

Odyssean Therapeutics: Fate, the Hero and Learned Helplessness

At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Zeus looks upon Aigisthos and complains “Mortals are always blaming the gods / claiming that their troubles come from us / but they have grief greater than their fate [ὐπὲρ μόρον] thanks to their own foolishness [σφῆσιν ἀτασθαλίησιν]” (1.32-4). While this opening lament establishes thematic patterns that help to explain and/or justify the deaths of suitors and Odysseus’ companions alike, it serves as well to emphasize the interaction between fate and free will (pointing to the famous ‘double motivation’ of Homeric actions) and also introduce notions of responsibility and consequences that can significantly impact the way we understand Odysseus’ *nostos*, the varied purposes of his *apologoi* in books 9-12, and the cultural function of the *Odyssey*.

This paper sets out to establish that Zeus’ opening comments invite the audience to take a complex approach to Odysseus’ character and through him an interrogation of human psychology and the relationship between man and gods. The *Odyssey* has been profitably analyzed before as a narrative that communicates the trauma of a warrior returning home. Its wider psychological resonance, however, in addressing issues of human and divine agency may have greater interpretive implications. By looking at expressions of divine causality and human responsibility in the *apologoi* especially, I will argue that part of the function of Odysseus’ own narrative is to facilitate the assumption and expression of responsibility. In part, Odysseus needs to address and confess his own complicity in his suffering in order to re-claim his identity and forge a new way home.

This reading is inspired by research in the psychological theory of “learned helplessness”, a condition under which human beings (and other sentient animals as well) behave listlessly and helplessly because they believe that they have no control over their situations. Odysseus during his sufferings and his sojourn on Calypso’s island, I suggest, is representative of a man who has lost all sense of agency, in short of a man who believes that all is fated. Through the intervention of the gods (ironically) and the therapeutics of storytelling, Odysseus learns to identify his own agency, accept blame for his own fate and thus empowers himself to embark on his famous return. Such a reading of the epic, in turn, suggests that the myth of Odysseus’ homecoming functions as a cultural narrative that emphasizes human agency

without abandoning divine influence. The salutary effect of this cultural narrative is to integrate divine authority and human causality into a dynamic world view shored up against possible negative effects of beliefs predestination.