*Mark W. Edwards*

# Homer

## Poet of the *Iliad*

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# Gods, Fate, and Mortality

No subject is so full of contradictions and inconsistencies as the subject of religion. To discuss "the religion of Homer" leads immediately to insoluble questions: Does "Homer" mean an individual who composed the poems, or an average Greek of the eighth century B.C.? Can one speak of the religion of an "average Greek" any more than an "average American"? What is meant by "religion"—the nature of the divinities who appear and act in the poems, the cult practices represented, the beliefs of the characters, the religious purpose of the poet, the myths invented by a creative folk? How can divine power and perhaps foreknowledge be reconciled with the power of fate and with human responsibility for individual actions? What is the association (if any) between religion and morality? Individual modern readers are likely to have very different answers; in fact, often we do not even identify the question clearly.

Nor can logical answers to questions like these be expected, then or now. A recent program announcement for a TV movie on the passion of Christ declared, "Meanwhile, aware of the danger he faces, Jesus prepares for his appointed destiny." Probably few who read this were perplexed at the confusion of thought between "appointed destiny," divine foreknowledge, and the freedom of choice that Jesus (as God, man, or both) might well be thought to possess. Should Greek epics be expected to be any more logical than this?

In Homer, Hesiod, and the early *Homeric Hymns*, the functions, genealogy, and family arrangements of the gods and the heroes descended from them are already stabilized and consistent. Minor discrepancies are not hard to explain; for instance, Hephaestus is married to Aphrodite in Demodocus's song in *Odyssey* 8 but to Charis, "Grace," in *Iliad* 18, probably because Aphrodite's well-known pro-Trojan bias would complicate Thetis's reception and making the new armor for Achilles. This is a considerable achievement and, in the absence of a priestly caste in Greece, must be attributed to the bards, to the pan-Hellenic festivals, and to close associations between Greek cities both on the mainland and in Ionia.



The development of a standardized poetic language (see p. 42–44) is probably a good parallel. Bardic tradition also developed different genres of poetry, such as epic, hymns, catalogue poetry or genealogies, cosmogonies, and so on, and it is likely that the attitude toward the gods may have been different in the different genres. In the poetry that survives, considerable differences exist. The *Odyssey* attributes to the gods a care for just men and women and (in the case of Athena) a comforting readiness to assist their favorites; the *Hymns*, together with the song of Ares and Aphrodite in *Odyssey* 8 and the "Beguiling of Zeus" in *Iliad* 14, present intensely human divinities whose adventures are entertaining, undignified, and often comic; Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* give them authority and concern for morality among men but little personality (except perhaps in the Prometheus tale, which may derive from a *Hymn*); and the *Iliad* presents a complex and possibly unique picture, which will be discussed in detail below.

Our purpose here is not to give an account of early Greek religion, or of the significance of Greek myth, but to attempt to assist appreciation of the Homeric epics. The following discussion, then, will deal primarily with two questions: What common human religious needs do the gods of the epics fill for the human characters? In what ways does the poet use his "divine machinery" as a compositional device, as a convenient means (usually denied to a modern novelist) of assisting the telling of his tale and of producing desired effects? A final section will deal with the ever-present contrast of human mortality and the carefree eternity of the gods. Where necessary, differences between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* will be indicated.

## *The Gods as the Religion of the Characters*

For the characters in the poems, the gods are omnipresent, always observing mankind's actions, their power as real as the government's is to us—and even more important. The roles they play may be divided for convenience into a number of categories, though these are of course artificial and may overlap.

1. They function as a higher power, and provide an explanation of otherwise inexplicable events. These include natural phenomena: Zeus sends the thunder (7.478–79) and the mountains tremble in earthquake under Poseidon's feet (13.18–19, 20.57–58). Their sheer size is awe-inspiring; Olympus shakes when Zeus nods his head, when Ares is wounded by Diomedes he yells like

ten thousand men (6.860) and when knocked down by Athena he covers seven acres (21.407), Poseidon's war cry is like that of nine or ten thousand men (14.148–49), and as the gods all advance to war Hades fears the earth may break open beneath them (20.61ff.). Since there is no accident or random chance (see below, part 4) every unusual occurrence is attributed to them, from a fighter's sudden feeling of strength (17.210–11), to Hector's lopping off the head of Ajax's spear (16.119–20), and even to Odysseus's forgetting his cloak (*Odyssey* 14.488–89).

They act as patrons of crafts and technology (Hephaestus, Athena), and personify certain abstractions, such as warfare (Ares) and sex (Aphrodite; see pp. 143–47). Zeus, king of the gods, personifies authority, and human authority figures like Agamemnon are under his protection (1.278–79, 2.101ff.). They wield power in a certain sphere, but usually the Greek love of anthropomorphism does not envision them in the *form* of that power; Sleep is not at all drowsy but is interested in women like any other male god (14.231ff., see p. 249), and the winds feast and ogle Iris like any obstreperous gang (23.200ff.); but Hephaestus boils the waters of the river as a fire would (21.343ff.), and the river god Scamander sometimes seems incarnate in his watery element (21.211ff.).

As the superiors of humans, they provide an object for human tribute and awe, and serve as the recipients of the sacrifices mankind feels obligated to make to some higher power. Human piety consists of the plentiful provision of these sacrifices, and Hector and Odysseus are specifically honored for this by the words of Zeus: "My heart is grieved for Hector, who has burned the thighs of many oxen for me" (22.169–70 and, at greater length, 24.66–70; *Odyssey* 1.66–67).

2. In return for human tribute, the gods are a potential source of help in trouble, the objects of prayers either to obtain something (strength, success, helpful action on one's behalf) or to avert something (the plague, the mist over the battlefield). Particularly noteworthy are the detailed accounts of the prayer of the Trojan women to Athena and that of Achilles to Zeus (6.269ff., 16.220ff.; see pp. 207 and 260). Approach to the gods, both by words and by sacrifices and gifts, is normally direct, not through the intermediacy of a priest. Very often a prayer includes a reason why the request should be granted, or an account of its purpose. On one occasion Glaucus states explicitly that a god can hear a prayer wherever he happens to be at the moment, a neat accommodation of the necessity of their presence at their cult centers to the fiction of their active participation in the Trojan War (16.514–16).



3. Guidance about the future can be obtained from the gods by means of omens, dreams, and oracles. The longed-for security of a destined future, however, is provided for the Greeks not by the Olympians but by fate (usually *moira* or *aisa*, both probably meaning "portion"). Fate is hardly ever personified in Homer and is given no genealogy. In the *Iliad* its power is shown primarily in the determination of the length of a man's life; the day of his death is set at the time of his birth (20.127–28, 23.79, 24.209–10). Even divine foreknowledge usually means only foreknowledge of a man's death. The decrees of fate cannot be swayed by prayers, as can the much more human gods, and *moira* often takes the place of a grim god of Death. A warrior like Hector, however, like all soldiers facing the uncertainties of battle, derives comfort from a fatalistic outlook (6.487–89; see p. 212). Fate does not affect his actions or the good and evil sent by the gods. Agamemnon's coupling of fate with Zeus and the Fury as jointly responsible for his unwise behavior [19.87] is exceptional, and may be due to the association of fate with men's deaths.

In the *Odyssey* the characters attribute a wider power to fate. It is said to be fated that Odysseus and Menelaus shall reach home again (*Odyssey* 5.114–15 and elsewhere; *Odyssey* 4.475–80), that Troy should fall (*Odyssey* 8.511), even that Odysseus should escape from his trials to sanctuary among the Phaeacians (*Odyssey* 5.288–89). This more benign attitude of fate is in harmony with the generally more optimistic tone of the poem. In both poems the expression "beyond fate" is sometimes used; see below (p. 136).

Accident and "luck," in our sense of random chance (the "Russian Roulette" of the movie *The Deer Hunter*), are unknown in Homer. This absence is characteristic of early Greek thinking, for random chance appears almost nowhere before the philosophy of Epicurus; the only significant mention is in the words of Sophocles' Jocasta as she proclaims the falsity of oracles ("Best live at random, as well as one can!" *Oedipus Rex* 978), and the error of her thinking is overwhelmingly apparent to the audience. It must not be forgotten that the tale is being told by a poet who knows what the future has in store for its characters, either because he is following tradition or because he has himself created character or plot; and he obtains emotional effects by revealing the future to the audience, and sometimes to the characters, before it comes about. In addition, it is natural for him

to fulfill the audience's universal desire to find reason, not random chance, behind the chaos of human experience. Both these inducements may produce a heavier emphasis on fate in the poems than was normal in the poet's society.

4. The gods provide the characters with a source of good and evil beyond human comprehension. The most explicit depiction of this appears at the final emotional climax of the *Iliad*, in Achilles' description of the two jars from which Zeus gives either mingled good and evil or evil alone (24.527ff.), without any reference to his motives in the distribution. Achilles has said previously that the quarrel between him and Agamemnon came about because Zeus wished death to come upon many of the Greeks (19.273–74), though the poet did not suggest this in Book 1. Even more frightening to a thoughtful audience would be the conversation between Zeus and Hera at the conclusion of the theme of Achilles' withdrawal (18.356–67), where all the suffering of the Trojans, past and future, is attributed to the personal spite of the mean-spirited Hera. Before the battle really begins there is a prelude (4.30–67) in which Zeus speaks of his love for Troy and Hera offers to sacrifice her own favorite cities in return for Troy's destruction; the traditional reasons for her hatred—the judgment of Paris and Zeus's love for the Trojan boy Ganymede (given by Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.25–28)—are left unmentioned, perhaps to make her anger—and thus the causes of man's suffering—seem even more irrational.

For the human characters in the *Iliad*, irrational evil comes from the gods; for the poet, who presents to us what is in the minds of the gods, human troubles are not irrational but all too easy to comprehend if one believes in gods like these. But there is, of course, a difference between religion and artistic creation.

The same idea that evil and good come from the gods occurs in the *Odyssey*, but the tone there is rather different. Though the gods bring upon a man good days and bad, this is said in the context of man's misconduct, and Odysseus explains the troubles that came upon him as caused by his own violence and folly and predicts that disaster will come to the suitors because of their own similar behavior (*Odyssey* 18.130–50). In fact, the gods themselves walk the earth to see which men are good and which are not (*Odyssey* 17.485–87). Indeed Nausicaa tells the naked vagabond, Odysseus (*Odyssey* 6.187–90), that good fortune and bad come to a man from Zeus, and he must endure it, much as Achilles said to Priam in *Iliad* 24; but this may be attributed (such is the poet's care in psychological depiction in this scene) to her courtesy, for it is neither tactful nor consoling to tell one obviously afflicted by the gods that he must have done something to deserve it. Helen, too, in order to remove blame for human suffering from the present company, says lightly that Zeus gives out good or evil as he wishes (*Odyssey* 4.236–37). But at the conclusion of this poem, as old Laertes proclaims when he recognizes his long-lost son, the gods are not dead but obviously taking good care of human affairs, since the suitors have paid for their misdeeds (*Odyssey* 24.351–52).



5. The gods are the source of specific gifts to certain individuals. The most detailed statement of this is Odysseus's lecture to the ill-mannered Phaeacian Euryalus, who has been given good looks but not the graces of speech (*Odyssey* 8.167–77). In the *Iliad*, another dignified enunciation of the principle is put in the mouth of Polydamas, who claims greater wisdom than Hector, though the latter is better at warfare (13.729–34). The idea is very much a commonplace; to the gods' gift are attributed the size, strength, and good sense of Ajax (7.288–89), the prophetic power of Calchas (1.72), the technical skill of the craftsman Phereclus (5.61), the inspiration of the poet (*Odyssey* 22.347), and many more distinctions.

Often a different angle is given by emphasizing that the gifts cannot be refused, as does Paris when Hector reproaches him for his sex appeal (3.65ff.); Nestor speaks of the gift first of youth, then the unwelcome one of old age (4.320–21); and Agamemnon jealously declares that since Achilles' strength comes from the gods, it does him no personal credit (1.178). Later poets repeat the idea that the gods' gifts are inescapable (Solon 13.64 West, Theognis 133–34, 1189–90). For the heroes of the epics, any successful shot, any victory in a race is due to the favor of a deity, usually that of an unspecified *daimôn*, for mortals cannot always know which god is helping them or their enemies.

Forces that we would consider psychological may also be attributed to an external and divine power. Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual desire, is the clearest example; when she afflicts men or women, they may act in total disregard of their better judgment and their own best interests. Less familiar to us, at least by name, is *Atê* ("Ruin," "Delusion," "Blind Folly"), the daughter of Zeus, of whom Agamemnon gives a full account (19.91–136). She it is who makes one do something foolish, counterproductive, against one's best interests, something which afterward cannot be understood as the choice of the individual and which is therefore attributed to an external power (see pp. 145–46).

6. The gods preside over certain standards of social behavior, rewarding those who observe them and punishing those who do not. Usually this is done not from ethical principles but because of some infringement on an agreement or relationship under the god's protection. Apollo in *Iliad* 1 avenges the insult to his priest, and so to his own honor. Helios insists on punishment for those who have killed his cows (*Odyssey* 12.376ff.). And Zeus can be relied upon to avenge the breaking of the oath sworn in his name (3.276ff., 4.160ff.), Paris's outrage to him as god of guest and host (3.351–54, 13.620–27), and any wrong done to stranger or suppliant (*Odyssey* 9.269–71); heralds, and beggars too, are dear to him (8.517; *Odyssey* 14.57–58). The gods also disapprove of Achilles' unrelenting rage against Hector even after he has killed him to avenge Patroclus's death; mortals are supposed to endure the deaths of those they love, and Achilles' fury verges on a challenge to the gods (24.46ff.). But only in one place in the *Iliad*, and in the untraditional circumstances of a simile, is Zeus said to be angered by the wrongdoing of men and to punish them with natural disasters (16.384–93).

In the *Odyssey*, however, the gods are much more concerned with morality, and they wander in disguise over the earth, watching men's conduct (*Odyssey* 17.485ff., 7.199–206). A man's sufferings are partly the result of his misdeeds, not simply the will of the gods. This is stated firmly in the proem of the poem, where Odysseus's companions are said to lose their day of homecoming because of their own wickedness in eating the cattle of the Sun (1.7–9). A little later, Zeus makes an almost explicit refutation of Achilles' account of the jars of good and evil as he carefully clarifies the theodicy for the present audience, using the example of Aegisthus (1.32–43). Aegisthus, he says, was *warned* not to do wrong, but nevertheless seduced Agamemnon's wife and killed him on his return home, and so he suffered for his wickedness "beyond fate," that is, in addition to any sufferings fate ("fate" as in the *Odyssey*, see part 3 above) or the gods might have sent upon him. Similarly, before the punishment of the suitors they are warned many times that their behavior will lead to trouble: by the omen of Zeus (2.146ff.), by Telemachus's threats of Zeus's punishment (1.378ff., 2.143ff.), by the disguised Odysseus (18.125ff.), and by the frightful vision of Theoclymenus (20.350ff.).

The poet's point is not so much that the gods are kind enough to warn mankind; he is presenting the beginning of the idea that men are responsible for their own misfortunes, that their troubles arise because they *knowingly* do wrong, a view that is eloquently proclaimed a century or so later by Solon the Athenian (4 West). The gods of the *Odyssey* are beginning to support the indignation we all feel at willful and successful wrongdoing, and to satisfy our sense of justice by punishing it; they do not irresponsibly (or even inscrutably) dispense good and evil as in the harsher world of the *Iliad*.



7. The gods are thus in many ways an upward projection of (and justification for) the human social hierarchy, exercising a power that often seems, to the lower orders, more or less arbitrary. They do not present an ideal for human conduct, as Jesus did; instead, they adopt the privileges of the powerful and transgress many of the standards they expect their inferiors to follow. Only as patrons of seers, craftsmen, and others, and as supporters of courage and cleverness, do they represent objects of imitation or admiration. On the other hand, they do not yet suffer from jealousy of human achievements, from *phthonos*, as the gods do later in Greek thought; the divine jealousy of which Calypso complains is merely that of male sexuality (*Odyssey* 5.118ff.). Herodotus insists in one example after another that the gods delight to bring low any human who rises to preeminence, just as he also stresses jealousy among men themselves (7.236.1). But there is no hint in Homer that the gods cause suffering to Achilles, or bring about his early death, merely because of his superhuman greatness.

### *The Gods as a Compositional Device*

In a work of fiction the gods and Fate are as much in the power of the poet as are the characters; it is he who determines their actions, their motivations, and probably to some extent their powers. We can never know what is traditional, what is drawn from common belief of the poet's own time, and what is essentially his own contribution. But by identifiying certain areas that clearly belong to creative imagination rather than to the facts of the religious belief of a historical society, we can avoid some misapprehensions.

1. In the *Iliad* most of the gods who appear, with the exception of Zeus, are either pro-Greek or pro-Trojan. For our benefit, and in proper epic style, Homer gives a catalogue of the gods arrayed on each side as they go to war after Achilles has returned to battle (20.31–40). On the Greek side are Hera, Athena, Poseidon, Hermes, Thetis, Hephaestus; for the Trojans, Apollo, Artemis,

Aphrodite, Ares, Leto, and of course the local river god Xanthus. It is remarkable that at such an early period in Greek history their gods are already the universal gods of the world, and it seems likely that this is the result of the long existence of the epic tradition before Homer. Conflicts between gods were known in Greek myth, and representations of the mighty battles of the Olympians against the Giants and the Titans were popular in epic and art. But all the Olympians are subject to Zeus, and though his power has been threatened by other superhuman powers in the past, by the time of the Trojan War all human affairs, Greek and Trojan alike, are under his sway.

The fact that both the warring nations worship the same universal gods makes it easier for the poet to portray the human qualities of Greeks and Trojans. It is hard to imagine the *Iliad* being so great a poem if the Trojans (like the Saracens in *Roland*) worshipped barbaric gods; Virgil was aware of the dehumanizing effect of such gods when he pictured the animal-headed deities of Egypt backing Cleopatra on the shield of Aeneas (*Aeneid* 8.698–700). Occasionally a reference to mythology is given as a reason for the divine lineup. The judgment of Paris explains the hatred of Hera and Athena for the Trojans, and Aphrodite's favor toward them (24.25–30); the ill treatment of Poseidon and Apollo by the former Trojan king Laomedon accounts for Poseidon's hostility toward the Trojan people (21.441–57). The poet even draws attention to the oddity of the support given to the Trojans by these Greek gods, when Athena tells Ares that his mother, Hera, is cross with him for deserting the Greeks (21.412–14), and above all when Poseidon roundly condemns the aid given to the Trojans by Apollo, the god of Delphi, Delos, and much of Greek national identity and culture (21.441–60). It may well be that the epic tradition has preserved a reflection of the origin of Apollo in Asia Minor, not fully understood by Homer.

In the *Odyssey* the situation is, as usual, rather simpler. No god supports the wicked suitors, and the hostility of Poseidon toward Odysseus is explicitly accounted for, at the beginning of the poem, by the tale of the hero's injury to the god's son Polyphemus (*Odyssey* 1.68–75). Zeus and Athena support him because he provides the gods with many sacrifices and because they admire his intelligence (*Odyssey* 1.60–62, 65–67; with humorous self-consciousness the poet makes Athena admire the good sense he has given to Odysseus, *Odyssey* 13.330–36).

2. The major divinities form an extended family, living together on Olympus with second residences in the centers of their cult. Zeus is father and patriarch, and his adult children are still subordinate to him. He is also a ruler who maintains his power not by wisdom or justice but by force, and does not hesitate to boast of it (8.450–56, 15.162–67). His brother Poseidon claims equality in rank and supreme power in his own sphere of the sea, but Zeus declares that he is elder and greater and Poseidon does not press the point (15.158–217); Zeus's wife and sister, Hera, yields unhappily but of necessity to his threats of violence (1.565–67, 8.415–31), which have been actually carried out in the past (15.18–25; this passage may be post-Homeric). It is noteworthy that the goddesses join in the councils of the gods as equals with the males, and in both epics Athena is in practice the most powerful figure after Zeus. In view of the exalted positions of Penelope, Helen, and Arete in the *Odyssey*, one feels that powerful female figures may not be unknown to Homer and his audience in human ruling families.



Naturally there are alliances and quarrels within the family. Hera, Athena, and Poseidon unite against the Trojans; Ares and Aphrodite assist them. Ares and Athena are constant antagonists, like a boy with a bossy elder sister, and the unpopular Ares always suffers ignominy as well as defeat (5.827ff., 15.121ff., 21.391ff.). In their relations with each other they embody—or parody—the frailties of ordinary human nature (see p. 252). Zeus and his wife Hera squabble continually. Hera, in a furious temper because she cannot get her way, derives a disgustingly mean satisfaction from telling Ares of his son's death (15.110ff.). When hurt, Aphrodite, Ares, and Artemis in turn wail to a parent, "He hit me!" (5.370ff., 872ff., 21.505ff.). Thetis has a mother's uncritical love for her magnificent son Achilles, but is not bright enough to realize that it is hardly tactful to say to him with smug satisfaction, "Haven't you got just what you asked for?" when he has just heard of Patroclus's death (18.74ff.).

In the *Iliad* the intensely human interrelationships of the divine first family enable the poet to present a picture of the less serious side of human life that circumstances as well as the dignity of the human characters make impossible in any other way. They bring needed humor and relaxation to the grim tragedies of the poem. Besides all the minor humorous scenes in which they are involved, their brawling in the Battle of the Gods (21.385ff.) is like a parody of a *War of Gods and Titans* (Zeus himself is vastly amused by it; 21.388ff.) and ends at about the level of Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*. The long and brilliant episode of the beguiling of Zeus in book 14 (see pp. 247–50) adds pure

entertainment to the long-drawn-out defeat of the Greeks before the entry of Patroclus.

Such tales provide light relief from the troubles and anxieties of the human characters; inventing and gossiping about the undignified behavior of our superiors is an appealingly human method of getting our own back on those who live as we would like to live ourselves but cannot. Already by the late sixth century Homer's fun and the Greeks' religion had become confused, and a thoughtful man was much offended by all this ungodly behavior: "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is thought a shame and reproach among mankind: theft, adultery, deceitfulness" (Xenophanes, fragment 11. Diels-Kranz).

3. The presence of the gods often facilitates the smooth working of the plot. The Greeks can be beaten, without losing too much face, because it is the will of Zeus; and the will of Zeus can be brought into play against them not because of any wrongdoing or offense on their part, not as a punishment for Agamemnon's treatment of Achilles, but because Thetis has requested it in the name of her beloved son.

Duels between important heroes can occur without wasteful fatalities because a god, like modern Superman, can swoop down in the nick of time to rescue the weaker combatant (Paris from Menelaus in Book 3, Aeneas from Diomedes in Book 5 and from Achilles in book 21). Assistance to the stronger man can be direct, and brings him additional honor (Athena returns Achilles' spear in Book 22, Diomedes' whip in book 23). The duel of Hector and Achilles, fought without either the courteous conventions of a truce or the fear of intervention by other heroes, can be arranged by the help of Apollo (Books 21 to 22); and the meeting of Priam and Achilles, impossible to arrange at the realistic level without harsh straining of human probability, becomes simple with the introduction of Hermes (Book 24).

Sometimes the gods are employed to bring out the psychological weaknesses and strengths of the human characters. It is Aphrodite who leads Helen to go to bed with Paris in Book 3, yielding to sex despite her contempt for her partner; Athena who encourages the foolish Pandarus, proud of his bow and his archery, to shoot the arrow that breaks the truce (4.89ff.), and who suggests to Achilles that it would not be wise to kill Agamemnon (1.206ff.). Reckless actions of Automedon (17.469ff.) and Glaucus (6.234ff.) are attributed to the hand of the gods, even when the spirit of Blind Folly, *Até*, is not mentioned. They help



heroes on the human level: even when assisted by a god, heroes on the battlefield do not become invisible or slay dozens at a blow; they achieve their successes on the plane of human greatness, not the supernatural.

Characteristically Homeric is the notion of "double motivation," by which many decisions and events are given one motivation on the divine level and one on the human. Often this is explicit: Ajax says that Achilles has "placed a savage temper in his breast" and goes on in the same breath to say that the *gods* put it there (9.629, 636); similarly Diomedes says Achilles will return to the battle "when his inclination [*thumos*] and the god drive him" (9.703). Odysseus's poor oarsman, Elpenor, attributes his fatal fall from the roof to "the evil fate of the gods and too much wine" (*Odyssey* 11.61).

A dramatic example is Achilles' great cry to terrify the Trojans away from Patroclus' body, magnified by Athena (18.217–18); it has been compared to the relief from the temple of Zeus at Olympia, which shows Heracles straining to support the burden of the sky while behind him Athena effortlessly lends a hand to make the feat possible. The dying Patroclus says to Hector, "Deadly destiny [*moira*] and Leto's son [Apollo] have killed me, and of men it was Euphorbus; you are the third to slay me" (16.849–50). Zeus drives on Hector "though Hector himself was in a fury" (15.604). This "over-determination," as it has been called, allows the poet to retain the interest of human characterization and action while superimposing upon it, for added dignity, the concern of the divinities.

4. The gods can be used by the poet to foretell the future (though for purposes of the plot they may sometimes be unaware of even the present). Before we have even met Odysseus, we can be told by Zeus in some detail of his journey to the Phaeacians and his eventual return home with many gifts (*Odyssey* 5.31ff.). A prediction from a god can add greater pathos and foreboding than if it were given in the poet's own voice. Thetis can tell Achilles, as he vows to kill Hector in revenge for Patroclus, that it is fated that his own death will follow soon after Hector's, and so Achilles makes a conscious decision to ignore his own coming doom (18.94ff.). Also particularly effective are Achilles' knowledge, from Thetis, that he may choose a short life with glory or a long life in obscurity, and his decision at that point in the tale to abandon the quest for glory (9.410–16; a rather similar prophecy occurs in the case of the minor figure Euchenor [13.663–70], which suggests a traditional motif adopted for Achil-

les by Homer). Zeus's foreknowledge enables the poet to create much pathos as the god sadly contemplates the deaths of Sarpedon and Hector (16.431ff., 22.168ff.; see also p. 35).

Fate, of course, is the will of the poet, limited by the major features of the traditional legends; its power is great because, to one looking back on history, the outcome of events can always be seen as the result of prior decisions, and because the poet needs to satisfy his audience's desire to find an order and rationality in human experience. In an obviously artistic, not religious, motif, Zeus holds up his scales to determine the decree of fate (see p. 294), and the gods act to ensure the fulfillment of such a decree; Poseidon rescues Aeneas for this reason, as it is fated that through him Dardanus's line shall continue (20.300–308). On two occasions Zeus considers the possibility of saving a hero from the death that fate has decreed (his son Sarpedon, 16.433ff., and the beloved Hector, 22.167–81), but both times another deity declares this to be exceptional and a bad policy, and Zeus gives up the idea.

The episodes should be considered a device for increasing tension and pathos by raising the possibility of a last-minute rescue, which is then abandoned, not a means of determining whether Zeus could actually overrule fate (if he had decided to try). They are elaborations of the common emphasizing motif that something would have come about "beyond fate" (*huper moron*) if a god had not intervened: the Greeks would have returned home if Hera had not taken action (2.155ff.), Achilles and the Greeks are on the point of storming Troy and must be stopped (20.30, 21.517), and Odysseus is nearly drowned when saved by Athena (*Odyssey* 5.436). In fact, Homer does not concern himself with the theological problem of the relationship of the gods and fate. Hesiod, probably his contemporary, dodged the issue by providing two different answers, at one place making the *Moirai* ("Fates") daughters of Night, coming into existence before Zeus himself and so superior to him, and at another the daughters of Zeus and Themis ("Order") and so under his patronage (*Theogony* 217–22, 904–6).

5. It has already been said that the gods' interventions lend dignity and status to their favored heroes (see p. 6). They are success-boosters. Ajax, mighty hero as he is, is not supported by any deity and always comes second. Hector and Antenor, when faced by the overwhelming might of Achilles, each say that sometimes even the weaker man may win (20.430–37; 21.566–69), but in practice this does not happen. As with so many other aspects, the poet seems to make a character comment on his technique. Aeneas complains bitterly of Athena's help to Achilles, but admits that he is a good shot even without such help; if the gods would only stand aside, however, Achilles would not find it quite so easy (20.98–102; Aeneas has just said that only Zeus's help saved *him* from Achilles on an earlier occasion).



6. Homer sets very firm limits to divine interventions and to supernatural phenomena generally in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in contrast to what we know of the fantastic occurrences in other epics about Troy (see Griffin 1977). There are no invulnerable or invisible warriors, no magical weapons, not even a mention of the Palladium, the image of Athena that must be removed from Troy before the city can fall, or the bow of Heracles that must be brought to Troy by Philoctetes. The bizarre has no place in these poems. A god may save Paris from Menelaus, during a duel that could only have been inconclusive, given the force of the traditional tale; but no god causes or intervenes in the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, or influences Achilles' decisions in books 9, 16, and 18, or takes part in the encounter when Achilles and Priam are face to face in Achilles' shelter. The divine armor of Peleus, and that made for Achilles by Hephaestus, are not said to be invulnerable during the battles; the divinely made shield fends off a spear (21.164–65), and so does the greave (21.592–94), but ordinary bronze might do as much (though the idea of invulnerability must underlie the poet's mockery of Achilles' fear that Aeneas would pierce his shield; 20.261–72).

No hint is given of the tale of Achilles' own personal invulnerability (see Young 1979), and in fact he is wounded once in the arm, which is unprotected by his armor (21.166–67); by contrast, Ajax seems to have enjoyed invulnerability in the *Aethiopis* (Griffin 1977.40). It is not hard, in the context, to accept the immortality of Achilles' horses and their mourning for their driver Patroclus (17.426ff.); it is harder for us to regard with solemnity the conversation Achilles has with one of them before he enters the battle, but perhaps any incongruity felt by Homer's intended audience would be satisfied with the explicit termination of this unnatural happening by the Furies (19.404ff.; see p. 287).

Homer also ignores many aspects of contemporary religion with which he must have been familiar. There are no fertility cults, no cult of dead heroes, no bizarre cult figures like the horse-headed Poseidon, the black Demeter, the Aphrodite in armor. Mystery religions, one of which is celebrated in the

*Hymn to Demeter*, composed not much later than Homer's time, are not mentioned. There is no punishment of children for the sins of their fathers, an idea that appears a century or so later in Solon.

Homer's divine personalities, imposing but intensely familiar in their human qualities, acting just as we do or would like to, have contributed much to art, literature, and entertainment; though it may seem odd to us, the tale that Pheidias's mighty statue of Zeus at Olympia was inspired by the Zeus of the *Iliad* (1.528–30) shows that they could also contribute to religious belief.

### *Mortals and the Gods*

Mortals hate death and old age, and long for immortality. This longing appears in literature from the earliest times; it is the prime motivation of the hero in the Sumerian/Assyrian epic *Gilgamesh* (see Renger 1978.36ff.), and still features in modern movies. Those who are doomed to death feel that those who they imagine are not, must be free from all care, and resent their happiness; and so they make the world of those who are without death, age, and suffering full of frivolities, as in the *Iliad*, or full of the apathy and boredom of spoiled children, as in the 1970s movie *Zardoz*.

"So the gods have assigned to unfortunate mortals, / to live amid griefs, but they themselves have no cares," says Achilles in his great consolation speech to Priam (24.525–26). The formula "the gods who live at ease" (*theoi rheia zôontes*) occurs three times, always with some pertinence: when the gods punish the attack by the mortal Lycurgus on one of their number, when they resent the love of the goddess Dawn for the mortal Orion, and when they comfort the anxious Penelope with assurances of their care for good men (6.138, *Odyssey* 5.122, *Odyssey* 4.805).

By contrast, a common formula for humanity is "miserable mortals" (*deiloisi brotoisi*). At the end of Book 1 of the *Iliad*, after the plague brought by Apollo, the disastrous quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles, Achilles' withdrawal from the Greek army and Zeus's promise that they will be made to regret it bitterly, the gods feast blithely, and Apollo sings delightfully for their pleasure. In the *Hymn to Apollo* (189ff.) the song he and the Muses sing at a similar feast tells of "the eternal gifts of the gods, and of mortals / the sufferings, enduring which at the hands of the immortal gods / they live senseless and helpless, unable / to find healing against death or help against old age." It is Apollo, too, who firmly states to Diomedes the distinction between men and gods: "Never are the races alike, / those of the immortal gods and of men who walk upon the earth" (5.441–42).



This distinction between mortals and immortals is constantly asserted, the common Homeric terms for each class being as transparently opposed in meaning as are the English words. And in the *Iliad* it is not merely the traditional language that brings out the great difference between the two races, for both in his main plot and in many small and inessential scenes the poet dwells on this fundamental limitation of his splendid heroes. Most of these are discussed in detail in Part Two, but a summary of the most significant passages is given here.

Achilles himself is a constant and highly concentrated symbol of the mortality of even the greatest human prowess; not only is he—goddess' son though he is—doomed to die, but his life will be even shorter than that of most men, and he is already aware of it; and he himself chooses to bring his end closer to avenge the death of his friend (see p. 273). With superb irony, immediately after this decision he is given magnificent armor made by the god Hephaestus, armor that, though perhaps invulnerable, will not save him from death (see pp. 115–16). His immortal mother is often with him; she herself personifies the great gulf between them, and her words never fail to dwell upon it. At their first meeting she mentions that, magnificent though he is, his life will be shorter than that of most men (1.415ff.); and the last time they meet, the poet avoids the usual departure element of a visit scene in order to leave them "saying much to each other" (24.141–42), for little time remains and his death will mean their eternal separation.

Even Achilles' horses are immortal, and Homer four times makes use of this traditional fact for pathetic effect. As he goes into battle Patroclus yokes a mortal horse beside the immortal ones, symbolizing his own vulnerability despite his divinely made armor, and later its death foreshadows his own (16.152–54, 467–69). Zeus sees the immortal horses grieving for their dead driver and reflects: "There is nothing anywhere more pitiable than man / of all things that breathe and walk upon the earth" (17.446–47), and in the context it is man's awareness of his mortality that makes his race so wretched (interestingly, when Odysseus expresses the same thought in similar words, it is man's blind optimism that makes him pitiable; *Odyssey* 18.130–35). When Achilles himself sets off for battle, there is a further

startling reminder of his coming death from the mouth of one of these horses, and Achilles acknowledges in response that he will never see his home again (19.408–23). Finally, at the beginning of the funeral games for the dead Patroclus, Achilles states that these horses will not compete in the chariot race because of their grief for their former driver (23.279ff.).

During his great speech in reply to the embassy in Book 9 Achilles reflects on the death which will come to him despite his mighty deeds (9.319ff., 400ff.). Even more powerful is the scene between him and the terrified young Trojan Lycaon, where he offers him the solace that the death he faces comes even to the greatest of men (21.106–13):

> Die, my friend, you too; why lament like this?
> Death took even Patroclus, who was a much greater man than you.
> Do you not see how splendid *I* am in beauty and size?
> My father was a hero, and a goddess bore me;
> Yet even for me there is death and harsh fate;
> There will be a morning, or an afternoon, or a noontime,
> When someone shall take the life even from me in the fighting,
> Either with a spear-cast or an arrow from the bowstring.

The passage seems to be a brilliant double adaptation of the trope "even Heracles died" (18.117ff.), with first Patroclus and then Achilles himself substituted for the paradeigmatic Heracles. His frequent references to his coming death (in addition to the poet's repeated foreshadowings of it) culminate in his instructions to mingle his bones with those of Patroclus after his funeral (23.243–48); and when his last rites are described by Agamemnon, as the *Odyssey* draws to a close (*Odyssey* 24.43ff.), it is fitting that there is no hint of the version in which Thetis carried him away to immortality (*Aethiopis* fragment 1 Evelyn-White).

The poet also brings in the theme in other ways. The simile of the falling leaves symbolizes the death of the individual and the continuation of the race, immediately before Hector predicts his own death to his wife (6.146ff., 21.462ff.; see pp. 202–5). Sarpedon meditates aloud about honor as the only solace for mortality, and sees the inevitability of death as the only reason for seeking honor (12.310ff.), in much the same tone as the traditional military exhortation "Do you want to live forever?" The poem ends not with the triumph of Achilles in Book 22, or with his magnanimous restoration of the body of his enemy, but with a funeral; not the funeral of the hero of the epic, Achilles, but that of his defeated enemy, Hector. We know that Achilles, Priam, and many other Trojans are soon to die. Only the gods will continue their same routine of feasting.



In the *Odyssey* the distinction between mortals and immortals remains, but the resentment does not appear. Odysseus, in an almost visible contrast with the *Iliad*, is offered the opportunity of an immortal life beside the lovely goddess Calypso, and rejects it in favor of a return to his middle-aged wife and his obscure island kingdom of Ithaca (*Odyssey* 5.203–13). Menelaus will live forever in the Elysian fields, but this eternal continuation of his rather acid relationship with Helen is hardly held up as an ideal (*Odyssey* 4.561–69). The afterlife portrayed in book 11 is dismal indeed, but there is little sign of revolt against it; in Odysseus's meeting with his mother the note is entirely one of pathos, and the dead Agamemnon complains not of death itself but of the way he was killed.

Only in the case of the dead Achilles, fittingly enough, is there a protest. Though reunited with his dear friends Patroclus and Antilochus, Achilles speaks of Hades as the place where "the senseless dead dwell, the images of mortals who have died" (*Odyssey* 11.475–76). In answer to Odysseus's well-intentioned (if unwise) consolation, "When you lived the Greeks honored you like a god, and now here you have great power among the dead," he makes the famous reply, "I would rather be the farmhand of a poor peasant with no land of his own than rule over all the dead" (*Odyssey* 11.484–86, 489–91). He still worries about his old father, Peleus, as he does at the end of the *Iliad*, and only Odysseus's lavish praise of his son Neoptolemus cheers him. Though one may wonder how well Achilles' pride would endure a farmhand's lot, his rejection of any comfort in honors among the dead recalls the tone of the *Iliad* perhaps more than anything else in the *Odyssey*.

In Homer's time the mystery religions were already offering the comfort and hope of a happy eternity, another kind of protest against death. They are not mentioned in Homer. But neither poem has a tone of pessimism or despair; courage and endurance are the glory of mankind, and in these the gods have no share at all (see Afterword). The pervasive melancholy of so much of mediaeval literature (despite its Christian surface), the mournful

*ubi sunt* ("Where are these heroes now?") of Villon and others, and the foreboding misery of the end of *Beowulf* are totally alien to the glory-seeking realists before Troy.

*Further Reading*

The bibliography on the gods in Homer is enormous; Combellack 1955.45–47 lists some of the still useful older works. Dodds 1951, Fränkel 1973.53–93, Greene 1948, and Guthrie 1950 are standard authorities. Among recent publications, the *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. II part 2 ch. 40, gives a brief survey, and there are chapters on the gods in Griffin 1980, Mueller 1984, and Schein 1984. On the relationship of gods and mortals, see especially Willcock 1970, Griffin 1978, Thalmann 1984.78–112, and Clay 1981. Wilson 1974 makes excellent points about Achilles' divinely made armor, his immortal horses, and his goddess mother. Rubino 1979 emphasizes the importance of the imminence of death to the heroic ideal.

# 18

# Personification and Psychology

The strong anthropomorphic colors of the Homeric gods appear also in the vivid personifications of some of the abstract conceptions introduced into the poems. A good example of the usage and the problems is the case of Sleep, who with his brother Death bears Sarpedon away to his far-off home after his slaying by Patroclus (16.681–83). Nothing more complex is involved here than a sympathetic evocation of the last long sleep and perhaps a picture of a pair of young and beautiful winged gods, as on the Euphronius crater in the New York Metropolitan Museum. But Sleep, his name a transparent personification in Greek as in English, also plays an important part in the subplot of the beguiling of Zeus.

Hera wishes him to perform his own proper function, putting Zeus to sleep so that her plan can work, but the bribe she offers is a throne and footstool (14.231ff.), aimed at a fully anthropomorphic deity. He demurs, nervously remembering a former occasion when Zeus's anger forced him to ask old Night for protection. So Hera offers him a further gift, even more anthropomorphic: the nymph he loves. Sleep now agrees, and conceals himself in a tree, taking (as the Olympians themselves sometimes do) the form of a bird. Zeus makes love to Hera; then follows: "So the Father slept peacefully on the top of Gargaron, / by sleep and love overcome." Or should it be "by Sleep and Love"? Most editors and translators reject capital letters for both abstractions here (14.353), but why? Sleep is very much a person in this scene, and Love here is *Philotês*, present on the girdle of Aphrodite, which has brought about Zeus's seduction (14.216), and personified again in Hesiod in a sinister context, with Deceit, Old Age, and Strife (*Theogony* 224–25). In the next verse Sleep dashes off to Poseidon to give him the news like any other messenger.

All this, of course, is straightforward storytelling, not really likely to raise ontological problems in a reader's mind. Nor is the personification of Dream, Zeus's messenger to Agamemnon in 2.6ff., even though he adds something of his own to Zeus's words. But in some cases the question of what kind of existence