Plato's Atalanta: The Soul of an Athlete in the Myth of Er

Lee Fratantuono

Περίληψη_ **Lee Fratantuono | Η πλατωνική Αταλάντη: Η ψυχή ενός αθλητή στον μύθο του Ηρός**

Ο πλατωνικός μύθος του Ηρός, όπως εκτίθεται στο Δέκατο Βιβλίο της *Πολιτείας*, έχει πολλαπλά μελετηθεί ως προς τις διάφορες πλευρές της αλληγορικής του σημασίας και της επιδραστικής λογοτεχνικής του αξίας, επειδή χρησιμοποιήθηκε ως όχημα προς διερεύνηση του δόγματος της μετά θάνατον αναγέννησης της ψυχής σε νέα σώματα. Λεπτομερής ανάλυση της σκηνής που περιγράφει την εκλογή της επιθυμητής μελλοντικής ζωής από επιλεγμένους ήρωες της μυθολογίας και της μυθικο-ιστορικής ελληνικής αρχαιότητας, μας προσκαλεί να επανεξετάσουμε τη μέχρι στιγμής αρκετά υποτιμημένη σπουδαιότητα της τοποθέτησης, από τον Πλάτωνα, της Αταλάντης στο μέσον της παρατιθέμενης ηρωικής ακολουθίας.

The so-called Myth of Er at the climax of the last book of Plato's *Republic* ("the last part of a story in a story"[1]) has been the subject of a significant bibliography, not least on the connection between its lengthy, enigmatic underworld narrative and the systematic, dialectical exposition of the problem of justice and the well-ordered state that precedes it.[2] Our purpose in this brief study will not be to revisit favorite interpretive cruces, or to present overarching arguments on the structure of Plato's work and the implications of the story of Er for understanding better the author's consideration of the problem of the ideal polity, let alone the question of the rationale for the philosopher's employment of myth as vehicle for theoretical exposition.[3] Rather, we shall consider one fleeting, noteworthy allusion that has received comparatively less attention from modern Platonists, namely the prominent place of the heroine Atalanta among the denizens of Er's afterlife vision.[4]

[1] Thayer 1988, 369.

[2] See especially Halliwell 2007, and Agamben 2015. Richardson 1926 remains invaluable; on the problem of the connection of the strange lore to what precedes, note in particular Johnson 1999.

[3] For an introduction to the vast subject of mythology in Plato, see Collobert, Destrée, and Gonzalez 2012, and cf. Smith 1986 and Baghdassarian 2014.

[4] For commentary *ad loc*. see Adam 1963 (1902), 458–61; Adam does not provide any notes

We may quote the relevant passage in full, highlighting the midpoint reference to Atalanta:

> Ταύτην γὰρ δὴ ἔφη τὴν θέαν ἀξίαν εἶναι ἰδεῖν, ὡς ἕκασται αἱ ψυχαὶ ἡροῦντο τοὺς βίους· ἐλεινήν τε γὰρ ἰδεῖν εἶναι καὶ γελοίαν καὶ θαυμασίαν. κατὰ συνήθειαν γὰρ τοῦ προτέρου βίου τὰ πολλὰ αἱρεῖσθαι. ἰδεῖν μὲν γὰρ ψυχὴν ἔφη τήν ποτε Ὀρφέως γενομένην κύκνου βίον αἱρουμένην, μίσει τοῦ γυναικείου γένους διὰ τὸν ὑπ᾽ ἐκείνων θάνατον οὐκ ἐθέλουσαν ἐν γυναικὶ γεννηθεῖσαν γενέσθαι· ἰδεῖν δὲ τὴν Θαμύρου ἀηδόνος ἑλομένην· ἰδεῖν δὲ καὶ κύκνον μεταβάλλοντα εἰς ἀνθρωπίνου βίου αἵρεσιν, καὶ ἄλλα ζῷα μουσικὰ ὡσαύτως. [620β] εἰκοστὴν δὲ λαχοῦσαν ψυχὴν ἑλέσθαι λέοντος βίον· εἶναι δὲ τὴν Αἴαντος τοῦ Τελαμωνίου, φεύγουσαν ἄνθρωπον γενέσθαι, μεμνημένην τῆς τῶν ὅπλων κρίσεως. τὴν δ᾽ ἐπὶ τούτῳ Ἀγαμέμνονος· ἔχθρᾳ δὲ καὶ ταύτην τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου γένους διὰ τὰ πάθη ἀετοῦ διαλλάξαι βίον. **ἐν μέσοις δὲ λαχοῦσαν τὴν Ἀταλάντης ψυχήν, κατιδοῦσαν μεγάλας τιμὰς ἀθλητοῦ ἀνδρός, οὐ δύνασθαι παρελθεῖν, ἀλλὰ λαβεῖν.** [620c] μετὰ δὲ ταύτην ἰδεῖν τὴν Ἐπειοῦ τοῦ Πανοπέως εἰς τεχνικῆς γυναικὸς ἰοῦσαν φύσιν· πόρρω δ᾽ ἐν ὑστάτοις ἰδεῖν τὴν τοῦ γελωτοποιοῦ Θερσίτου πίθηκον ἐνδυομένην. κατὰ τύχην δὲ τὴν Ὀδυσσέως λαχοῦσαν πασῶν ὑστάτην αἱρησομένην ἰέναι, μνήμῃ δὲ τῶν προτέρων πόνων φιλοτιμίας λελωφηκυῖαν ζητεῖν περιιοῦσαν χρόνον πολὺν βίον ἀνδρὸς ἰδιώτου ἀπράγμονος, καὶ μόγις εὑρεῖν κείμενόν που καὶ παρημελημένον ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων, [620d] καὶ εἰπεῖν ἰδοῦσαν ὅτι τὰ αὐτὰ ἂν ἔπραξεν καὶ πρώτη λαχοῦσα, καὶ ἀσμένην ἑλέσθαι. καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἄλλων δὴ θηρίων ὡσαύτως εἰς ἀνθρώπους ἰέναι καὶ εἰς ἄλληλα, τὰ μὲν ἄδικα εἰς τὰ ἄγρια, τὰ δὲ δίκαια εἰς τὰ ἥμερα μεταβάλλοντα, καὶ πάσας μείξεις μείγνυσθαι. (Pl. *R*. 10.620a-d).[5]

It is a challenging, splendidly composed scene, one that renders its own judgments on individuals famous from myth-history. The passage makes clear

(even cursory) on the Atalanta passage, and in general he has little to say on the mythological figures. More generally on the subject of Homer's employment of and allusion to archaic myth note Buffière 1956. The anonymous reviewer observes that the question of the choice of lives was of greater interest to the Neoplatonists than to more recent readers of the *Republic*; in general see further Lamberton 1986, and cf. Patterson 1997. Plutarch devotes a question of the *Symposiaca* to the matter of Ajax's lot (*Quaest. Conv*. 9.5).

[5] The text is quoted from Slings 2003, 406–7. I am grateful for the helpful corrections and suggestions of the anonymous reviewer, and for the assistance of the editor. Any errors that remain are my own.

that there are other human and animal souls in the process of selecting new destinies for rebirth; we are accorded a vision of a noteworthy, carefully curated selection.

First, we may review the characters in the eschatological procession. There are eight named figures in Plato's underworld vignette: Orpheus, Thamyris, Ajax, Agamemnon, Atalanta, Epeius, Thersites, and Odysseus.[6] There is a certain neat alphabetical pattern, with **O**rpheus–**Th**amyris in framing, chiastic order with **Th**ersites–**O**dysseus. The first two figures are noteworthy singers; this musical pair is followed by two Greek heroes from the Trojan War. Atalanta appears at the midpoint of the passage, as the second set of four notables commences; she is associated specifically with the choice of the middle lot. She is followed by the son of Panopeus, the builder of the Wooden Horse. The last pair is striking in its contrast; the notorious grumbler Thersites precedes the hero who rebuked him in the second book of the *Iliad*, the great Odysseus.[7] After the two musicians, then, the entire miniature catalogue has associations with the war at Troy and its aftermath, with the exception of Atalanta (who is distinguished also as the only woman in the queue).

Each figure selects a new life, a voluntary choice that is at the heart of the mechanism of the afterlife experience that Plato's Er relates.[8] The singers choose an avian rebirth, Orpheus as a swan, Thamyris as a nightingale. For Orpheus, the selection is associated with his hatred of women on account of his death at the hands of maenads; he wishes to have nothing to do with regeneration from a woman. No specific reason is given for Thamyris' choice (Plato expects his readers to remember their Homer and the reference there to the singer's ruinous competition with the Muses);[9] the second singer simply follows the example of Orpheus in opting to become a bird.

The heroes Ajax and Agamemnon are also discontented and bitter on account of their past life experiences. Ajax opts to be reincarnated as a lion, preferring to have nothing to do with men because of his loss in the adjudication of the arms of Achilles. Agamemnon laments his own sufferings, and chooses an aquiline fate. While specific reasons are cited for the choices of Orpheus and Ajax, Agamemnon's notorious, bloody homecoming is not specifically adduced; the description of his disdain for humanity is vague and imprecise (620b ἔχθρᾳ δὲ καὶ ταύτην τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου γένους διὰ τὰ πάθη). In the case of both members of both pairs, voluntary rebirth in animal form comes in

[6] The exact significance of the fact that there are eight named souls is difficult to explicate, unless it simply reflects the eight circles of Necessity's spindle (see further here Viltanioti 2015, 159); what matters for our purposes is that Atalanta will draw the middle lot.

[7] For an introduction to this character see Postlethwaite 1988.

[8] J. Sibley 2024 offers a thorough exploration and analysis of the philosopher's depiction of this momentous, *post mortem*, voluntary decision.

[9] *Il*. 2.594-600.

consequence of lamentable experiences in earlier, human form. We may note, too, that the narrative could easily have included Achilles, either in addition to or in substitution for Ajax and/or Agamemnon; the son of Thetis is mentioned only obliquely, in connection with the judgment of the arms and Ajax's humiliation.

For the moment, let us pass over Atalanta and proceed to the three Trojan War figures who close the passage: Epeius, Thersites, and Odysseus. Epeius will be reborn as a woman who works in crafts (620c εἰς τεχνικῆς γυναικὸς ἰοῦσαν φύσιν). Here the new life is cast in terms markedly different from the previous descriptions. Epeius will have another human existence, with change of gender; the "technical" occupation of his reincarnation relates to his notoriety in connection to the fashioning of the Wooden Horse. Thersites, for his part, opts for a zoomorphic fate; in this he follows the example of the first four souls. He had inspired mockery, and so fittingly (one might conclude) he will live as a monkey (620c πόρρω δ᾽ ἐν ὑστάτοις ἰδεῖν τὴν τοῦ γελωτοποιοῦ Θερσίτου πίθηκον ἐνδυομένην).[10] Lastly, Odysseus chooses the life of a man who is ordinary, and who minds his own business; this simple, even boring life (one might fairly characterize it as "anti-heroic") is cast as if it were a rare treasure. Like Ajax and Agamemnon, Odysseus remembered his previous existence, with all its travails and hardships. He wished in the future to live in peace and quiet. His new existence will be human, but essentially it will be the opposite of his storied, heroic life.[11]

Let us consider briefly the contrasts in these seven choices. Orpheus, Thamyris, Ajax, Agamemnon, and Thersites all select animal fates. In the cases of Orpheus, Ajax, and Agamemnon the option is linked explicitly to bad experiences in the individual's past life; for Thamyris, the linkage is implicit. Odysseus is like these four in that he makes his selection based on the sufferings he has endured, but he chooses a human destiny, indeed one that was hard to locate and passed over by the others (620c καὶ μόγις εὑρεῖν κείμενόν που καὶ παρημελημένον ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων). Thersites' animal choice is not explained with clarity (one could easily imagine such a fate being imposed on him by some harsh underworld judge); we are reminded that he was an object of mockery, and the zoological destiny he picks is one that will ensure that he will be laughed at again. Likewise, the implications of Epeius' choice are not entirely clear. Like Odysseus, he will be a human again, but why he chooses to be a woman working in crafts and the technical arts is not clarified.

[10] On the proverbial ugliness of the monkey in the Greek and Roman imagination and the use of the animal in performative art as a source of laughter and insult, see Jennison 1937, 20–21, and cf. Campbell 2014, 278.

[11] Not surprisingly, Plato's Odysseus has received the most commentary among these underworld denizens; see further Malabou 2017, and cf. Benoni 2018.

Before analyzing the implications of the underworld decisions of these legendary figures, we may turn to Atalanta, who anchors the middle of the line: *ἐν μέσοις δὲ λαχοῦσαν τὴν Ἀταλάντης ψυχήν, κατιδοῦσαν μεγάλας τιμὰς ἀθλητοῦ ἀνδρός, οὐ δύνασθαι παρελθεῖν, ἀλλὰ λαβεῖν* (620b). Plato's narrative emphasizes her significant place in the midst of the lots. There is no mention of her past life or her attitude thereto. Rather, she glimpses a fate that will bring her great honor as an athlete, and she is unable to resist the temptation of choosing this destiny.[12] Like Epeius, she will experience a gender reversal: ἀθλητοῦ *ἀνδρός* makes clear the change from woman to man; indeed, Epeius' own (reverse) gender shift is referred to in parallel, balancing language immediately thereafter (εἰς τεχνικῆς *γυναικὸς*). The emphasis on the "middle lot" may hint at the etymological association of the heroine's name with the notion of an "unswaying," equally weighted balance that does not sway to one side or another (a fitting reference for the figure who appears ἐν μέσοις); Atalanta was able, after all, to perform ably and successfully (indeed, superlatively) in the world of male athletics. We shall return to this etymological note.

Of all of these figures, arguably Odysseus learned the most from his lived experience. He will be a man again, but the opposite of his former self. Epeius and Atalanta choose lives that have clear affinities with their past existences; the former was skilled in the technical arts, and the latter was an accomplished athlete. But their genders will be reversed, and Epeius will focus on the private, not the public realm. As for the two musicians, the two heroes, and the decidedly anti-heroic, eminently risible Thersites, in three instances animal metamorphosis is chosen explicitly as an escape from hardship or misfortune (Orpheus, Ajax, Agamemnon). Like Orpheus' swan, Thamyris' nightingale has associations with song, and the singer in question endured a less than auspicious fate as a result of his daring to compete with the Muses. Both singers choose a life in which they will sing again. Ajax was wronged in the awarding of the arms; his leonine fate will allow him a certain kingship among terrestrial beasts, just as Agamemnon's eagle will afford him lordly status, with Jovian associations. Like Orpheus and Thamyris, Ajax and Agamemnon will have new lives that accord with the old, at least in some regards and within the bounds of reasonable expectation. Thersites was mocked as a man, and he will be mocked as a monkey; his choice of fates may hint at a certain defiant embrace of his destiny, perhaps with an indication that it is less degrading for a monkey to be laughed at than for a man on a heroic expedition to be denigrated and insulted.

What can we say of the two transgendered souls, Epeius and Atalanta? Epeius stands out among the group for having no obvious negative experience to affect his choice of destiny. He was instructed by the goddess Athena in how to construct the Wooden Horse, and he was successful in building it, just as

[12] On her "philotimia" see Halliwell 1988, *ad loc*.

he had won appreciable victories as a great boxer and veritable giant.[13] In his chosen destiny as a craftswoman of technical skill, we may see a purposeful reflection of his connection to Athena. The goddess was of dual association, a patroness of both battle and the eminently public world of war, and the private realm of the loom, of weaving and the arts of the shuttle and the distaff. Epeius chooses a new life that will give him the experience of this second domain of Athena; the fact that he had been a great warrior who also was gifted with the technical skill to construct the prodigious horse means that he was already well advanced on the path.

But Atalanta's choice is more allusively resonant in context, where it serves as a purposeful counterpoint to Epeius'. The lone woman in Plato's description is one of the more complex figures in extant classical mythology.[14] The main myths associated with her concern her participation in Meleager's Calydonian boar hunt, and the tradition of the fateful race in which her successful suitor (Hippomenes or Me[i]lanion/Milanion) secures victory by the timely, distracting cast of golden fruit in her path. Her reputation for superlative hunting is noteworthy; as for the general heroic esteem in which she was held, she was of great enough distinction to be the only woman considered worthy of a place on Jason's Argo (denied her seat only because of fear that she would cause undue distraction).[15] Atalanta is the "oldest" heroic figure in Plato's catalogue, a heroine from an age before Troy, a woman who performed impressively in the male-dominated realms of both hunting and athletic pursuits.

Atalanta is named together with Cephalus' equally ill-fated Procris at the close of Xenophon's *Cynegeticus*, where both women are noted for their hunting prowess.[16] But Atalanta is referenced also in the same work in connection with her suitor Meilanion, who is credited with winning her hand on account of his impressive labors in pursuit of his erotic quest; Xenophon's allusion is familiar to readers of Propertius' first elegy, where the efforts of the same would-be lover are highlighted as an *exemplum* of erotic devotion.[17] Xenophon thus offers two Atalanta citations: the one praises her as a huntress, while the other evokes the lore of how an amorous hero exerted himself in hunting exploits so as to impress her.

The earliest extant Atalanta lore is from Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*.[18] While the heroine's race was dramatically related, the relatively meager re-

[13] *Il*. 23.664-99, for example, describes his impressive performance at the funeral games for Patroclus, where he defeated Euryalus.

[14] For a convenient introduction to the heroine, see D'Entremont 2020, and cf. Gantz 1993, 328 ff., and Fratantuono 2024 (with particular focus on Atalanta in Calydon).

[15] Cf. A.R. 1.768 ff., Diodorus 4.41.2, and [Apoll.] *Bib*. 1.9.16, 3.9.2.

[16] *Cyn*. 13.8.

[17] *Cyn*. 1.7; cf. Propertius, c. 1.1.9-16.

[18] Frr. 72–76 Merkelbach-West.

mains of the Hesiodic treatment of the myth do not reveal the end of the story. The classic version of the tale is from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in part because of the Augustan poet's great skill in relating a dramatic narrative, but also in consequence of how few accounts survive.[19] If it were not for Ovid and the mythographic tradition, we would be even more in the dark. But the popularity and familiarity of the story cannot be underestimated.[20]

Plato's Atalanta is concerned with the great honors of an athletic man's life. Two details may be noted here. First, the emphasis is on the visual: Atalanta sees what tantalizes her; she gazes down on the potential destiny, on what for her at least is the middle lot (620b κατιδοῦσαν μεγάλας τιμὰς ἀθλητοῦ ἀνδρός). Second, she is depicted as being unable to pass by the sight; what catches her eye is impossible to ignore, and she feels compelled to pick it up (οὐ δύνασθαι παρελθεῖν, ἀλλὰ λαβεῖν). There is a subtle reference here to the celebrated story of the race and the golden apples/quinces, seductive baubles that Atalanta first noticed, and then felt irresistibly drawn to retrieve. She was incapable of going past the golden snare. Her soul chooses an explicitly male destiny, but in her act of choosing, she does exactly that which led her into trouble in the first place (at least in some extant versions of the myth). The change that Atalanta seeks for her new life is solely that of gender. She pursued great honors in athletics in her previous existence, and she cannot resist the lure of the same as she chooses a new destiny. She is implicitly rueful about her gender; there may be a hint in Plato's depiction of the heroine that Atalanta blames whatever ill fate she may have suffered on her being a woman, an object of passion and pursuit by suitors that spelled doom for her and many others. But she fails to appreciate that gender is not the only factor in her fate; love of prizes and the pursuit of great renown is also at play.

Readers of Ovid know that Atalanta and her lover were transformed into lions as the culmination of their ill-fated romance; unable to control their passion, they took their pleasure in a sacred precinct and were transformed. One problem we face is that we cannot be sure of the parameters of the Atalanta story (or stories) in Plato's day. The brief citation in the *Republic* alludes to the race narrative that is as old as Hesiod. Xenophon's passing references to Atalanta and her suitor do not provide much help. She appears in the *Theognidea*, but again what we find is more tantalizing than conclusive.[21] We would know far more if we had access to Aeschylus' *Atalanta* and Sophocles' *Meleager*. We are more familiar with Euripides' *Meleager* (at least relatively speaking), but we still have more questions than answers. Her archaic and classical mythology

[19] 10.560-707. In the same epic Ovid also narrates the Calydonian hunt and Atalanta's significant participation therein (8.260-546).

[20] Cf., e.g., Theocritus 3.40-2 (with Gow), Catullus 2b (with Fordyce), and Virgil, *Ecl*. 6.61 (with Cucchiarelli).

[21] Frr. 1287–1294 West.

certainly included her giving birth to Parthenopaeus (which is noted in both Aeschylus and Euripides[22]), but the mythographic tradition is by no means unanimous even on so basic a matter as his paternity. Her suitor Melanion is mentioned by Aristophanes as a paradigm of a man who seeks to avoid marriage by pursuing a hunter's life, in a reference rich with resonance to other snippets of Atalanta lore, but of little help in clarifying our passage.[23] What is certain is that Plato had an abundance of material at his disposal; the dramas noted here are but a selection of the numerous plays devoted to Atalanta and Atalanta lore.[24]

Our best clue as to what information about Atalanta's fate was extant in Plato's time *may* be the mythographer Palaephatus, if the text of the author as transmitted bears any resemblance to a classical, Attic original of (perhaps) the late fourth century BC.[25] In his rationalized account of the story of Atalanta and Milanion, the hunters were slain by feral cats when they retreated into a cave to indulge their passion; when the lion and lioness were seen later, the story was divulged that the lovers had been transformed.[26] To the degree that the Atalanta story was known to have culminated in metamorphosis, the reference to her in the myth of Er takes on added significance as her soul is depicted as selecting a new form.

It is reasonable to conclude that the story of Atalanta's race had a dark ending in the version or versions known to Plato. For Plato's purposes, the question of whether there were originally two Atalantas (an Arcadian and a Boeotian) whose stories and very identities became blurred into one is not at issue. The Atalanta of the Er myth is associated not with hunting (we may compare Xenophon's Atalanta), but with athletic competitions and the fateful race in which she was distracted and lost.

How does the athlete Atalanta fit in with her afterlife cohort? Plato's Orpheus and Thamyris were singers, and they wished to remain as such, albeit in avian form (where presumably they would not know the sort of sorrows that had plagued them as men). Ajax and Agamemnon were lordly and noble, and they are attracted to the same fate, respectively as a lion and an eagle to lord over beasts and birds (again, with the expectation that this time they would not experience the same sort of troubles they had experienced in the aftermath of Troy). The first half of the catalogue is about seeking the same thing, but in a different realm, one in which there is the expectation (wise or not) of a happier end, or at least of escaping past sufferings.

[22] Cf. *Septem* 526 ff. and *Phoenissae* 145 ff.

[23] *Lysistrata* 781–804.

[24] "Most are known only by title" (Barringer 1996, 48 n.1). Barringer provides a convenient listing of the plays entitled *Atalanta* or *Atalantae*.

[25] *De Incredibilibus* 13.

[26] A. Konstantinou 2012 explores the significance of leonine imagery in association with mythic women, including Atalanta.

At the midpoint of the vignette, we have a vivid picture of Atalanta's soul literally reliving one of the most famous (if the not the singularly emblematic) episodes of her career. Once again, she is seduced by something she sees at her feet, something that she cannot ignore. Unlike the first four figures, she wishes to remain human, but to change her gender, convinced (like her predecessors) that she will have a more fortunate outcome in her new form (male, not female). In this, she exhibits an attitude that recalls Platonic sentiments on female training in gymnastics. One commentator notes, "…she appears as the type of female athleticism. Plato has earlier pleaded for equal opportunities for men and women in physical education; he has a final thrust at masculine exclusiveness."[27] But there is more afoot here than merely reminding the audience that the philosopher endorses equal educational opportunities.[28] Atalanta blames her gender for her fate; in her second life, she wishes to escape the same problem. There is also an implicit hint of a reminder that Atalanta lost her last race because of her distraction; for her rebirth, she is attracted to a prize-laden life, not one in which she will come in second place.

Her choice invites comparison with the others in her tetrad, especially the only other figure who chooses a gender reversal. Epeius was a noble warrior aided by Athena; for his second life, he chooses what ostensibly is the exact opposite of his previous existence, though in fact it is simply another side of the Pallas' coin. Like Atalanta, he seeks a change of sex, though the fate he chooses is not so much a repetition of his previous life, as it is an exploration of the other realm of the goddess' patronage.

Odysseus, for his part, is the only soul who chooses both to remain human, and to keep the same gender; the life he selects is the most difficult to find, not only because it was the last lot, we might think, but also because it is the most ordinary and nondescript (and thus the least likely to attract notice). Indeed, the hero notes that he would have chosen this same life, even if he had drawn the first lot: καὶ εἰπεῖν ἰδοῦσαν ὅτι τὰ αὐτὰ ἂν ἔπραξεν καὶ πρώτη λαχοῦσα, καὶ ἀσμένην ἑλέσθαι (620d).

We have noted the absence of Achilles from the Er myth, except by allusion to the contest for his arms (which Odysseus won). Odysseus' choice of a new fate is reminiscent of the musing of the shade of Achilles in the Homeric underworld about the destiny *he* would prefer:

> μὴ δή μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ᾽ Ὀδυσσεῦ.
> βουλοίμην κ᾽ ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλῳ,
> ἀνδρὶ παρ᾽ ἀκλήρῳ, ᾧ μὴ βίοτος πολὺς εἴη,
> ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν. (*Od.* 11.488-91)

[27] Ferguson 1957, 124.

[28] For a different approach and focus, note Ward Scaltsas 1992.

Odysseus has learned lessons not only from his own experiences, but also from what he heard in the underworld from Achilles' shade; unlike Homer's Achilles, Plato's Odysseus is able to choose the ideal fate, indeed to do so with resolve, even at the expense of effort. The man who endured such suffering to secure a homecoming is willing to exert effort to find a highly desirable fate that is so easily overlooked. Plato's Odysseus incarnates the rueful dream of the hero his Homeric intertext had encountered in the land of the dead.[29]

The Odysseus description crowns a subtle, brilliantly arranged Platonic tetrad of figures. The comparatively simple balanced pairs Orpheus–Thamyris and Ajax–Agamemnon are followed by a more intricately arranged progression. The last figure offers the clearest image: Odysseus has learned from his past to a consummate degree, and he has chosen something akin to what Achillles' shade extolled in Homer. The second figure in the tetrad, Epeius, has associations with Athena; in this he is reminiscent of Odysseus. The conjuring of the stratagem of the Wooden Horse was Odyssean in origin. The realm of weaving and the world of arts and crafts is Athena's preserve, and it provided the trick by which Penelope kept her suitors at bay for so long. Odysseus' choice illustrates what he has learned from his previous life; Epeius opts for a life that in some regards offers a complementary experience to its predecessor, with the optimistic expectation that together the two lives will impart the totality of the wisdom associated with the goddess.

Nestled between these two pupils of Athena is Thersites, the laughable, clownish man who was rebuked so memorably by Odysseus in Homer. One may well wonder what he has learned from his experience, choosing as he does to be an object of mockery and derision in animal form. Swans, nightingales, lions and eagles are admirable in their diverse ways; Thersites' simian future portends a less noble fate by classical zoological standards. If Epeius evokes balance and Odysseus betterment and improvement, Thersites arguably opts for a worse destiny, indeed for the poorest lot of the eight. His presence in the octet serves to highlight one extreme on the spectrum of selections.

Atalanta hails from an antecedent generation; she has no connection to Odysseus, though she was associated with a lover who won his victory by means of a stratagem. Like the four figures before her, Atalanta seeks a new life akin to her old one, but with a change designed to try to avert the problems that plagued her past. The triad that follows her midpoint, middle-lot appearance offers the aforementioned study in Odyssean contrasts, as we move from Epeius to Thersites to the great Ithacan hero.

Plato's Atalanta succumbed to a trick, one occasioned by her suitor's obsession with her physical attractiveness and lithe athleticism. She understands her fate, but only dimly. She is all too well aware of how her looks have brought her

[29] On the intertextuality of philosopher and poet, see Segal 1978.

unwanted attention, or at least attention that has had disastrous consequences for her and others. But she fails to appreciate her own culpability in her woes. She is still distracted by the allure of prizes and honors. The μεγάλας τιμὰς ἀθλητοῦ ἀνδρός coveted by Atalanta are presents of renown, offerings and rewards attendant on the success of a male athlete.[30] One could object that such honors are not the same thing as the golden apples that ensnared the heroine at her fateful race. But the essence of the temptation is the same; Atalanta is once again seduced by an irresistible distraction on the wayside. If the second life is supposed to mark an improvement on the first, one could fashion a case that Atalanta's will be not so much improved, as it will remain static; she has failed to appreciate the essential quality of what led to her doom. Plato's Atalanta is not Xenophon's huntress, the girl associated with participation in the Calydonian boar hunt and with the slaying of centaurs; she is the Hesiodic athlete of the racecourse and its less than auspicious outcome.

The Atalanta in Er's story is concerned with prizes and honor, as was Ajax (620b μεμνημένην τῆς τῶν ὅπλων κρίσεως). The son of Telamon was unwilling to live again as a human being because of his defeat (φεύγουσαν *ἄνθρωπον* γενέσθαι); his leonine option allows him supremacy in his domain, while avoiding the possibility of a repeat of losing to crafty manipulators of words. We may note the key word *ἄνθρωπον*; what Ajax is avoiding is life not as a man *per se*, but as a human capable of speech.[31] Atalanta's pursuit of μεγάλας τιμὰς ἀθλητοῦ ἀνδρός, in contrast, highlights the gender differential.[32] Atalanta's desire for μεγάλας τιμὰς affords a potent contrast with Odysseus' memory of the hazards of such pursuits (620c μνήμῃ δὲ τῶν προτέρων πόνων φιλοτιμίας). Atalanta's gendered selection recalls Orpheus'; he chose the life of a swan out of hatred for women (620a μίσει τοῦ *γυναικείου* γένους διὰ τὸν ὑπ᾽ ἐκείνων θάνατον οὐκ ἐθέλουσαν ἐν *γυναικὶ* γεννηθεῖσαν γενέσθαι); to live again as a human being would require birth from a woman, and this was intolerable to him. Orpheus is said to have noticed Thamyris' avian choice, and also how a swan was opting for a human destiny (ἰδεῖν δὲ καὶ κύκνον μεταβάλλοντα εἰς *ἀνθρωπίνου* βίου αἵρεσιν). Orpheus died at the hands of women; if we recall the Eurydice myth, we have a second, palpable reason for the musician's desire to avoid human women. The swan affords a chance to remain a musician (καὶ ἄλλα ζῷα μουσικὰ), while securing the misogynistic priority.

We may summarize the significance of Plato's mythological delineation of these souls, and the central, key role of Atalanta in the curious octet. The tone

[30] Vid. *LSJ* I.4.

[31] Cf. Agamemnon's motivation (ἔχθρᾳ δὲ καὶ ταύτην τοῦ *ἀνθρωπίνου* γένους), where again the problem is humanity, not men *qua* men; we may recall that he suffered appreciably at the hands of both genders; see further Brill 2013, 159.

[32] As with Agamemnon balancing Ajax, so with Epeius the chosen new life is gender-specific: εἰς τεχνικῆς *γυναικὸς*.

is set by the first soul, Orpheus the hater of women. All he has learned from his previous life is that he does not wish to be born of woman; he will remain a singer, but misogyny is his principal motivation as he makes his choice. Plato's narrative emphasizes that the selection process was pitiable, laughable, and wondrous (620a αἱ ψυχαὶ ᾑροῦντο τοὺς βίους· ἐλεινήν τε γὰρ ἰδεῖν εἶναι καὶ γελοίαν καὶ θαυμασίαν), driven as it was by one's past life experiences (κατὰ συνήθειαν γὰρ τοῦ προτέρου βίου τὰ πολλὰ αἱρεῖσθαι). Like Orpheus, Thamyris had a less than positive interaction with women, in his case the Muses; his choice likewise is conditioned by this experience.

Ajax and Agamemnon flee humanity altogether; no specifically gender-driven aspect to their choice is referenced. Atalanta and Epeius constitute the pair that chooses a human destiny, though with appreciably different implications rooted both in gender and in diverse motivations. Epeius (not unlike Odysseus) chooses a humbler fate, and one that accords perfectly with his ties to the goddess Athena. Atalanta's lessons have been absorbed imperfectly. Thersites would seem to have learned nothing from his past; Odysseus alone of the eight souls chooses wisely, indeed impeccably. Plato's narrative takes care to note that even though the hero's choice was in the unlucky, last position, all was well; not only was his option not a superficially attractive one, it was also difficult to find.

What of the fact that we were told that the selection of fates was pitiable, laughable, and wondrous. The "laughable" (γελοίαν) fate is clearly Thersites'; indeed he is characterized as γελωτοποιοῦ (620c), with the language of his description echoing that of the description of his choice of destiny. One could reasonably argue that the "wondrous" (θαυμασίαν) fates belong to Odysseus, Epeius, Ajax, and Agamemnon. These four heroes of Troy make different choices, but in no instance is the past likely to repeat itself. The same assessment could be applied to the two singers; like Ajax and Agamemnon they choose to be reborn as animals, a wondrous metamorphosis in itself, beyond any consideration for the wisdom of the selection. The pitiable (ἐλεινήν) destiny is, perhaps, peculiar to Atalanta. The middle figure and middle lot belong to the soul that has indeed learned something from her past, but not enough. Epeius affords a pointed contrast in his place immediately after her; his choice represents the pursuit of an omnibus education in the works of his patron goddess. And like Odysseus, Epeius will also enjoy a humbler existence. Atalanta's selection responds to the accident of her gender and its consequences, while ignoring the fundamental weakness in her character. Her loveliness was a superficial characteristic that brought unwelcome attention. But her attraction to prizes, even to the point of distraction from the goal, is also a manifestation of the same superficiality. Artfully, Plato's narrative portrays Atalanta as reenacting exactly the signal episode of her life, with the heroine repeating her critical past action. We are left with a profound sense of pity that she is repeating the same error.

In a later age, Atalanta's choice would be recalled in a sepulchral epigram attributed to Antipater of Sidon that is preserved in the *Greek Anthology*:

> Οὐχὶ βαθυστόλμων Ἱπποαρχία ἔργα γυναικῶν,
> τῶν δὲ Κυνῶν ἑλόμαν ῥωμαλέον βίοτον,
> οὐδέ μοι ἀμπεχόναι περονήτιδες, οὐ βαθύπελμος
> εὔμαρις, οὐ λιπόων εὔαδε κεκρύφαλος,
> οὐλὰς δὲ σκίπωνι συνέμπορος, ἅ τε συνῳδός
> δίπλαξ καὶ κοίτας βλῆμα χαμαιλεχέος
> ἄμμι δὲ Μαιναλίας κάρρων † ἄμιν † Ἀταλάντας
> τόσσον, ὅσον σοφία κρέσσον ὀρειδρομίας.[33]

Hipparchia eschews a womanly life, but her concerns are focused not on the art of war or athletic pursuits, but on Cynic philosophy. The closing couplet of the poem boasts of her having surpassed Atalanta, insofar as the pursuit of wisdom is greater than racing in mountain haunts. The textual difficulties are real, but "The meaning is plain; Hipparchia and Atalanta both voluntarily led hard lives and Hipparchia's was the better because her motive was the nobler."[34] Implicit to the logic and sentiment of the epigram is that Atalanta chose a masculine destiny; the author of the stylized verse epitaph may have recalled Plato's underworld scene. But in a twist that no doubt would have appealed to the Attic philosopher, Hipparchia boasts of superiority to Atalanta; her claim is rooted in the preeminence of the quest for wisdom. In an artful touch, the closing verses emphasize Ἀταλάντας…ὀρειδρομίας, with allusion both to the heroine's association with the mountain haunts of huntresses and, too, the racecourse.

The Cynic Hipparchia pursued wisdom over Atalanta's athleticism; Plato's Atalanta incarnates the peculiar circumstances of the middle lot. Judgments about pity and wonder are inherently subjective. Atalanta's middle lot is a relatable one to Plato's readers in that it is not uncommon for someone to have imperfect knowledge of the causes of their predicament. Further, time and again one sees someone fall into the same pattern of behavior, seemingly blind to the predictable consequences. One might feel wonder about a transformation from human to animal or vice versa; for Atalanta to succumb to the same trap elicits pity, especially when we appreciate that she has solved only half her problem, and is thus fittingly *ἐν μέσοις* in the parade of souls. Plato's Atalanta approximates a tragic figure, an extraordinary heroine whose incomplete appraisal of her past predicament is all too readily understandable for its commonalty, and even mediocrity.

[33] A.P. VII.413/Gow & Page LXVII (Gow and Page 1965.I, 34–35).
[34] Gow and Page 1965.II, 88.

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Lee Fratantuono

Adjunct Professor
Department of Ancient Classics
Maynooth University, Ireland

lee.fratantuono@mu.ie