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***Odyssey* 18.130-42: The Poem's Programmatic Passage?**

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At the end of my introductory course on classical mythology, in which we read large chunks of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, and *Metamorphoses*, as well as several tragedies, I like to set an essay question for the students in which they are to identify the text and author of some significant passage from one of these texts and discuss how that passage typifies the approach to storytelling of its author, his time, and the particular work in which it is found. (The passages also tend to make significant claims about the human condition, since the course is also an introduction to others in a Humanities department.) For the last couple years I've included *Odyssey* 18.130-42. This paper may serve as a sort of explanation of my selection of this passage, since in fact I do think that the passage exemplifies many of the most important programmatic elements in the Homeric epic.

In the guise of a beggar, after pummeling another beggar, Arnaeus, who to the delight of the suitors had challenged Odysseus to his right to beg in his own house, Odysseus decides to wax eloquent about the nature of the human condition:

Nothing feebler (*akidnoteron*) does earth nurture than a human (*anthropos*), of all things that on earth are breathing and moving. For, so long as the gods give him strength (*aretê*) and his knees are quick, he says that he will never suffer evil in time to come; but when again the blessed gods decree him sorrow, this too he grimly bears with steadfast heart (*thymos*); for the mind (*noos*) of men upon the

earth is even such as the day which the father of gods and men brings upon them. For I, too, was once prosperous (*olbios*) among men, but I committed many reckless deeds (*atasthala*), yielding to my might and my strength, and trusting in my father and my brethren. Wherefore let no man at all be lawless (*athemistios*) at any time, but let him keep in silence whatever gifts the gods give.

The passage might easily be applied to Odysseus himself. As a warrior at Troy his knees were quick, but the intervening years have brought him sorrow. It is arguable that his own recklessness led to the murder of his crewmen by the Cyclops (9.208ff.;)<sup>1</sup> and the Laestrygonians (10.27ff.), but through it all he has by and large kept a steadfast heart and resisted the lure of lawlessness.<sup>2</sup> The passage might easily be seen as programmatic for the poem too, giving a sort of anonymous autobiography and echoing as it does the simple points about avoiding recklessness and lawless behavior. The reckless Suitors hear but don't appreciate his warning. They will all die a gruesome death. His own crewmen were told not to attack the cattle of the sun, did so anyway, and suffered death as a result (12.300ff.; *cf.* 1.7). This is the moral point of the sort as outlined by Zeus in book one (1.32ff. and 64ff.)

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<sup>1</sup> *Cf. Od.* 10.437, where the charge of recklessness is brought against Odysseus for the loss of his men to the Cyclops.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Clay, *The Wrath of Athena* (Princeton 1983) 218-219, argues against this view, and the beginning of the epic says that his followers were destroyed "by their own recklessness" (1.7). The point need not be belabored, but Odysseus certainly could have been more cautious.

The attention recently given by Gregory Nagy to a passage of book 18 of the *Iliad* as a programmatic passage of that poem lends some partial support to this reading.<sup>3</sup> Nagy suggests that the men disputing the blood-price on the new shield of Achilles (*Iliad* 18.498-501) are, at least at one level of meaning, analogues for Achilles and Agamemnon, who must negotiate the price of Achilles' life, which he must lose if he is to re-enter the fight at Troy. Nagy's interpretation is quite compelling, raising questions about how the price of a human life is measured, how it can justly be compensated, and how the poet delimits such questions within the epic framework. Book 9 of the *Iliad* is, for instance, strikingly read as a series of attempts by Nestor, Agamemnon and his three ambassadors to negotiate the price for Achilles' life.

For teachers of courses in the humanistic tradition, however, the programmatic aspects of the *Odyssey* appear even more important than those of the *Iliad* inasmuch as the first word of the epic signals that its theme is "man", though perhaps in the more

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., G. Nagy, *Homeric Responses* (Austin 2003) 72-87. Nagy would probably not follow my hunch that the occurrence of these programmatic passages in book 18 of each epic is not coincidence, but I am also struck that both epics have, for instance, their climactic contests in book 22 (Hector/Achilles, Suitors/Odysseus) and father/son resolutions in book 24 (Priam in lieu of Peleus/Achilles, Laertes/Odysseus). Even if we recognize that the book numeration is late and somewhat arbitrary, the structural parallels nevertheless emerge. Indeed, to my mind, the *Odyssey* is in many ways written in emulation of and in reaction to the *Iliad*, but clearly I do not have the space to argue for this view here, let alone the expertise as a Homerist. See, however, R. B. Rutherford, "From the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey*," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 38 (1991-1993) 37-54.

specific sense of the revenant husband, rather than “the human” more generally. (In terms of this year’s conference theme, we might think about how hopelessly lost a husband gets without his wife along to navigate, about how “odysseys” may occur as a result of such masculine weaknesses, but that would be to digress.) In book 18 the word is *anthropos* (“human”) and not *andra* (“man”), and nothing impedes the more general implications of the passage to the human condition.

The core texts of classical mythology are of course replete with such general statements about the human condition. In the texts selected for my own course in classical mythology this past term, for example, *Prometheus Bound* offers Prometheus’ own claim about the centrality of fire, and so technology, his gifts, for the human condition (443-71). *Antigone*’s first *stasimon* offers its Ode to Man that is without equal, both in defining the wondrous achievements of humanity and in defining its limitations in human mortality, which Creon derogates to his peril (332-61). *Hippolytus* makes at least a shorter, gnomic claim about the likelihood of human error that is contrived by the gods (1433-34). In each case these general claims about humanity can equally well be understood as programmatic statements about the works in which the myths are rendered: Prometheus is responsible for human technology, for all of humanity’s gifts. Creon’s failure is in not realizing that the limits of human authority do not extend beyond death (to the prohibition of funeral rites), and humanity does make mistakes, especially when they are engineered by jealous divinities like Aphrodite, as they are in *Hippolytus*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Single humanistic, programmatic passages are harder to identify in the *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses*. Obviously Anchises’ directions to Aeneas in *Aeneid* 6 work well enough for Aeneas as Roman (6.851-53).

If we're to use 18.130 ff. as programmatic for the *Odyssey*, we should do a little more close reading. For instance, the expression for “feebler” (*akidnoteros*) is used only at two other points in Homer — really in all of Greek literature — both times by Odysseus himself. He describes Penelope as “feebler in appearance” than Calypso in book five (5.217), and when he feels like explaining the facts of life to his young Phaeacian challengers in book eight, he says likewise that one person may be “feebler in appearance”, but that he may have compensating gifts (8.169). The derivation of the word *akidnoteros* is uncertain, and it only occurs in these passages, and so only in the comparative. It *may* derive as a negative adjective from *kednos*, a generic word for nobility, strength, and so on, but that does not help much since *kednos* is so broad a term. It seems a striking thing that Odysseus in particular likes the word so much. From the humanities point of view, it is interesting to discover that Odysseus applies the term to a human (*anthropos*) in book eighteen, to the archetypal woman/wife Penelope in book five, and to *aner*, a specifically male term, in book eight (he practises gender equity!).

There is a sense in which the first sentence expresses simply a commonplace of ancient Greek literature, and scholars have taken turns pointing out their favorites. R. B. Rutherford argues that Odysseus is suggesting that the suitors' offence “ignores the humility and fragility of man.”<sup>5</sup> The suitors are not gods, who feast eternally, unpunished (cf. *Od.* 1.377, 380). Rutherford points out parallels, in Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*: “Alas for mortal affairs; when fortunate a mere shadow may overturn them” (1328-29); and in Euripides, *Heraclidae*, “I say that no one is blessed, except the gods, no man is born ill-fated, nor does the same house walk always in good fortune, but different fates pursue it,

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<sup>5</sup> R. B. Rutherford, “The Philosophy of the *Odyssey*,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 106 (1986) 145-62, esp. 156.

one after another” (608-11). John Finley points out that the passage is in some ways similar to one of the elegiac poet Mimnermus (fr. 2), who puts emphasis on the ephemeral quality of youthful strength, pointing out the similarity between human life and that of leaves and flowers, which grow and have strength, but then wither and die. Theognis, another elegiac poet, emphasizes the need to accept what the gods give with a steadfast heart (441-446, 1029-1036).<sup>6</sup> Michael Clarke points out the parallels in Simonides, fr. 521 *PMG*: humans cannot tell how their fortune may change from day to day.<sup>7</sup> Colin Macleod emphasizes the common weakness that gives men a reason to treat each other with respect, offering parallels in Herodotus’ portrayal of Cyrus’ pity for Croesus (1.86) and Sophocles’ depiction of Odysseus’ pity for his erstwhile antagonist Ajax: “I pity him, for I see that we living men are nothing but phantoms or a bodiless shadow” (*Ajax* 122-4).<sup>8</sup>

Parallels in western literature could easily multiply, but I’m not sure whether they help much in determining the rhetorical force of Odysseus’ statement in its context. It may be better to stick to the Homer himself. When King Alcinous of Phaeacia speculates that Odysseus may be a god, for instance, Odysseus formulates a similar speech:

I’m not like the immortals that hold broad heaven, neither in body nor birth, but like mortal men. Whatever people you know who’ve had plenty of woe, I’d be like them in my pains. I’d say I’ve even borne more evils with all I’ve suffered by the will of the gods. But allow me to eat, even though I suffer. (7.208-15)

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<sup>6</sup> See J.H. Finley, Jr., *Homer’s Odyssey*, (Cambridge, MA 1978) 181-82.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Clarke, “Manhood and Heroism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge 2004) 74-90, esp. 89.

<sup>8</sup> C. W. Macleod, *Collected Essays* (Oxford 1982) 14.

As in 18.130-42, Odysseus begins with a comparison, this time identifying himself in place of the generic human. He is, after all, at this point still an anonymous everyman to the Phaeacians. He then goes on to his autobiographical suffering, and then makes his plea to eat, here in place of his moralizing about abiding by the laws. For him here the law is that he must eat: that is also the human condition. As Odysseus puts it, eating makes him forget everything he is suffering (7.220).

Scholars have pointed to *Iliad* 17.446-47, where Zeus, mourning the death of Patroclus and the folly of Hector, uses essentially the same construction as in *Odyssey* 18.130: “There is nothing more miserable than man (*aner*) among all things that breathe and move upon earth.” The term used for “more miserable”, *oizyroteron*, is different from *akidnoteron*. *Oizys* is a term more easily associated with Odysseus himself — as we see him described at *Odyssey* 5.105: “a man *most miserable* above all those warriors who fought around the city of Priam.” But it has some important differences that would make it inappropriate for Odysseus to use before the suitors. First, *oizyroteron* is unqualified: Odysseus might have applied the term to his own status as a beggar in book eighteen, but he cannot plausibly extend it to the suitors; they don’t consider themselves miserable. Second, the term he does use, *akidnoteros*, is dynamic, it could apply as easily to those who at first sight seem strong as well as to those who seem at first sight weak, as the occurrences in books five and eight show.

And here seems the rub. Both in book five and in book eight Odysseus describes his archetypal woman, Penelope, and his generic man, referring to himself, as *akidnoteros*, as feeble or frail, but he quickly follows with striking antitheses. Penelope is feebler to look at, but Odysseus still prefers to go home to her over staying with the goddess. His generic man in book eight, meaning himself, is feebler in appearance, but he is more skilled at the athletic events than all of the Phaeacian youths. That is, in book

eighteen we should perhaps also look for an implied antithesis. The human is a feeble creature, too proud of his youthful strength and beauty, too reckless and prone to lawlessness. But Odysseus has had his chance to opt for an immortal life by staying with Calypso: he has instead chosen to come home to a house filled with usurpers. The scholars cited above who have discussed this passage have uniformly emphasized the negative aspects of Odysseus' statement about the human condition, and there is no doubt that Odysseus' ostensible rhetoric before the suitors emphasizes the vulnerability of their situation as comparable to that of his own, as a beggar. But the word *akidnoteros*, in reference to Odysseus' own situation, also suggests some positive aspects of a human life lived according to law and what the gods ordain. There is the joy that comes from eating, as he says in book seven, and there is the joy of the feast, as he also emphasizes to Alcinous (9.5-11).

Jenny Strauss Clay sees in the passage a double theodicy, or rather two *Weltanschauungen*, one in which the gods randomly apportion good and evil, the other in which there is divine punishment for injustice.<sup>9</sup> She sees no incentive for morality in the first theodicy, but Odysseus is trying to warn the suitors, Amphinomus in particular, to leave, so he must also invoke the second: "Only the hope of threat of divine reward or punishment can encourage the performance of just or pious acts."<sup>10</sup> Clay also points out that unlike in this passage, in his explanation to Melanthis (19.75-76, 80), Odysseus makes Zeus the agent of his misfortunes. But I wonder about whether Homer really has

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<sup>9</sup> Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton 1983) 227.

<sup>10</sup> Clay (note 9) 229.

such a double theodicy in the *Odyssey*.<sup>11</sup> Except in a utopian world like that of Aristophanes' *Wealth*, surely everyone recognizes that bad things happen to good people from time to time. In the *Odyssey*, these seem to be ordained by fate or decreed by the gods (which amounts to the same thing), but it is not so much a theodicy as something inherent in the fates of particular individuals. There is also the complication of the behavior of some gods, like Poseidon, who may act out of spite in loyalty to their favorites. But Zeus is, if sometimes slow, always ultimately just and decisive. So when Odysseus says that the low points in life must be borne "with steadfast heart", he does so in the faith that Zeus' justice will ultimately prevail. He knows that the Suitors will not heed his warning, and neither will Melantho. The warning is offered in order for the Homeric theodicy to entail that the wrongdoer not only does wrong, but does so knowingly, after being warned, and so suffers, just as Aegisthus killed Agamemnon even though the gods had told him not to (*Od.* 1.40-43).

The phrase "with steadfast heart" (*tetlêoti thymôi*) occurs nine times in the *Odyssey*, never in the *Iliad*. Again, it seems a peculiarly Odyssean term, although Menelaus uses it twice of himself in book four (447, 459). Odysseus uses it of himself, clinging to the ram as he made his escape from the Cyclops' cave, and in book twenty-four the deceased suitors use it of him when he suffered the abuse he does in book eighteen (24.163). Interestingly, the phrase is applied twice to Penelope while she endured Odysseus' absence (11.181, 16.37), and Odysseus twice observes, surely with

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<sup>11</sup> The view that the gods are the cause of ultimate human suffering is expressed by some characters in the *Odyssey*, but not by Odysseus, not when he is speaking sincerely. That seems rather the view of the *Iliad*.

ironic implication, how Penelope stands aloof from her husband with “steadfast heart” as husband and wife flirt their way to their full reunion (23.100, 168).

There is no doubt that *atasthalia*, recklessness, can claim pride of place as the most important moral concept of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus the avenger fulfills the gods’ vengeance against those who recklessly overstep what they know to be ordained for themselves. But this meditation on *Od.* 18.130-42 and its potentialities as a programmatic passage for the epic reveals other, particularly Odyssean, terms, the imaginative interpretation of which may shed more light on the richness of this core text.

In the answers my students give to this question, I hope that they identify the passage as characteristic of the Homeric *Odyssey*. Odysseus characteristically makes the speech in disguise, making claims about the nature of the human condition that resonate with the everyman role of Odysseus himself. He seems to refer to the arrogance of his Iliadic *persona*, the troubles he suffered thanks to Poseidon, Aeolus, Circe, and various other divine and semi-divine figures. He has by and large stuck to the law, what has been ordained for him, “with steadfast heart”. Ironically, the epic will finally see him reunited with his father and brethren (if we can consider Penelope, Telemachus, and his loyal servants this way).