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The Honey and the Smoke: Achilles and *Atē* in the *Iliad*

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In the ninth book of the *Iliad*, in a speech intended to persuade Achilles to return to the war, Phoenix warns his young friend, who has just reiterated his denunciation of Agamemnon and his blindness (*Iliad* 9.377, *ek gar eu phrenas heileto mētieta Zeus*: "For Zeus the counsellor has taken away his wits"), that he, Achilles himself, is in danger of succumbing to the same state of mind if he refuses Agamemnon's offer of reconciliation and rejects the embassy. Phoenix's warning takes the form of an allegory or parable in which a man who commits an offense may gain pardon if he allows the *Litai* (Prayers), the daughters of Zeus, to intercede in his behalf; but if he refuses, then *Atē* (which we here translate as "delusion") visits the unrepentant transgressor and punishes him:

> For there also the Prayers (*Litai*), the daughters of Zeus,
> and they are lame of their feet, and wrinkled, and cast
> their eyes sidelong,
> who toil on their way left far behind by *Atē*;
> but she, *Atē*, strong and sound on her feet, and therefore
> far outruns all Prayers, and wins into every country
> to force men astray; and the Prayers follow as healers
> after her.
> If a man venerates these daughters of Zeus as they draw
> near,
> such a man they bring great advantage, and hear his
> entreaty;

Achilleus
has made savage the proud-hearted spirit (*thymos*)
within his body.
He is hard and does not remember that friends' affection
wherein we honored him by the ships, far beyond all others.
Pitiless.

Iliad 9.628-32

But at verse 636, he says:

But *the gods* put in your breast a spirit (*thymos*)
not to be placated, bad, for the sake of a single girl.

Iliad 9.636-38

In the next verse, however, it is Achilles himself who is responsible:

Now make gracious the spirit (*thymos*) within you.

Iliad 9.639

One is reminded here of the passages from the book of Exodus, where, on the one hand, the Lord says to Moses: "See that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand; but I will harden his heart that he shall not let the people go" (Exodus 4:21), but elsewhere we read: "And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and the thunders were ceased, he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart, he and his servants" (Exodus 9:34-35).

But Achilles' reply to Aias is perhaps more to the point when he says, without any reference to the gods:

All that you have said seems spoken after my own mind.
Yet still the heart in me swells up in anger (*cholos*), when I remember
the disgrace that he wrought upon me before the Argives,

> the Son of Atreus, as if I were some dishonored
> vagabond.
>
> *Iliad* 9.645-48

We shall have occasion to return to this idea of the heart swelling with anger.

Since there are clear intimations of tragedy in Phoenix's and Aias's words to Achilles, if Homer means for us to take them seriously, as I believe he does, it would be surprising, I think, if Homer did not compose some part in his epic to correspond to and balance the speeches in Book 9, especially Phoenix's warning regarding *atē*. It would be dramatically effective to see his words fulfilled. We do witness, in Achilles' sending Patroclus to Nestor's tent in Book 11, a chain of events that begins to operate on Patroclus's own feelings, events that have nothing at all to do with divine influence or intervention, but which become an essential part of Patroclus's *atē*, and we see in Achilles' allowing him to go into battle in his stead and with his armor in Book 16, a man making fatal decisions without foreseeing the consequences. We can agree with Mueller that what characterizes Achilles in these decisions and acts is the unreality of his thinking, which Mueller calls "the rhetoric of the unreal." He writes, for example:

> When Patroclus asks for the arms of Achilles and for permission to defend the Achaeans, Achilles at first does not answer his request but instead indulges in the memory of the injustice that he has suffered at the hands of Agamemnon. The present situation would not seem so bleak, he argues, if Agamemnon had treated him kindly (16.72). From his rehearsal of past injuries his mind moves on to an imagined future. He will allow Patroclus to help the Achaeans, and as a result of this partial change of mind he expects that the Achaeans will honor him and bring him presents. It has always baffled critics how Achilles at this stage could not only omit any mention of Agamemnon's previous offer, but could ex-

> press a desire for "gifts" when he had so violently rejected the treasures that Agamemnon had promised him. The rhetoric of the unreal provides the solution to this difficulty. The significance of Achilles' speech lies not in its psychological continuity with the past but in the violent contrast it establishes between his indulgence in an imaginary future and the actual reality that awaits him.[5]

We see this unreality and delusion in Achilles' thinking reach its climax in his prayer at Book 16 that he and Patroclus alone may sack Troy, a delusion underscored by the irony that these two heroes will *not* be present on that occasion:

> Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, if only
> not one of all the Trojans could escape destruction,
> not one
> of the Argives, but you and I could emerge from the
> slaughter
> so that we two alone could break Troy's hallowed
> coronal.
>
> *Iliad* 16.97-100

Thereupon, "at the deepest point of delusion," to use Mueller's words, he sends his friend into battle and to his death.[6]

We expect, then, after the death of Patroclus, some statement on the part of Achilles expressing his disillusionment and recognizing the mental state which has caused him to commit his fatal error, a recognition such as we have in the case of Hector, for example, or Agamemnon. Nor are we disappointed. In Book 18, after the news of Patroclus's death is brought to him, Achilles, in his long conversation with his mother, experiences a kind of *anagnorisis* or recognition. When Thetis reveals to her son that if he kills Hector in avenging Patroclus's death, he must then lose his own life, Achilles delivers what Malcolm Willcock calls "a very powerful and psychologi-

cally motivated speech comparable to Achilles' great speech of Book 9.308-409."[7] Totally disillusioned, Achilles says:

> May I die soon then; since I was not to stand by my
> companion
> when he was killed. And now, far away from the land
> of his fathers,
> he has perished, and lacked my fighting strength to
> defend him.
>
> *Iliad* 18.98-100

> Now I shall go, to overtake that killer of a dear life,
> Hektor; then I will accept my own death at whatever
> time Zeus wishes to bring it about, and the other
> immortals.
>
> *Iliad* 18.114-16

Placed at the center of this speech and forming the emotional climax is an outburst, a hopeless and anguished wish, by Achilles, which must apply to him especially and which provides the best insight into the true nature of his wrath and the blindness that it has produced, and which may be regarded as that *atē*, which Phoenix in Book 9 had warned would befall him:

> Why, I wish that strife would vanish from gods and
> mortals
> and gall (*cholos*), which makes a man grow angry for
> all his great mind,
> that gall of anger that swarms like smoke inside a
> man's heart
> and becomes a thing sweeter to him by far than the
> dripping of honey.
> So it was here that the lord of men Agamemnon
> angered me.
>
> *Iliad* 18.107-11

In using the figures of the smoke and the honey in this striking double simile to describe Achilles' mental and emotional state, Homer shows himself not only a sensitive poet

but a sound psychologist. The gradual and imperceptible darkening of the mind suggested by the image of the "smoke from a very small smouldering fire that fills all the house," as Leaf puts it in his comment on this passage,[8] recalls Achilles' words to Aias in Book 9.644-48, quoted above: "Yet still the heart in me swells up in anger (*cholos*)." Although some commentators see in the figure of the dripping honey the idea that anger slips easily like honey down the throat, it is more likely that Homer uses it to suggest how Achilles' anger and the hurt which produced it have become so delicious to him as he indulged himself, that he could not bring himself to give it up until it was too late, and now he curses it. The image of the sweet honey used in connection with *cholos* may be a little surprising and paradoxical since it literally means "gall" or "bile" and when used metaphorically refers to a "bitter anger." But Homer surely knew human nature well enough to know how sweet anger and resentment can be to one who sulks, and it is most important to note that it is Achilles himself who uses the simile, showing that he himself is eminently aware of the consequences of his anger.

When we consider the significance of this passage, that it constitutes Achilles' own statement on his mental and emotional state when he made the most disastrous decision of his life, that it is found in one of his most important speeches in the *Iliad*, and, as I believe, in a passage which Homer intended as a recognition, then it is safe to say that he is here referring to his blindness or delusion or *atē*, which destroyed his judgment, as Phoenix had warned that it would. This can be seen particularly in the words at verse 108, which in spite of the gnomic aorist must refer to Achilles' own case:

> *kai cholos, hos t' epheēke polyphrona per chalepēnai*
> and gall, which makes a man grow angry for all his great mind.
>
> *Iliad* 18.108

It is significant that there is no mention here of any malicious interfering deity or god. So far as any outside agency inciting Achilles' *atē* is concerned, it is to be found in Agamemnon.

It is clear, then, that the source for Achilles' blindness or *atē* is to be found in his own being. Yet it appears to be an article of faith among some critics that Homer could not possibly have conceived of any delusion or *atē* that was not caused by an external divine agency, and that he could not have imagined a delusion that came from a man's own personality. This view takes its extreme form in the words of Bremer: "The Homeric conception of *atē* relates the error to an arbitrary and malicious interference of the gods with human action, causing infatuation in man and resulting in disaster."[9]

It may be objected that since Homer does not use the word *atē* in this passage, or, more correctly, that he does not have Achilles use it of himself, specifically of his state of mind, he cannot be thinking of it. Yet there is one other nearly equally important instance in the *Iliad* in which a hero is deluded and may properly be said to have become a victim of *atē*, without the word actually being used in his case. It seems to me that one cannot read the *Iliad* without believing that Homer expects us to see Hector as much blinded or deluded as was Agamemnon or Patroclus or Paris, who are specifically described as victims of *atē*. After he shows us Hector in his disturbing scenes with Poulydamas earlier, in his dangerous overconfidence at the end of Book 8, in his taunting of the dying Patroclus in Book 16, Homer says of him in Book 18 as Hector makes *his* disastrous mistake when he rejects the wise counsel of Poulydamas to lead the Trojan forces into the citadel of Troy and not remain that night on the battlefield:

> So spoke Hektor, and the Trojans thundered to hear
> him;

> fools, since Pallas Athene had taken away the wits from them.
> They gave their applause to Hektor in his counsel of evil,
> but none to Poulydamas, who had spoken good sense before them.
>
> *Iliad* 18.310-13

And yet when Hector has his moment of recognition in Book 22, before the gates of Troy, shackled by his fate (*moira*), as Homer says, where he refers to this very incident and his fatal mistake in rejecting the warning of Poulydamas, he does not ascribe his error and delusion to Athene or any other god, but to his *atasthaliai*, his own recklessness. In his case, then, we cannot take the phrase that "Pallas Athene took away the wits" in Book 18 as the whole or even the most important element in his delusion. I suspect that a careful examination of other examples of delusion or *atē* in the *Iliad* from the standpoint of Homer's imaginative use of poetic language—for example, in the so-called apology of Agamemnon, and from his dramatic technique as found in his portrayal of Patroclus's career—would, as in the case of the simile of the honey and the smoke, reveal a much less rigid conception of *atē* and a greater appreciation of Homer's use of motivation in the *Iliad*.

In conclusion, I think that Homer intended us to see Achilles as a victim of *atē* in fulfillment of Phoenix's warning in Book 9, but that this delusion had its source in his own nature and being, as Homer's magnificent simile suggests, and was not due to the external operation of some malignant god.

Notes

1. Cedric Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1965), 189.

2. Richard E. Doyle, "*Atē, Its Use and Meaning: A Study in the Greek Poetic Tradition from Homer to Euripides* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1984), 9-11.

3. J. M. Bremer, *Hamartia: Tragic Error in the Poetics of Aristotle and in Greek Tragedy* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1969), 110.

4. Albin Lesky, *Göttliche und menschliche Motivation in homerischen Epos* (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 1961).

5. Martin Mueller, "Knowledge and Delusion in the *Iliad,*" in John Wright, ed., *Essays on the Iliad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 118.

6. Martin Mueller, *The Iliad,* Unwin Critical Library (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 50.

7. Malcolm Willcock, *A Companion to the Iliad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 204.

8. Walter Leaf, *The Iliad,* 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1902), 2:277.

9. Bremer, *Hamartia,* 111-12.