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# THE WRATH OF POSEIDON

There is a major problem in connection with the wrath of Poseidon in Homer's *Odyssey*. We are told by Homer and Zeus (*Od*. 1.20-1, 1.68-75) that Poseidon raged continually against the hero from the time that the Cyclops was blinded until Odysseus reached Ithaca; and, when back on Ithaca the man complains to Athena about her absence and lack of help during the whole period of his wanderings after the fall of Troy, she says at 13.341-3 that she was avoiding confrontation with her angry uncle during all that time. But the only specified manifestation of that anger is the storm roused by the sea-god after Odysseus leaves Calypso in Book 5, in the tenth year after Polyphemus' prayer to his father for revenge.[1] It seems extraordinary that Poseidon should have waited so long before acting against him, and then have attacked him only once, merely causing him difficulty before he reached Scheria, and not (since it was fated for him to get home, and troubles there are already assured thanks to the suitors) ensuring his late return in a miserable plight on another's ship after losing all his companions, as his blinded son had requested (at 9.532-5).

This problem has been explained as being due to a massive nod by Homer or the clumsy cobbling together of various episodes by an incompetent bard or bunch of bards. But there is another solution, one that is in keeping with the modern scholarly trend of viewing the poet of the *Odyssey* as a subtle and effective author who actually knows what he is doing. The narrative in Books 9 to 12 is put into the mouth of Odysseus, and he does not specify intervention by Poseidon in any of those books. However, unlike us, he has not been told about Poseidon's unremitting rage, and he knows that the god caused the storm in Book 5 and that Helios and Zeus destroyed his last ship at Thrinacia only because he has been informed of all that by goddesses (at 5.339-40, 12.389-90). He states that the marine deity heeded Polyphemus' prayer (at 9.536), and accepts that Poseidon was behind the tempest of Book 5 (at 7.270-5), but, apparently presuming that this was Poseidon's response to His son's appeal, Odysseus does not speak of further action by Poseidon, and by the end of all his ordeals our despondent hero has suffered so much that, understandably enough, he concludes that Zeus and the gods in general have been persecuting him (9.37-8, 12.313-15, 12.338, 12.371). But Odysseus does not speak with the authority of the poet himself and is merely speculating from a restricted point of view.[2] And we know for a fact

[1] On the absence of Poseidon's rage in Books 9-12 cf. A. Heubeck and A. Hoekstra, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey Volume II Books IX-XVI* (Oxford, 1989), 40.

[2] Many critics have automatically accepted Odysseus' words at face value as the truth (e.g. G.E. Dimock, *The Unity of the* Odyssey [Amherst, MA, 1989], 120). Others point out correctly that we should not take on trust the reliability of such a blinkered narrator: see esp. R.B. Rutherford, 'The philosophy of the *Odyssey*', *JHS* 106 (1986), 153 n. 43; R. Friedrich, 'Thrinakia and Zeus' ways to men in the *Odyssey*', *GRBS* 28 (1987), 387–9 and C. Segal, *Singers, Heroes and Gods in the Odyssey* (Ithaca and London, 1994), 212–13.

that he is wrong at 5.303-5 when he assigns to Zeus the storm attacking him, and he significantly fails to see the hand of Poseidon at that point; so too he does not perceive Athena's help in connection with that squall and on Scheria (at 5.382-7, 5.426-7, 6.139-40, 6.229-35, etc.). However, for the benefit of his audience the poet has provided clues to Poseidon's influence extending beyond that tempest. The *two* references at the start of the epic to His *continual* rage amount to an obvious hint to look out for intervention by Him from the blinding onwards (i.e. long before the storm). When Tiresias in the Underworld (at 11.100-3) speaks of a god making Odysseus' onward journey difficult for him and of the hero not escaping the angry Poseidon's attention, we are encouraged to look in all that follows for His hand, and there is a subsequent episode (Thrinacia) where it seems probable that He is in action. In fact, there are also clear indications of His presence for alert people to pick up in two cases before that speech of Tiresias (in connection with Aeolus' bag of winds and the Laestrygonians). A few scholars have seen or almost seen some of this, but have not developed or extended their suspicions.[3]

It would be a remarkable coincidence if, right after the Cyclops' prayer, Odysseus' return to Ithaca thanks to Aeolus' help was thwarted at 10.31-55 merely by chance. Would Poseidon really have overlooked the fact that the Greek was about to get home quickly on his own ship in a good state with all his companions intact so soon after His blinded son's request for that not to happen? But it would have happened if Odysseus had not fallen asleep, enabling his men to open Aeolus' bag of winds. When the fleet was in sight of Ithaca, it is most improbable that the hero would go to sleep of his own accord, but a god could make him drop off,[4] especially when vulnerable from lack of sleep; and the god may also have inspired the crew to look into the bag (fuddling their wits as Odysseus fuddled Polyphemus' with the wine).[5] At sea, Odysseus is in Poseidon's province, and He would here be engineering another storm with disastrous consequences for His enemy like the one in Book 5. When the Greeks are blown back to Aeolia by the released winds, Aeolus asks him if a malevolent δαίμων (in the singular) has attacked him (10.64); and when Odysseus blames his comrades and sleep, Aeolus immediately maintains that the hero is hated by the gods, which means that he sees divine provenance for the slumber. He is sure that the hand of heaven is involved (and he should have some insight into such things, as one close to the gods),[6] and he is very forceful in putting that explanation across (with repetition at 10.74-5, coming on top of 64), so that we may be induced to entertain that notion too. There are also connections with the Polyphemus incident, which suggest that the sea-god is bringing about a satisfyingly symmetrical repayment. He assails Odysseus via sleep, as the Greek had assailed His son. He engineers trouble for Odysseus by means of an ἀσκός (10.47), as Odysseus had done for the Cyclops (9.196). He causes Odysseus grief and deprives him of something very dear to him (his return home), as Odysseus did by blinding Polyphemus. Poseidon may also have had an eye to Odysseus' lying

[3] B. Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey* (Wiesbaden, 1974), 229–30 argues briefly but well for the operation of Poseidon in connection with Aeolia, and there are also vague glimmerings of this idea in E. Brann, *Homeric Moments* (Philadelphia, 2002), 191 and in J.V. Morrison, *A Companion to Homer's Odyssey* (Westport, CT, 2003), 98. P. Toohey, *Reading Epic* (London, 1992), 54 almost gets the point in Laestrygonia, when he says that the havoc that the Laestrygonians wreak on Odysseus' men enacts Polyphemus' revenge by proxy.

[4] For gods causing sleep cf. e.g. 21.357-8.

[5] For a god putting a notion into a human's mind cf. e.g. 21.1-4.

[6] See 10.2, 10.21.

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claim at 9.283–5 that He and wind had driven his ship to shore, and really have driven his ship to land here by means of the winds. Ominously it seems that the sea-god's wrath is soon starting to operate, with a grim malice in letting the man get very close to home (10.30) and then frustrating him heartbreakingly. This arouses tension as well as sympathy and makes us fear that He will intrude again, perhaps soon.

It is not hard to see Him at work in Laestrygonia too, in the very next port of call. Polyphemus had asked for the loss of all of Odysseus' men, and now eleven out of twelve ships plus crews are soon eradicated. Poseidon, active in His marine province, may well have guided the fleet to Laestrygonia;[7] He may also have led the other eleven ships into the deathtrap of a harbour.[8] It seems probable that He put into Odysseus' head the idea of mooring his own ship outside the harbour. Odysseus offers no motivation for this action at 10.95-6.[9] One wonders why he would choose not to anchor in what he himself describes as a fine harbour (10.87-94) and to separate himself from the rest of the fleet (so that he was not there among them to get them moving off quickly when they were pelted by the Laestrygonians, as he did with his own ship at 10.125-30). If this was due to canniness (not specified, whereas he does spell out his forethought in connection with Maron's wine at 9.212-15), and he suspected danger, why would he not have warned his comrades and tried to get them to come back out of the harbour? The omission of a motive on his part is suggestive: he does not know why he did this because it was not his own decision to do it. There are also numerous clear echoes of the Cyclops episode here in diction and themes,[10] so that it is brought to mind and we can readily see various pointed inversions: this time Odysseus can inflict no harm on the cannibal giants, can think up no ruse, has to flee with his tail between his legs and without indulging in triumphant vaunting, as many more of his men are killed and eaten, and huge boulders are hurled again but hit the target and do real damage.[11] After Aeolia this is a second crushing blow for our hero, a chillingly swift reinforcement, which leaves just one ship and crew to be wiped out and a miserable plight for Odysseus as per Polyphemus' prayer. Again there is tension in expectation of such an eventuality, but Homer has done with the wrath motif for the time being. We can imagine the sea-god keeping an eye on His enemy for the rest of his voyage, happy when he is static with Circe (and later Calypso), enticed by the Sirens and losing men to Scylla, so that He does not feel the need to intervene then. But He is not finished yet.

It appears improbable that Poseidon would leave to chance the destruction of the remaining vessel and crew-members and not engineer that himself in His relentless rage. In connection with Thrinacia too there are various hints for us to show that He is actually at work there. At 12.266-9, as he approaches the island, Odysseus recalls

[7] For this within a god's power see 9.142-3 and 10.141, and for Poseidon in particular driving ships ashore cf. 4.500 and 9.283-4.

[8] But this may just be due to the sailors' insubordination (so S.D. Olson, *Blood and Iron* [Leiden, 1995], 55).

[9] The point is noted by e.g. P.V. Jones, *Homer's Odyssey. A Companion to the Translation of Richmond Lattimore* (Bristol, 1988), 90 and I. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge, 2001), 254, but without further probing.

[10] For themes see my main text and also S. Said, *Homer & the Odyssey*, trans. R. Webb (Oxford, 2011), 168-9. On diction see Heubeck-Hoekstra (n. 1), 49-50 (for 113 cf. 9.191-2; 115-6 = 9.289-91, 9.311 and 9.344; 118-19 = 9.401; 128-9 = 9.488-9; 133-4 = 9.565-6).

[11] It may be significant that the Laestrygonian spring Artacia (10.108) has the same name as a spring visited by the Argonauts (Ap. Rhod. 1.957) on an island that had associations with Poseidon (the local Doliones were descended from and protected by Him: see Ap. Rhod. 1.951-2).

the warnings of Tiresias and Circe to avoid it, and at 12.298-302 he makes his men swear not to eat the cattle. Tiresias and Circe had in fact prophesied that, if the cattle of the Sun were devoured, they would suffer the very fate that Polyphemus had prayed for (11.113-15 and 12.141 = 9.534-5), so that we now immediately think of that prayer, which Poseidon heeded. When his comrades insist on landing there, Odysseus is sure that some δαίμων is devising calamity for them (12.295), and divine influence does seem the most likely reason for them to ignore his stern warning of the terrible danger for them there at 12.271-5. Next, at 12.325-6, strong winds keep them on the island for a month (cf. 5.291-6 for Poseidon causing Odysseus problems by means of winds), so that they run out of provisions. When Odysseus goes off to pray to the immortals for help at 12.335-7, again he falls asleep when he should have stayed awake and kept his crew in check, and once more they talk among themselves and opt for a disastrous course of action—eating the Sun's cattle.[12] The repetition of the ironical phrase γλυκὺς ὕπνος (10.31, 12.338) underlines the connection with the Aeolus segment of the poem, where the sea-god appeared to be behind the somnolence. Odysseus speculatively assigns the bad weather and sleep to Zeus and the gods in general (12.313, 338, 371-3), but we know that Zeus and the others favour Odysseus' return (1.64-79, 5.29-42) and have no reason to cause such difficulties, whereas Poseidon does have good reason. As a result of the crew's actions (brought about through the weather and Odysseus' nap) Helios complains about the loss of his cattle to Zeus, who smites their ship when they leave the island and kills all the men except Odysseus, who eventually makes his way to Calypso's isle, where he is detained for seven years, so that he gets home late. In this way the Cyclops' wishes come true. Again there are links that direct us back to the Polyphemus episode (entrapment on Thrinacia, as in his cave; disagreement between Odysseus and his crew; the eating of food belonging to another, as with the Cyclops' cheese at 9.231-2), and they help us to discern a vindictive tit-for-tat aspect: like Polyphemus, Odysseus is attacked in his sleep and suffers a severe loss; as payback for the theft, sacrifice and consumption of the monster's ram at 9.551-7 the Greeks are punished when they steal, sacrifice and eat the Sun's cattle; at 9.283 Odysseus claimed deceitfully that Poseidon and the winds caused him a problem, and here they really do.[13]

After this all that remains to be fulfilled of Polyphemus' prayer is the miserable plight for Odysseus as he returns on another's ship. The Phaeacians provide the ship. But it appears from 5.35–42 that the hero is fated to return safely to Ithaca with an abundance of treasure provided by those hosts. When he does manage that without any more trouble and is himself now beyond Poseidon's reach, this grim god still does not give up His wrath, but in His frustration at not being able to implement every single request of His son He transfers His rage to the Phaeacians (13.149-64).

In conclusion, this explanation solves the problem of Poseidon's apparent absence in Books 9 to 12 and clears up some minor puzzles as well (like Odysseus tying up outside the Laestrygonian harbour and falling asleep at a most inconvenient point twice). Such continuous activity by Poseidon also justifies fully Athena's unwillingness to oppose Him. This interpretation gives the sections on Aeolus, Laestrygonia and Thrinacia added import and impact. It builds the character and role of the sea-god, making Him

[12] The link with Aeolia has been noted by scholars (e.g. de Jong [n. 9], 308 and B.B. Powell, *Homer* [Oxford, 2007], 177), but they have made nothing of it.

[13] There may also be allusion to θρῖναξ (Poseidon's implement) in the name Thrinacia (so Jones [n. 9], 117 and Brann [n. 3], 211; contrast Heubeck-Hoekstra [n. 1], 133).

into a truly formidable epic opponent, who dogs our hero. This increases sympathy for Odysseus as victim of such a malevolent and relentless deity. As well as the emotive aspect there is intellectual stimulation in all this, because we are invited to pick up hints and work out the presence of Poseidon for ourselves. In addition, the failure to specify that Poseidon was in operation is effective from a literary perspective, since it represents Him as a sinister force at work in the background and creates a sense of lurking menace.[14] For all of these reasons I hope that readers have been convinced by my arguments that the hand of Poseidon should be seen in these three episodes. At the very least I trust that intervention by Him there will now be viewed as a distinct possibility, an intriguing and disturbing possibility.

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[14] This theory also makes Poseidon's wrath significantly outweigh that of Helios, which should assuage the concerns of those critics who are uncomfortable with apparent parity in the importance of the ire of the two divinities (cf. e.g. W.J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* [Oxford, 1930], 29-40; Fenik [n. 3], 208-30; and D. Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* [New Haven, CT, and London, 1978], 37). It also adds thought-provoking complexity to the issue of whether Odysseus' men here are just victims of malevolent deities or are rightly punished by gods in their role as guardians of justice (on which see Fenik [n. 3], 208-30; Friedrich [n. 2], 375-400; and Olson [n. 8], 205-23).