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## ODYSSEY AND ILIAD: FOLLY AND DELUSION

**Abstract:** The theme of ἀτασθαλῖαι (reckless folly persisted in contrary to sound advice) owes its predominant place in the *Odyssey* to the presence of a folk-lore element, that of the 'wise adviser'. It is suggested that ἀτασθαλῖαι is prominent in Zeus' address to the gods in α not only because of the importance this theme is to have throughout the poem but also to state in a definitive manner that the *Odyssey* has a different motivation from the *Iliad*, in which the prevalent theme is not ἀτασθαλῖαι but ἔτη. On one occasion in each epic the theme of ἔτη and that of ἀτασθαλῖαι converge: in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus' crew eat the cattle of the Sun (μ 372) and in the *Iliad* when Hector, having suffered from the consequences of his reckless folly, realizes the extent to which the gods have deluded him (X 296).

When Zeus addresses the gods for the first time in the *Odyssey* both the theme of his speech and the *exemplum* which illustrates it are closely related to the ensuing action. The *exemplum* of the young Orestes coming to manhood and avenging his father is so apt to Telemachus' case that Athena later transfers it from the heavenly to the terrestrial plane in her own speech of admonition to Telemachus (α 298—300). And the theme of Zeus' address, that men suffer not from divine intervention but through their own perverse folly (ἀτασθαλῖαι), turns out to be a principal theme of the poem itself. The word ἀτασθαλῖαι is a technical term applied to human behaviour in Homeric poetry, and is at home only there, although the phenomenon it denotes recurs as a motif in later Greek literature, especially in Herodotus. ἀτασθαλῖαι may be defined as the reckless persistence in a given course of conduct, despite a specific warning to the contrary:

in the *exemplum* itself Aegisthus seduced Clytaemnestra and killed Agamemnon, although he had been warned not to do so (α 37—9);

Odysseus sacrificed some of his comrades in the Cyclops' cave because he had over-riden their prudent objections (κ 437);

the remaining comrades sacrificed their own life by eating the Sun's cattle, contrary to clear admonitions (α 7, μ 300);

the suitors were destroyed because they did not hearken to advice to abandon their conduct (χ 316—7, 414—6, ψ 65—7, ω 455—60).

The word ἀτασθαλίαι describes the conduct of ἀτάσθαλοι, those who commit ἀτάσθαλα; and the meaning of the two latter words is clarified by the context in which they are found. The association of ἀτάσθαλοι with words such as βίη, ὕβρις, ὑπερβασίη, and ὑπέρθυμος (γ 206—7, η 59—60, π 86, ρ 588, σ 139, υ 170, 370, ω 282, 352) shows that they are men who act with undue force, and do not place desirable restraints on their behaviour. It is this unremitting persistence in unacceptable conduct that is the essence of ἀτασθαλίαι. ἀτασθαλίαι thus becomes a 'marked' term, positively indicating perverse indulgence in folly and standing in contrast to the 'unmarked' term ἀφραδίαι, which means 'witlessness' pure and simple. ἀφραδίαι is applied to the sort of irrational impulse which dictates many human actions, but there is nothing irrational about ἀτασθαλίαι: that amounts to the deliberate pursuance of one's ends, regardless of the consequences to oneself or to others. So the word ἀφραδίαι, in the sense of irrational behaviour, is used of the Cyclop's drinking wine which is too strong for him (ι 361), of the crew opening the bag of winds (κ 27), of Odysseus leaving behind his cloak on a cold night (ξ 481), and (most strikingly) of the nightingale killing her child (τ 523), where the phrase δι' ἀφραδίαις means little more than 'unwittingly', as if the poet had described her as νηπίη or ἀέκουσα. The casual, or occasional, aberration expressed by ἀφραδίαι does not form a major motif of the *Odyssey*; but ἀτασθαλίαι may rightly be regarded as such a motif, in view of its application to the suitors' conduct and even to the conduct of Odysseus himself.

There is a specific reason for the dominance of the ἀτασθαλίαι-motif in the *Odyssey*. It owes its central place to the presence in the poem of one folk-lore component (among many others), that of the 'sound adviser' who all too often sees his advice ignored or rejected. By virtue of this device, the protagonist in a story is set the task of overcoming not only external enemies but the perversity inherent in his own nature. Even when elements of folklore are embedded in a work of great complexity and sophistication, such as the *Odyssey*, they retain characteristics by which they can be identified. So in the present case one can easily perceive the repeated sequence: advice given — advice not comprehended or not heeded — disaster to the person advised.

Returning to Zeus' emphatic statement about the role of ἀτασθαλίαι, we observe that this statement has a two-fold purpose: not only to define the dominant motif of the *Odyssey* but, just as surely, to differentiate it from the *Iliad*. For, in defining the theme of *this* poem, Zeus effectively states what it is *not*, namely the ἄτη or 'delusion' which works so strongly upon the heroes at Troy.

The theme of 'delusion' may rightly be said to dominate the *Iliad*, both in small matters and in the great matter of Achilles' μῆνις.

Among the small matters may be reckoned the action of Glaucus in exchanging his gold armour for Diomedes' armour of bronze. No one had previously advised against this course, so that the question of ἀτασθαλίαι does not arise; in the *Odyssey* his action would have

been seen as displaying ἀφραδίαι, 'witlessness pure and simple'. But that is not the view taken by the poet of the *Iliad*. He explains Glaucus' behaviour by saying that Zeus deprived him of his wits (φρένας ἐξείλετο, Z 234).

What of the causes which led to the disastrous μῆνις of Achilles? So far as human understanding goes, there is no doubt what caused Agamemnon to deprive Achilles of his γέρας. It was 'delusion', as stated by Achilles in A 411—2 and admitted (in Achilles' absence) by Agamemnon himself (I 115—9). He admits it again when Achilles is present, with the addition of an elaborate *exemplum* illustrating the power of ἄτη over gods as well as men (T 86—137). It is significant here that Achilles fully accepts Agamemnon's account of events and his explanation for them: Agamemnon must have been deluded, he says, since otherwise he would never have aroused such wrath in his own breast; no, it was the pleasure of Zeus to cause the death of so many Achaeans (T 270—4). It is not, then, men's malice or wickedness which causes them to hurt one another (the Homeric vocabulary, indeed, is lacking in terms for such concepts); nor do human misfortunes arise from inward perversity and folly, as Zeus says they do in the *Odyssey*; all must be attributed to an external agency, sometimes said to operate independently, sometimes regarded as a mere instrument of Zeus' will.

It is true that Zeus works through the medium of ἄτη in order to fulfil his promise to Thetis; and so to this extent the heroes correctly perceive ἄτη as a force continually deluding the individual. The malign dream which Zeus sends to Agamemnon not only succeeds in deluding him but causes him to do his best to delude the Achaeans; he realizes that he is in the grip of ἄτη (B 111), but fails to understand how far ἄτη has invaded his reason. Again and again Agamemnon appears as a man utterly bemused (Θ 237, I 18), in accordance with Zeus' plan.

Achilles is granted far deeper vision than that vouchsafed to Agamemnon; but, while he rightly blames ἄτη for Agamemnon's conduct, he is himself not exempt from the power of ἄτη. So much is conveyed by Phoenix, ostensibly in general terms, but really with particular reference to Achilles. If a man spurns the Λιταί (says Phoenix), they beg Zeus to send ἄτη as an escort to him, so that in his bemusement he may pay the penalty (ὕνα βλαφθεὶς ἀποτίσῃ, I 512). The form of Phoenix' expression makes it necessary to understand both Λιταί and ἄτη as actual persons; and it is worth considering whether ἄτη, at least, was originally conceived as a person and only later became a general term for 'bemusement, delusion', namely the condition brought about by Zeus' agent ἄτη. However that may be, the words of Phoenix are terribly fulfilled, although not in a way that Achilles could have anticipated. In rejecting the pleas of the embassy, Achilles in effect fails to honour the Λιταί; the ensuing bemusement falls not upon Achilles but on his other self, Patroclus. When Apollo intervenes to bring Patroclus' victorious career to an

end, he strikes off his helmet, sword, and breast-plate and breaks his spear. But the psychological impact is even more devastating than the physical: τὸν δ' ἄτη φρένας εἶλε (II 805). Reduced to this state of utter bewilderment, Patroclus falls easily to Euphorbus and Hector.

Only late and at the price of intense suffering does Achilles reach an understanding of these events; or at least he discovers that they cannot, after all, be comprehended in human terms. The quality of a man's life depends entirely upon the arbitrary disposition of Zeus. He grants nobody unmixed blessings, but the man to whom he gives a harmful allotment becomes an outcast:

καί ἐ κακῇ βούβρωστις ἐπὶ χθόνα δῖαν ἐλάσυνει (Ω 532),

The form of this expression recalls that of the remarkable simile which marked Priam's entrance a little while before:

ὧς δ' ἔτ' ἄν ἄνδρ' ἄτη πυκινὴ λάβῃ, ὅς τ' ἐνὶ πάτρῃ  
φῶτα κατακτείνας ἄλλων ἐξέικετο δῆμον. . . (Ω 480—1),

And, despite our ignorance of the precise formation of βούβρωστις it cannot differ greatly in meaning from ἄτη (ἀντὶ τῆς μεγάλης ἀνίας καὶ λύπης κεῖται ἢ λέξις, ΣΑ). Achilles' experience has taught him that human life is formless, without pattern, and that men suffer the bad and good (but much more of the bad) on no discernible principle:

ὧς γὰρ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοὶ δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσι,  
ζῶειν ἄχνουμένους· αὐτοὶ δέ τ' ἀκηδέες εἰσὶ (Ω 525—6),

Such is the outlook when the *Iliad* reaches its end. But at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Zeus substitutes a different perspective: although mortals still complain of their lot, they have no right to do so — their own ἀτασθαλίαι must be held to blame. And it is true that events in the *Odyssey* are ordered according to a pattern: not indeed a moral pattern, but one in which results can be traced back unerringly to their respective causes. Achilles could not tell why he and Priam had suffered so much; but Odysseus can very easily account for the disaster which has overcome the suitors — they met their doom because of their σχέτλια ἔργα and their failure to accord τιμὴ to others (χ 413—4).

The theme of 'delusion', then, is prominent in the *Iliad* and that of 'folly' in the *Odyssey*; and Zeus' first speech in the *Odyssey* intimates clearly that a different order and different motives are to prevail here. These observations do not permit anything to be said for certain about the authorship of the two poems, for it is evident that whether or not the author of the *Odyssey* had also composed the *Iliad* he might still wish to indicate the different lines along which the *Odyssey* was to proceed. There is in any case, as usual, a certain overlap between *Odyssey*

and *Iliad*. ἄτη stands out as the dominant, but not the exclusive, theme of the *Iliad*; ἀτασθαλίαι too is occasionally found as a motive there. So, *vice versa*, with the *Odyssey*.

There are five occasions in the *Odyssey* on which the theme of 'delusion' comes to the fore and is duly expressed by ἄτη. Two of these are of banal type, and need not detain us long: the delusion brought upon Melampus by the Erinys (ο 233—4) and upon the centaur Eurytion by wine (φ 297—302). Helen too attributes her leaving Lacedaemon for Troy to ἄτη sent by Aphrodite (δ 261—4). And this allusion finds an echo much later in the poem, when Penelope mentions the ἄτη which Helen laid up in her heart as the result of divine intervention (ψ 222—4). The part of Penelope's speech referring to Helen has often been rejected by critics ancient and modern: that they were wrong is shown by Heubeck's note *ad loc.*; and to his perceptive arguments in favour of authenticity one might add the fact that Penelope is adducing nothing new and strange but merely recasting in different words what Helen herself earlier stated.

Each poem, however, presents one crucial situation in which (contrary to the general trend) the motives of ἄτη and ἀτασθαλίαι converge: a person is reduced to a desperate plight through ἀτασθαλίαι and, while in this state, he becomes subject to ἄτη. The passages in question concern Odysseus and Hector.

The eating of the Sun's cattle by Odysseus' crew has already been identified as a fatal result of ἀτασθαλίαι. When Odysseus wakes from his slumber to find the crew already roasting the cattle, he blames the gods for sending sleep at such a time: 'you acted εἰς ἄτην', he says (μ 372). Here we catch a hint of the capricious malevolence of the gods so often manifest in the *Iliad*. We remember especially the travail of Hector. He brought himself to his present pass, left outside the wall to face Achilles, by scorning Polydamas' advice, and now he correctly blames his own ἀτασθαλίαι for bringing destruction upon his people (X 104). But the gods are not content to let Hector suffer, with a modicum of dignity, the consequences of his ἀτασθαλίαι; in his greatest need, he is deluded by Athena and deserted by Apollo. At the chilling moment when the man realizes the extent of the gods' treachery (ἐγνων ἧσιν ἐνὶ φρεσὶ, X 296), the themes of delusion and reckless folly come together to add a peculiar pathos to Hector's suffering.

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