers the expectations of the husbandmen with only a mean and scanty return? Now take it not amiss that I forewarn ye lest your love to your country sway ye to give an answer contrary to truth.

ULYSSES No, no, I will not lie for the matter; I must confess I love and honor my own country more; but I applaud and admire theirs far beyond it.



GRYLLUS Hence we must conclude that it is so as the wisest of men has affirmed; that there are some things to be praised and approved, others to be preferred by choice and affection. And I suppose you believe the same concerning the soul. For the same reasons hold in reference to the soul as to the ground; that such a soul should be the best, that produces virtue like spontaneous fruit, without labor and toil.

ULYSSES Grant all this.

GRYLLUS Then you confess that the souls of beasts are the more perfect, and more fertilely endued for the production of virtue; seeing that without any command or instruction — as it were without sowing or ploughing — it produces and increases that virtue which is requisite for every one.

ULYSSES Prithee, Gryllus, don't rave, but tell me what those virtues are that beasts partake of?

4 GRYLLUS Rather what virtues do they not partake of in a higher degree than the wisest of men? Look upon fortitude in the first place, of which you vaunt and brag to have such a terrible share, being not ashamed of the magnificent titles of Ulysses the bold and city-stormer, when indeed, like a pitiful knave as thou art, thou dost only circumvent by tricks and artifices men that understand only the simple and generous way of making war, ignorant altogether of fraud and faith-breaking, and by that means coverest thy deceit with the name of virtue, which never admits of any such coney-catching devices. But do you observe the combats and warfare of beasts, as well one against another as against yourselves, how free from craft and deceit they are, and how with an open and naked courage they defend themselves by mere strength of body; and how, neither afraid of the law that calls them forth to battle nor the severe edicts against deserters, but only out of scorn to be overcome, they fight with obstinacy to the last for conquest and victory. For they are not vanquished when their bodies are worsted, neither does despair cowardize them, but they die upon the spot. And you shall see many times that the strength of many, while they are expiring, being retired and crowded together in some part of the body, still makes resistance against the victor, and pants and fumes till at length it fails like extinguished fire that goes out for want of fuel. But there is no crying for quarter, no begging of mercy, no acknowledgment of being beaten; nor will the lion be a slave to the lion, nor the horse to the horse, as one man is a slave to another, willingly and patiently embracing servitude, which derives its name (*δουλεία*) from that of cowardice (*δειλία*). On the other side, such beasts as men by nets and treacherous snares get into their power, if fully grown, rather choose to die than serve, refusing nourishment and suffering extremity of drought. But as for their young ones, — being tractable and supple by reason of their age, and fed with the deceitful mixtures and food that men provide for them, their inbred fierceness languishing through the taste of preternatural delights, — they suffer that which is called domestication, which is only an effeminating of their natural fury.

Whence it is apparent that beasts are naturally inclined to be courageous and daring, but that the martial confidence of men is preternatural. Which, most noble Ulysses, you may chiefly observe from hence; for that in beasts Nature keeps an equal



balance of strength; so that the female, being but little inferior to the male, undergoes all necessary toils, and fights in defence of her young ones. And thus you hear of a certain Cromyonian sow, which, though a female, held Theseus tuck, and found him work sufficient. Neither had the wisdom of that same female Sphinx that sat on Phicium, with all her riddles and enigmas, availed her, had she not far excelled the Cadmeans in strength and fortitude. Not far from whence the Telmesian fox had his den, a great propounder of questions also; not to omit the female serpent that fought with Apollo for his oracle at Delphi. Your king also took the mare Aetha from the Sicyonian, as a bribe to discharge him from going to the wars; and he did well, thereby showing how much he esteemed a valiant and generous mare above a timorous coward. You yourself have also seen female panthers and lionesses little inferior to the males in strength and courage; when your own wife, though a Lacedaemonian, when you were hectoring and blustering abroad, sat at home in the chimney-corner, not daring to do so much as the very swallows in encountering those who plagued both her and her family. Why need I still speak of the Carian and Maeonian women? Whence it is apparent that fortitude is not natural to men, for then the women would partake of the same strength with men. So that the fortitude which you exercise is only constrained by law, not natural and voluntary, but subservient to the manners of the place and enslaved to reproach, a thing made up only of glorious words and adventitious opinion. And you undergo labor and throw yourself into danger, not out of real valor and boldness, but because ye are more afraid of other things. Therefore, as among thy own companions he that first makes haste to snatch up the light oar does it not because he contemns it, but because he is loath to be troubled with the more heavy; so he that endures a blow to avoid a wound, and defends himself against an enemy to preserve himself from wounds and death, does it not out of daring courage against the one, but out of fear of the other. Thus your fortitude is only a prudent fear; and your courage a knowing timidity, which understandingly does one thing to avoid another.

In short, if you believe yourselves superior to the beasts in fortitude, why do your poets call those that behave themselves most valiantly against their enemies wolf-breasted, lion-hearted, and compare them to wild boars; but never call the courage of lions man-like, or resemble the strength of a wild boar to that of a man? But as they call the swift wind-footed, and the beautiful Godlike-formed, hyperbolizing in their similes; so when they extol the gallantry of the stout in battle, they derive their comparisons from the superior in bravery. The reason is, because courage is as it were the tincture and edge of fortitude; which the beasts make use of unmixed in their combats, but in you being mixed with reason, like wine diluted with water, it gives way to danger and loses the opportunity. And some of you there are who deny that courage is requisite in battle, and therefore laying it aside make use of sober reason; which they do well for their preservation, but are shamefully beside the cushion, in point of strength and revenge. How absurd is it therefore for you to complain of Nature, because she did not furnish your bodies with goads and teeth and crooked claws to defend yourselves, when at the same time you would disarm the soul of her natural weapons?



5 ULYSSES In good truth, Gryllus, you are grown, in my conceit, a notable sophister, to discourse at this rate out of a hog's snout, and yet to handle your argument so strenuously. But why have you not all this while spoke a word of temperance?

GRYLLUS Because I thought you would have contradicted first what I have already said. But you are in haste to hear what I have to say concerning temperance, because that, being the husband of a most temperate and chaste wife, you believe you have set us an example of temperance by abstaining from Circe's embraces. And yet in this you differ nothing from all the beasts; for neither do they desire to approach their superiors, but they pursue their pleasures and amours among those of their own tribe. No wonder is it then, if — like the Mendesian goat in Egypt, which is reported to have been shut up with several most beautiful women, yet never to have offered copulation with them, but when he was at liberty, with a lustful fury flew upon the she-goats — so thou, though a man addicted greatly to venereal pleasures, yet being a man, hast no desire to sleep with a goddess. And for the chastity of thy Penelope, the ten thousand rooks and daws that chatter it abroad do but make it ridiculous and expose it to contempt, there being not one of those birds but, if she loses her mate, continues a widow, not for a small time, but for nine ages of men; so that there is not one of those female rooks that does not surpass in chastity thy fair Penelope above nine times.

6 But because thou believest me to be a sophister, I shall observe a certain order in my discourse, first giving thee the definition of temperance, and then dividing desire according to the several kinds of it. Temperance then is the contracting and well governing our desires, pruning off those that are superfluous and encroaching upon our wills, and ruling those that are necessary by the standards of reason and moderation. Now in desires you observe a vast number of distinctions. For it is both natural and necessary to drink; but as for venereal desires, which derive their originals from Nature, there is a time when they may be restrained without any inconvenience; these are therefore called natural but not necessary. But there is another sort, which are neither natural nor necessary, but infused from without by vain opinion through the mistake of right and true; and it is these that want but very little of ruining all your natural desires with their number, like a multitude of foreigners outnumbering the natives and expelling them from their habitations. But the beasts, having their souls unmixed and not to be overcome by these adventitious passions, and living lives as distant from vain opinion as from the sea, are inferior to you in living elegantly and superfluously, but they are extremely wary in preserving temperance and the right government of their desires, as being neither troubled with many, nor those foreign to their natures. And therefore formerly I was no less smitten with the glister of gold than thou art now, as believing nothing else that a man could possess to be comparable to it. Silver also and ivory inveigled me with the same desires; and he that enjoyed these things in the greatest measure seemed to be a man most happy and beloved of God, whether a Phrygian or a Carian, whether more meanly descended than Dolon or more miserable than Priam. From thenceforward being altogether swayed by my desires, I reaped no other pleasure nor delight in any other blessings of my life, with which I abounded, believing that I wanted still and missed my share of those that were the chiefest and the greatest. Therefore, I remember, when I beheld thee in Crete, at some solemnity, most pompously attired, I neither



envied thy wisdom nor thy virtue; but the extraordinary fineness and exquisite workmanship of thy tunic, and the glistening of thy purple upper garment, and the beauty of the ornaments struck me with admiration. And the golden clasp, methought, was a pretty toy that had something of extraordinary graving in it; and bewitched with these baubles, I followed thee as the women did. But now being altogether estranged from those vain opinions, and having my understanding purified, I tread both gold and silver under my feet as I do the common stones; nor did I ever sleep more soundly upon thy carpets and tapestries, than now I do, rolled over head and ears in the deep and soft mud. None of those adventitious desires reside in our souls, but for the most part our manner of living is accustomed to necessary pleasures and desires; and as for those pleasures which are not necessary but only natural, we make such a use of them as is neither without order nor moderation.

7 And therefore let us consider these in the first place. The pleasure then that affects the sense of smelling with sweet odors and fragrant exhalations, besides that it has something in it which is pure in itself, and as it were bestowed upon us gratis, contributes also in some measure to the distinction of nourishment. For the tongue is said to be the judge of sweet, sour, and tart, only when the juices have come to be mingled and conconcorporate with the tasting faculty, and not before. But our smell, before the taste, becoming sensible of the virtue and qualities of every thing, and being more accurate than the tasters attending upon princes, admits what is familiar to Nature, and expels whatever is disagreeable to it; neither will it suffer it to touch or molest the taste, but accuses and declares the offensiveness of the thing smelt, before it do any harm. As to other things, it troubles us not at all as it does you, whom it constrains for the sake of the sweet scents of cinnamon nard, malobathrum, and Arabian reed, to seek out for things dissimilar, and to jumble them together with a kind of apothecary's or perfumer's art, and at vast expense to purchase an unmanly and effeminate delight, for nothing profitable or useful. Now being such, this sense of smelling has not only corrupted all the female sex but the greatest part of men, in-somuch that they care not to converse with their own wives, unless perfumed with precious ointments and odoriferous compositions. Whereas sows, she-goats, and other females attract the boars, he-goats, and the males of their own kind, by their own proper scents; and smelling of the pure dew, the meadows, and the fresh grass, they are incited to copulation out of common affection; the females without the coynesses of women, or the practice of little frauds and fascinations, to inflame the lust of their mates; and the males, not with amorous rage and frenzy stimulated, and enforced to purchase the act of generation with expensive hire or servile assiduity, but enjoying their seasonable amours without deceit or purchase of the satisfaction of their venery. For Nature in the spring-time, even as she puts forth the buds of plants, likewise awakens the desires of animals, but presently quenches them again, neither the female admitting the male nor the male attempting the female after conception. And thus pleasure has but a small and slender esteem among us; but Nature is all in all. So that even to this very day, we beasts were never yet tainted with coupling male with male, and female with female. Of which nevertheless there are many examples to be produced among the greatest and most celebrated persons; for I pass by those not worth remembrance.



Agamemnon hunted all Boeotia in pursuit of Argynnus, who fled his embraces; and after he had falsely accused the sea and winds, bravely flung himself into the lake Copais, to quench his love and free himself from the ardor of his lust.

Hercules in like manner pursuing his beardless friend, forsook his choicest associates and abandoned the fleet.

In the vaulted room belonging to Apollo surnamed Ptous, one of you men secretly wrote this inscription, Achilles the fair; when Achilles at that time had a son. [And I hear the inscription is still remaining.]¹ Yet if a cock tread a cock in the absence of the hen, he is burned alive, upon the signification of the soothsayer that it portends some fatal calamity. This is a plain confession in men themselves, that the beasts excel them in chastity, and that force is not to be put upon Nature for the sake of pleasure. But your incontinence is such, that Nature, though she have the law to assist her, is not able to keep it within bounds; insomuch that, like a rapid inundation, those inordinate desires overwhelm Nature with continual violence, trouble, and confusion. For men have copulated with she-goats, sows, and mares; and women have run mad after male beasts. And from such copulations sprang the Minotaurs and Silvans, and, as I am apt to believe, the Sphinxes and Centaurs. It is true, that sometimes, constrained by hunger, a dog or a bird has fed upon human flesh; but never yet did any beast attempt to couple with human kind. But men constrain and force the beasts to these and many other unlawful pleasures.

8 Now being thus wicked and incontinent in reference to the aforesaid lustful desires, it is no less easy to be proved that men are more intemperate than beasts, even in those things which are necessary, that is to say, in eating and drinking, the pleasure of which we always enjoy with some benefit to ourselves. But you, pursuing the pleasures of eating and drinking beyond the satisfaction of nature, are punished with many and tedious diseases, which, arising from the single fountain of superfluous gormandizing, fill your bodies with all manner of wind and vapors not easy for purgation to expel. In the first place, all sorts of beasts, according to their kind, feed upon one sort of food, which is proper to their natures; some upon grass, some upon roots, and others upon fruits. They that feed upon flesh never mind any other sort of food. Neither do they rob the weaker animals of their nourishment. But the lion suffers the hart, and the wolf the sheep, to feed upon what Nature has provided for them. But man, such is his voracity, falls upon all, to satisfy the pleasures of his appetite; tries all things, tastes all things; and, as if he were yet to seek what was the most proper diet and most agreeable to his nature, among all the creatures is the only all-devourer. And first he makes use of flesh, not for want, as having the liberty to take his choice of herbs and fruits, the plenty of which is inexhaustible; but out of luxury and being cloyed with necessaries, he seeks after inconvenient and impure diet, purchased by the slaughter of living creatures; by that means showing himself more cruel than the most savage of wild beasts. For blood, murder, and flesh are proper to nourish the kite, the wolf, and dragon; but to men they are delicious viands. Then making use of all, he does not do like the beasts, which abstain from most creatures and are at enmity only with a few, and that only compelled by the necessities of hun-

¹ It seems incredible that Plutarch could have put this into the mouth of Gryllus, even by carelessness. (G.)



ger; but neither fowl nor fish nor any thing that lives upon the land escapes your tables, though they bear the epithets of human and hospitable.

9 Let it be so, that nothing will serve ye but to devour whatever comes near ye, to pamper and indulge your voracious appetites. Yet where is the benefit and pleasure of all this? But such is the prudence of the beasts, as not to admit of any vain and unprofitable arts. And as for those that are necessary, they do not acquire them, as being introduced by others or taught for reward; neither do they make it their study to soder and fasten one contemplation to another, but they are supplied by their own prudence with such as are true-born and genuine. It is true, we hear the Egyptians are generally physicians. But the beasts are not only every one of them notionally endued with knowledge and art which way to cure themselves, but also to procure their food and repair their strength, to catch their prey by slight and cunning, to guard themselves from danger; neither are some of them ignorant how to teach the science of music so far as is convenient for them. For from whom did we hogs learn to run to the rivers, when we are sick, to search for crawfish? Who taught the tortoises, when they have eaten vipers, to physic themselves with origanum? Who taught the Cretan goats, when shot with arrows that stick in their bodies, to betake themselves to dittany, which they have no sooner eaten, but the heads of the darts fall out of the wound? Now if you say that Nature is the schoolmistress that teaches them these things, you acknowledge the prudence of beasts to be derived from the chiefest and wisest original of understanding; which if you think not proper to call reason and wisdom, it is time for ye to find out a more glorious and honorable name for it. Indeed by its effects it shows itself to be greater and more wonderful in power; not illiterate or without education, but instructed by itself and wanting nothing from without; not weak and imperfect, but, through the vigor and perfection of its natural virtue, supporting and cherishing that natural contribution of understanding which others attain to by instruction and education. So that, whatever men acquire and contemplate in the midst of their luxury and wantonness, those things our understanding attains to through the excellency of our apprehensions, even contrary to the nature of the body. For not to speak of whelps that learn to draw dry foot, and colts that will practise figure-dances; there are crows that will speak, and dogs that will leap through hoops as they turn around. You shall also see horses and bulls upon the theatres lie down, dance, stop, and move their bodies after such a manner as would puzzle even men to perform the same things; which, though they are of little use, yet being learned and remembered by beasts, are great arguments of their docility.

If you doubt whether we learn arts, be convinced that we teach them. For partridges teach their young ones to hide themselves by lying upon their backs just before a clod of earth, to escape the pursuit of the fowlers. And you shall observe the old storks, when their young ones first begin to take wing, what care they take to instruct them upon the tops of houses. Nightingales also teach their young ones to sing; insomuch that nightingales taken young out of the nest, and bred up by hand in cages, sing worse, as being deprived of their instructors before their time. So that after I had been a while transformed into this shape, I admired at myself, that I was so easily persuaded by idle arguments of the sophisters to believe that all other creatures were void of sense and reason except man.



10 ULYSSES What then, Gryllus? Does your transmutation inform ye also that sheep and asses are rational creatures?

GRYLLUS From these very creatures, most worthy and best of men, Ulysses, the nature of beasts is chiefly to be discerned to be as it is, neither void of reason nor understanding. For as one tree is neither more or less than another without a soul, but all are together in the same condition of insensibility (for there is no tree that is endued with a soul); so neither would one animal seem to be more slow to understand or more indocible than another, if all did not partake of reason and understanding, though some in a less, some in a greater measure. For you must consider that the stupidity and slothfulness of some is an argument of the quickness and subtlety of others, which easily appears when you compare a fox, a wolf, or a bee with a sheep or ass; as if thou shouldst compare thyself to Polyphemus, or thy grandfather Autolykus with the Corinthian [mentioned in] Homer. For I do not believe there is such difference between beast and beast, in point of reason and understanding and memory, as between man and man.

ULYSSES Have a care, Gryllus; it is a dangerous thing to allow them reason that have no knowledge of a Deity.

GRYLLUS Must we then deny that thou, most noble Ulysses, being so wise and full of stratagems as thou art, wast begotten by Sisyphus? . . .



Odysseus overcome by Demodocus' song (1813-15) Francesco Hayez

