

Blind to the Future: Homeric ἄτη and the Tragic Plot of the *Iliad*

In 1982/1983 Georg Dunkel published an important article on the way ancient Greek has been understood to represent the past and future as spatially located in front of (πρόσω) and behind (πίσω) a viewing subject. Dunkel challenges the traditional view that Greek represents the future as located behind a viewer because it can't be seen—an argument that goes back to the ancient bT scholia and Eustathius (cf. Treu 1955: 134)—, and instead argues that the future is located *behind* the past and present which are laid out right in front of us; in other words, ancient Greek conceives of the future as located off in the distance in front of us (Dunkel 1982/1983: 80).

In this presentation I will build upon Dunkel's insight to consider the tragic plot of the *Iliad* through a reconsideration of the semantics of the Greek noun ἄτη “blindness, delusion.” Characters in Homeric epic are not entirely blind to the future: they make plans and act with an eye to advantage and profit, often thinking *κεν πολὺ κέρδιον εἴη*, “it would be far more profitable” to choose one course of action over another (*Il.* 6.410, 7.28, 17.417, 22.108, etc.; Stallmach 1968: 21-22). And yet, each human action is made without perfect vision into the future; only gods, as poets remind us, can see and understand the complex chain of causal relations once an event is set into motion (cf. Theognis 133-142). The term ἄτη precisely describes that which keeps human agents from seeing the future consequences of their actions—it is the “blindness, infatuation, folly” that leads us into error (Dodds 1951, Stallmach 1968, Wyatt Jr. 1982). Through infatuation with the present moment, the agent loses sight of the future; only after irrevocable consequences does the cause of his error become clear.

Early on, Achilles criticizes Agamemnon for being so caught up in the moment that he fails to see the consequences of his actions: “For in truth he rages in his destructive wits, nor at all does he know how to notice at the same time to what is before him and beyond” (*Il.* 1.342-

343). Agamemnon fails to see what's coming (οὐδέ τι οἶδε νοῆσαι ἅμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω)—namely Achilles' withdrawal from the fighting—because of his infatuation with anger and pride. But when Achilles asks Thetis to convey his prayers to Zeus, “so that ... also the son of Atreus, wide-ruling Agamemnon, may come to know his blindness (ἦν ἄτην), that he did not honor the best of the Achaeans” (*Il.* 1.410-412), Achilles has set the plot of the *Iliad* into motion (*Il.* 1.5).

The human actor has his eyes toward the future—but not far enough; ἄτη is the experience of finding oneself enmeshed in the world in more complicated relationships than one expected—and each action has ramifications that bind our outcome to that of others. ἄτη is the network that binds us in place and to each other (δίκτυον ἄτης: Aesch. *Prom.* 1076ff.; στεγανὸν δίκτυον ... γάγγαμον ἄτης; Ag. 357-361; cf. Stallmach 1968: 21). Although Achilles may wish for a world free from the tangle of relations with others, one in which he and Patroclus alone may sack a deserted Troy (*Il.* 16.97-100), he comes to see clearly the role he plays in his friend's death. When Thetis asks Achilles why he is crying at *Il.* 18.73-77—after all, she says, “all these things have been accomplished for you by Zeus” (τὰ μὲν δὴ τοῖ τετέλεσται | ἐκ Διός, 18.74-75) precisely because of his prayer (*Il.* 1.407-412, 16.236-238)—she brings home the point of Achilles' responsibility for Patroclus' death (Edwards 1991: 153). The tragic plot of the *Iliad* requires that Achilles himself acknowledge his responsibility: τὸν ἀπόλεσα, “I got him killed” (*Il.* 18.82; cf. Edwards 1991 *ad loc.* on the active form). The tragedy is that he will realize his own ἄτη (*Il.* 19.270-275) only after it is all too late.

Bibliography

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