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THE NOTION OF MADNESS IN LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY, AND TRAGEDY:
EVOLVING CONCEPTIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN ATHENS

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In his clinical descriptions of mental illness, the ancient Greek physician Aretaeus (~100 AD) writes of the disease called melancholy. He begins with a comprehensive description of the affliction, listing symptoms reflective of depression like sleeplessness, loss of appetite, dejection, and a desire to die.¹ Interestingly, after speculating about its various bodily causes and treatments, he recounts a story of love curing it all: “A certain person, incurably affected, fell in love with a girl; and when the physicians could bring him no relief, love cured him. But I think he was originally in love, and that he was dejected and spiritless from being unsuccessful with the girl and appeared to be melancholic ... but when he imparted his love to the girl, he ceased from his dejection and dispelled his passion and sorrow ... and with joy he awoke from his lowness of spirits, and he became restored to understanding, love being his physician.”²

At a time when Greek physicians such as Aretaeus were just beginning to write of illnesses of the mind for the first time in history, such a story must have been puzzling. What was thought to be an incurable disease seemed to be remedied not with the intervention of the gods or other outside forces, but with love, a construct of the mind. This very thought, that mental afflictions had physiological and organic causes and treatments, was unprecedented; it was a rejection of divine intervention and the beginning of empirical, clinical mental science. Ripe with both the newfound intellectualism and political strife of the fifth century BCE, Athens developed the enduring literature, tragedy, and philosophy that would begin this shift in thinking. By way of minds like Aristotle and Euripides, these disciplines grew rich and evolved with an

¹ Aretaeus, *De causis et signis acutorum morborum* (lib. 2) Francis Adams LL.D., Ed, Chapter V “On Melancholy”.

² Ibid.

unprecedented focus on the self, driving this paradigm shift that would push Greek understanding of mental illness away from hundreds of years of divine explanation toward the physiological explanation that is the basis of modern thought.

In analyzing how this shift in thinking came about in Athens, it is important to begin with an understanding of the belief that had dominated the majority of Greek history: human mental afflictions originated not in mind and soul, but in gods. Madness, that is uncontrollable and often sudden bouts of anger and malice, is rampant throughout Greek literature and presents an understanding of Greek attitudes towards mental illness. As early as Homer, characters are often inflicted with periods of madness and grief that are blamed upon the gods.³ In *The Odyssey* when nurse Eurikleya announces to Penelope that Odysseus has returned and killed the suitors, Penelope doubts her and tells the old woman the gods must have driven her to madness, for they can “put chaos into the clearest head or bring a lunatic down to earth.”⁴ Interestingly, this attitude is also evident in the syntax of nouns and verbs used to write of madness. For example, one of the most common Greek words used to describe the madness of epic characters, *ate*, meaning damage of mind, life, or fortune, is always used passively — that is, it describes a form of harm done *unto* a subject from some outside force as a consequence of an action, rather than the subject acting as its cause. In *Whom Gods Destroy*, Padel expands on this important distinction: “[*Ate*’s causes] are often left unspecified through the use of the middle or passive voice ... The importance of this double possibility is vital ... [this] means that the verb’s form may reflect

³ Georgios Tzeferakos and Athanasios Douzenis, "Sacred Psychiatry in Ancient Greece," *Annals of General Psychiatry* 13, no. 1 (2014)

⁴Homer and Robert Fitzgerald, *The Odyssey* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 429.

deep ambiguity about who is responsible for the activity: the person going mad (being damaged) or an outside agent.”⁵ Thus it is in Greek epic literature where authors establish the idea that the cause of mental affliction rests outside the mind; no one does *ate* to themselves, it is sent onto them. Padel goes on to detail examples from Homeric poetry and later Athenian tragedy that demonstrate characters using *ate* in this manner, describing an outside force, often divine, that damages them, and “leads astray the phrenes [mind]” and “seizes them, like passion” — all verbal constructions that set the character as the receiving *object* of some harming force.⁶ Harris details many other Greek words of madness that relay this outside-force origin concept of mental affliction, such as the verb *alyo* meaning ‘to be carried away’, used in both Homeric and tragic speeches to refer to characters carried away by “excessive physical pain or moral sorrow”, rather than the affliction originating in the mind itself.⁷

However, while Homeric poetry often described bouts of mania and dejection that are today recognizable as mental disease, it is important to realize that vocabulary for ‘madness’ as an *illness* of the mind did not exist at the time. Madness was in fact respected and perhaps even beneficial. This is apparent in the imagined worlds of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, where such forms of anger were natural and indulged in without shame by both gods and mortals. *Menes*, one of the primary epic words used to describe intense anger and similar to the vocabulary above, was restricted in Homer to the wrath of the gods or of the hero Achilles, who himself was half-divine.

⁵ Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy*, 171.

⁶ Ruth Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 171.

⁷ Harris, *Mental Disorders*, 367.

⁸ Therefore madness wasn't stigmatized as today, rather it was a common characteristic of the highest and most respected power. And in these conflict torn, honor-conscious worlds, it seems entirely natural that both hero and god *need* these bouts of anger to succeed — after all, it is by war prowess and often brutal conflict that these warrior heroes gain their sense of *kleos*, or fame, that is so incredibly important.⁹ Thus it is in Homer's works that the greatest hero of all should be the most anger-prone, or perhaps by modern definition, the most mentally ill. Therefore in epic poetry, where the first descriptions of recognizable madness appear, these altered mental states have two characteristics: they are god-sent or come from some other outside force, and they are not an illness but a frequent, often even beneficial state of mind.

This of course then raises the question as to what changed. As history moved forward from Homer, and Athens entered the fifth century, the abundance of vocabulary used to describe emotion dramatically widened; educated Greeks in 5th century Athens had a relatively large number of Greek anger nouns to choose from, by standards of Latin.¹⁰ Nouns like *orge*, *cholos*, and *thumos* had come to replace Homeric words, representing not just intense anger but intense emotion in general.¹¹ Harris finds that this lexical abundance in anger vocabulary is evidence not simply that Athenians were interested in this particular aspect of their lives, but that they were

⁸ William V. Harris, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52. Homeric poems laid the foundation of madness vocabulary that later Athenian tragedy would expand and evolve.

preoccupied by it.¹² This new sense of introspection among the Athenians is the distinction that sets apart Homer from Athens. While archaic Greeks of Homer's works often addressed their own hearts or spirits, they were not *preoccupied* with them, as most people seemed to be in fourth century B.C., nor did they reflect at length either about their psychological well-being or about their own moral condition, themes that are common throughout Athenian tragedy.¹³ The answer then, to what exactly brought about this Athenian obsession with introspection, lies in the philosophy, tragedy and political strife of Athens that defined the fifth century.

During this time, Athens flourished in philosophy and literature and produced some of the most enduring intellectual pieces of the Western tradition. Philosophy grew rich as it sought to describe the world not with the gods, but with a universal, rational conception of nature. These disciplines grew intertwined with the turbulent politics of the era, such as the Greco-Persian Wars, Peloponnesian Wars, and the many tyrants and disastrous reforms that took hold of Athens during this era.¹⁴ Naturally, amidst all this conflict, there arose a common theme in both literature and philosophy that influenced Greek conceptualization of madness and modern illness: self-restraint.

With newfound political freedom and class strife within Athens, Greek conceptualization of anger seemed to be changing; no longer was it viewed as natural, beneficial, or necessary of *kleos*. This political turn of events began to shift Greece away from the concept of respected

¹² Ibid., 55.

¹³ Ibid., 346.

¹⁴ Mortimer Chambers et al., *The Western Experience*, 7th ed. (McGraw-Hill Companies, 1999), 74.

anger that dominated the epic era, towards the notion that anger could be an illness of the mind and should be restrained. Harris notes that during this time, the Athenians “seemed to a large extent to have internalized the notion that their freedom would only survive if they were able to limit the action of their own passions, including especially their own anger ... if there was too much *thumos*-anger, terrible civil conflict (*stasis*) was a likely consequence.”¹⁵ This ideology rang true among Athenians as the brutality of wars, tyrants, and angry mobs swept their city. The great dramatists of Athens, relayed this message of self-restraint throughout their tragedies, urging nearly the whole of Athens towards this rapidly changing conceptualization of anger. In *Aeschylus’ Oresteia*, performed in 458 BC, the tragedy seems to take a clear political stance towards self-restraint. In the last play of the trilogy, Athena directs that the Furies (implacable spirits of vengeance) not stir up anger between the citizens of Athens and “make them mad with wineless rages.”¹⁶ As the end of the trilogy approaches, the Chorus of now convinced Furies prays that:

Never may man-killing *stasis* (civil strife) roar aloud within the city — may its dust not drink our citizen’s dark blood, nor passions for revenge incite those wars which kill the state. Let men give joy for joy, united by their common love, united in their enemies — for that cures all human ills.¹⁷

Williams notes that it is obvious that this plea for self-restraint of anger is an attempt to relay “divine support for a basic code of political coexistence.”¹⁸ This message was incredibly

¹⁵ Harris, *Restraining Rage*, 158.

¹⁶ Aeschylus and Ian Jonston, *The Eumenides* (CA: Malaspina University-College)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Harris, *Restraining Rage*, 160.

powerful as the play premiered in the years just after the reforms (462), a time where bloody political strife was a reality. The anger of the monarchical rulers of the time also comes under heavy criticism in tragedy, such as in Sophocles' *Antigone* (~442). King Creon, an evil tyrant, loses his temper with Polyneices and his sister Antigone. When Creon's son asks him to give up his *thumos*, Creon relents too late, so that Antigone, his son, and Creon's wife all die. It is easily understood that anger was his fault.¹⁹ Considering Greek tragedy was intended for wide Greek audiences, these primary sources strongly point to a growing belief among Athenians that passionate emotion, particularly madness, must be restrained. From this point in Athenian tragedy, anger increasingly becomes an object of disapproval, so much so that in Aeschylus' later tragedy *Prometheus Bound* (~430), for the first time, as the Ocean attempts to restrain Prometheus from his wrath against Zeus, anger is very clearly treated as a sickness:

Prometheus: ... Save yourself, as you know best; while I exhaust my present lot until the time comes when the mind of Zeus shall abandon its wrath [*cholos*]

Ocean: Do you not understand, Prometheus, that words are the physicians of the illness of anger [*orge*]?²⁰

As the conceptualization of intense anger and wrath began to revolve around negative connotations of sickness and themes of introspection take hold on Athenian society, tragedy delves deeper into the conflict of mind with the most vivid and appalling descriptions of frenzied insanity in Greek literature, such as in Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Orestes* in which terrifying

¹⁹ Ibid., 164.

²⁰ Aeschylus and Herbert Weir Smyth, *Aeschylus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

visions, fits of despair, and repeated wishes for death strangle the main characters' minds.²¹

Introspection and focus on the well-being of mind and soul thus becomes an incredibly important theme of 5th century tragedy as Athenians are urged to restrain their harmful anger to protect the state, rather than take advantage of it as Homeric era texts suggested. But despite this new introspection movement and the rapidly falling view of anger, it is evident in these tragedies that Athenians still believed that diseases of fury and depression originated not from the mind, but the gods. In Sophocles' *Ajax* (~442), after Agamemnon and Menelaos choose to award Odysseus with Achilles' armor, Ajax grows furious and decides to kill them. However before Ajax does so, Athena intervenes and leads Ajax's mind to believe farm animals are the leaders of Achaian warriors. Ajax then brutally kills and tortures the herds of animals with an "incurable frenzy".²²

When Tecmessa encounters the bloody scene, she remarks:

In the darkness of night madness has seized
Our glorious Ajax: he is ruined and lost ...
He smites with the whistling doubled lash,
Uttering fierce taunts which an evil fiend
No mere mortal could have taught him ...
And I fear, from some god came This stroke;
how else? if, now his frenzy is ceased,
His mind has no more ease than when it raged.²³

Later in the tragedy when Ajax realizes what he has done, he tells the Leader that Athena had foiled him, smiting him with a "maddening plague" so that he butchered all the cattle.²⁴

²¹ Georgios Tzeferakos and Athanasios Douzenis, "Sacred Psychiatry in Ancient Greece," *Annals of General Psychiatry* 13, no. 1 (2014). Several works of Aeschylus and Euripides involve vivid descriptions of madness as divine punishment.

²² Sophocles and R. J. Trevelyan, *Ajax* (n.p.: Sophocles, Ajax, ed. R. C. Trevelyan (n.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014)., 2014).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

However, this god-sent view begins to rapidly change as the flourishing intellectualism of philosophers like Socrates and Democritus respond to the political strife, writing on the relationship between mind and soul and the important, emerging theme of self-restraint.

In the Socratic dialogues presented at his execution (399 BC), Socrates is made to describe his occupation: “My sole activity is to go about urging you [Athenians], both young and old, not to care for your bodies or your property either before or as much as you care for your soul.”²⁵ Plato writes similarly of the health of the soul in *Republic* (380 BC), where he asserts that “the object [of the man of understanding] will not be strength or health or good looks .. but he will always subordinate physical well-being to the harmony of the soul ... He will look at the city [*politeia*] which is within him, and take heed that no disorder occurs in it.”²⁶ Plato makes a clear connection between the political strife and the emerging sense of introspection of the era, strongly urging against a “disorder” of both the state and soul. By 350 BC, this ideology was taught in schools as well, evident in an Athenian teacher’s platitudes for public affairs where he advises against *orge*: “Practise self-control in all the things by which it is shameful for the soul to be controlled - gain, *orge*, pleasure, and pain. You will attain such self-control if you [among other things] ... manage your *orge* towards those who offend against you as you would expect others to do if you offended against them.”²⁷ These pleas for awareness of psychological complexity and control of the mind grew ever stronger as the wide intellectual exchange between philosophy, tragedy, and politics swept Athens. The idea that humans could have control over

²⁵ Plato and Benjamin Jowett, *Apology*

²⁶ Plato and Benjamin Jowett, *Republic*, Book IV

²⁷ Harris, *Restraining Rage*, 187.

the health of their minds and souls was unprecedented and laid the foundation for an understanding of afflictions like mania and melancholy as illnesses of only the mind. Thus with this growing emphasis on rationality, mind and soul, and the restraint of the illness of madness in Athens, the rise of medicine had a platform from which it began to intervene into the matters of mind with the first speculations of physical, organic causes of mental illness.

Greek medicine from the late fifth century onward speculated over the physical as well as divine causes of disease. Physician-authors described in depth the physical and physiological signs of mental afflictions, some blaming madness on blood spilling on the hands, others delving into the body with complex humoural theories.²⁸ This type of clinical journaling of mental illness was among the first of its kind.²⁹ The emergence of these theories point to an increasing interest in physical sources of madness, however that is not to say that divine explanation had completely lost influence — Hippocratics, dedicated to physical cause and cure and deglamorizing divine-sent afflictions, still operated on several levels of causality, often involving religious themes like daemonology in their studies.³⁰ However this seemingly contradictory duality was indeed a topic of debate at the time, clearly detailed in the second volume of the medical journal *Hippocratic Corpus* in a treatise entitled “On The Sacred Disease.” Twenty-one brief sections in length, this treatise discusses a disease that roughly corresponds to epilepsy. Although now known not to be psychological in nature, the author explores it as an illness of the mind.³¹ In

²⁸ Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy*, 161.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 162

³¹ Exact authorship of the *Corpus* has always been debated among historians. It is generally agreed that these texts were most likely written by multiple authors and compiled in the later Hellenistic era, around 300 BC.

addition to describing epileptic symptoms such as seizures and involuntary muscle contractions, the author also describes distortions of mind and perception that are akin to madness. Nocturnal fears and terrors, jumping out of bed and rushing outdoors, groans and shrieks in sleep, and sudden piercing loud cries are few among many symptoms.³² However when it comes to assigning a cause, the author rejects divine intervention with a rather antagonistic tone, accusing those who believe it so as impious and unholy: "... the fact being that men, in need of a livelihood, contrive and devise many fictions of all sorts, about this disease among other things, putting the blame, for each form of affection, upon a particular god ... a god is more likely to purify and sanctify than he is to cause defilement."³³ The author instead, for the first time in Greek medicine, attributes these traits of madness to the brain:

Men ought to know that from the brain, and from the brain only, arise our pleasures, joys, laughter and jests, as well as our sorrows, pains, griefs and tears ... Through it, in particular, we think, see, hear, and distinguish the ugly from the beautiful, the bad from the good ... It is the same thing which makes us mad or delirious, inspires us with dread and fear ... brings sleeplessness, mistakes, aimless anxieties, and acts that are contrary to our habit. These things that we suffer all come from the brain when it is not healthy.³⁴

The author goes on to explain a corrupted brain as a result of an imbalance of bile, blood, and phlegm, the physiological humors believed to dictate well-being.³⁵ He argues that patients be

³² Hippocrates, W. H. S Jones, and E. T. Withington, *Hippocrates*, ed. Page T.E., Vol. 2 ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1923). 147, 148.

³³ *Ibid.*, 147. Translator's footnote: If the sentence be retained with which I have deleted as a gloss the general meaning will be : "Again and again do they bethink themselves of this trick."

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁵ *Ibid.* See Hippocrates Vol. 1 *On The Nature of Man* treatise for explanation of Hippocrates' humoral theory

taken to sanctuaries, vehemently rejecting the “magicians, purifiers, witch doctors, charlatans” of the time — a powerful plea for rational medicine amidst the popular magic cures and talk of divine causality.³⁶ Such vehemence indicates both the controversy this duality must have caused at the time and the rising influence of rational medical thinkers in Athens. But despite these efforts, divine causality of mental disease wouldn’t be completely abandoned until the eighteenth century, when doctors began to explore purely mechanistic metaphors to explain mania or melancholy.³⁷

In uniting and exploring the seemingly separate Athenian disciplines of politics, literature, and philosophy, there arises a clear paradigm shift towards an unprecedented focus on self. Together these disciplines present an explanation of both how and why Greek understanding and conceptualization of mental illness had taken such a modern turn by the end of the fifth century BC. While understanding of mental illness had by this point involved a much more rational and organic approach than that of the epic era, it is important to note that there remained a contradictory duality between the divine and physical. This duality would endure throughout history, mixing with the ideas of the later Roman and Islamic medical thinkers, and form the Graeco-Arabic tradition that is the basis of modern medicine. While divine explanation has very much lost influence by today, interactions between madness, physical illness, and spiritual health are still under research and are strong today. Such an interplay between these ideas has formed western medicine and is very much a product of Greece and the legacy of fifth century B.C. Athens.

³⁶ Ibid., 178.

³⁷ Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy*, 162.

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