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The Gods in the Homeric epics

A popular, somewhat pretentious, party game in certain circles not so long ago was to summarise a famous work of literature as briefly as possible: give the plot of Proust in one sentence, and so on. If we were thus to reduce the storylines of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to the bare essentials, the Gods would not have to feature at all. Zeus's co-operation is not necessary, given the hero's larger-than-life status, to explain the disastrous effects of Achilles' withdrawal from battle, and neither do Poseidon or the Sun need to be invoked to account for misadventures at sea and the effect of twenty years' absence on a man's home. The party game was of course intended to provoke amusement by making the summary factually accurate but also entirely incongruous with the spirit of the original. Similarly, without the Gods the epics would be quite different from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that we have, and surely also from the tradition that produced the poems. The (slightly longer) summaries given by the poems themselves, after all, give divine action a certain prominence: 'the plan of Zeus was accomplished', 'he took away from them the day of their return'; and the action of the *Iliad* begins with the question 'Which God caused them to quarrel?'¹ The words of the characters reflect a pervasive view that significant ideas, emotions and events are in some way caused by the intervention of a God.² Insofar as some concept of cause and effect is inherent in narrative, then, the divine must make its appearance; arguably it is not until Thucydides that the idea of a sustained narrative without the divine is born.

This causal function is not of course the only role of the Gods in the epic, and as we shall see it doesn't explain many of the distinctive features of

¹ I. 5, I. 9, I. 8.

² Although this concept of causation does not, or does not always, let mortals off the hook. It is one of the most conspicuous, and most discussed, features of the interaction between humans and gods that the same event has frequently both a divine and a human cause: so-called 'double motivation' or 'over-determination'. The fullest treatment is still Lesky (1961); standard and very clear presentations also in Dodds (1951) 1–18 and Willcock (1970).

the epic Gods. For all the Homeric resonances of Herodotus' *Histories*, the contrast between his 'the God', or 'the divine', equally a key player in human affairs, and the individualised, highly personal Gods of Homer, could hardly be greater.³ The Gods may perfectly well be implicated in the working-out of human affairs without making a personal appearance. But such appearances are a central and characteristic feature of the Homeric Gods, so that they are presented as characters in a sense equipollent to the human actors. So deeply embedded in the narrative style is that personal presentation that it occurs even when it causes logical difficulties. In *Odyssey* XII, when Odysseus' men have eaten the herds of the Sun, their guardian Lampetie informs their owner, her father Helios, and he in turn complains to Zeus, who agrees to destroy Odysseus' ship in vengeance. But all this is part of Odysseus' own narrative – how can he possibly know this? It is as though the poet suddenly realised the problem, pulled himself up with a start, and quickly found an explanation: 'I heard this later from Calypso, who was told it by Hermes' (XII.374–90). This highlights the singularity of the poet's own perspective, which goes far beyond the 'some God must have guided me' of his characters, or Herodotus' axiom that the divine principle acts by nature to upset things, and claims a knowledge of the Gods which – surely – no human being can possess. The audacity of this claim is somewhat softened by the introduction of the Muse or Muses as intermediary,⁴ but it can still hardly be taken literally.

The Gods of the *Iliad*: who and where?

Book 1 of the *Iliad* introduces us not only to a world of divine causation and interaction, but to a whole society of Gods. Apollo, Athena, Hera, Zeus and Hephaestus make their appearance, and there are clearly other Gods who spend much of their time together, but also have separate homes, on the peaks of Olympus. The Gods indeed can be characterised as 'having Olympian homes' (I.18 and often). But there are also Gods such as Thetis who are able to travel to Olympus but who normally live elsewhere – 'in the depths of the sea, beside her aged father' (I.358). The picture is rounded out in subsequent books with the addition of further players: Ares, Aphrodite, Dione, Leto, Artemis, Hermes, and the messenger Iris all seem to have their homes on Olympus, while Poseidon, though at home in the depths of the sea which he rules, seems also to spend a good deal of his time with the other Gods on Olympus or on earth, presumably because as a son of Kronos and

³ The Herodotean usage is present sporadically in the speech of human characters in Homer, e.g. XVII.218 ('*theos* (god) always brings like to like', clearly proverbial).

⁴ See especially 2.484–5.

brother of Zeus his status is rather higher than most of the non-Olympian Gods; he is even unwilling to accept Zeus's overall authority, though in the end he submits, grumbling (15.184–217).

Other Gods are mentioned in the *Iliad*, but they are scarcely or not at all characters in the action. There is Enyo, a female counterpart of Ares, who features in one battle scene but never on Olympus; there is Charis or Pasithea, the wife of Hephaestus (18.382–3). Of the Gods who are prominent elsewhere in literature and in cult, Hades and Persephone (mentioned, e.g. in 9.569) may be presumed to be out of the action because they are effectively confined to their own sphere, the Underworld. This is the final destination of the heroes, but as it marks the end it is never explored itself; even the other Gods would shudder if Tartarus were laid open (20.62–5). But the absence of Demeter and Dionysus is harder to explain. Since they are both mentioned in the text, it seems very unlikely that they were unfamiliar to Homer's audience, and the most likely explanation is that these deities were difficult to treat convincingly in a way appropriate to the story. Hera, Athena, Poseidon, were all prominent as patrons of Greek cities, *poliouchoi*: Apollo, and therefore, it could be assumed, his mother Leto and sister Artemis had strong connections with the Asiatic mainland.⁵ It made sense, therefore, to show them as passionately involved in the action on behalf of their favoured human communities. Dionysus, on the other hand, though sometimes thought of as Asian, was by human descent Theban and thus Greek, and both he and Demeter spent most of their mythological time travelling from city to city teaching the benefits of agriculture and viticulture and establishing their own worship.⁶ This did not always occur without trauma, but essentially these deities were benefactors of humanity in general, rather than partisans of one group or the other. To show them favouring Achaeans or Trojans would involve too radical a shift in their essential nature, so they can have no part in the story.

There are other differences between the Iliadic pantheon and those we know from other sources, differences which seem unlikely to be solely or even primarily chronological. Hephaestus is prominent in other early Greek literature, but only in a few Greek cities did he have a significant cult presence (one of these cities was Athens, which is why this fact is not always realised).⁷ Iris was even less of a cult figure, though she too appears quite often in literary mythology.⁸ But perhaps the most general and far-reaching distinction

⁵ Although the view that he originated from here is too simple: see Burkert (1985) 144.

⁶ See Flueckiger-Guggenheim (1983). ⁷ Burkert (1985) 167–8.

⁸ The sum of her known cult appears to be one Delian sacrifice recorded in Semos of Delos, *FGrHist* 396 F5.

between the Gods as they appear in the *Iliad* and the Gods as they were actually worshipped is the Iliadic conception of the Gods as precisely defined individuals, in the manner of human beings. Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite are individual characters as are Agamemnon, Odysseus and Diomedes, and you can no more speak of two Apollos than you could speak of two Achilleses. But where cult was concerned, it was demonstrably normal to speak of ‘a God’ meaning the God of a particular sanctuary, so that we would have the Apollo of this place and of that place, each with different qualities and traditions and yet still Apollo. This has continued as an ordinary way of thinking in some systems. In South India, Meenakshi at Madurai, Sivakami at Chidambaram, are different, but they are both Devi, the Goddess. In the Aegean, the Megalochari of Tinos and the Ekatontapyliani of Paros are different, but they are both the Panayia (the Virgin Mary). This double perspective is missing in Homer, as indeed in most of our literary sources or those that deal with panhellenic mythology. To be sure, each Homeric deity has his or her own array of favoured places; thus, for instance, Chryses prays to Apollo as frequenting Killa, ruler of Tenedos (1.38) and later Apollo deposits Aeneas in his temple on the Trojan acropolis (5.445–6). But here there are no ambiguities – whichever way you look at it, it is the same character who moves between the two places. This is a rather obvious point in regard to the narrative, but it is none the less important in differentiating the Homeric (or more broadly, epic/literary) Gods from those of other contexts.

There is a similar ambiguity affecting the location of the Gods, but here the epic is itself less definite. Our first impression, that the Gods live as an extended family, perhaps a rather unusual one, on Olympus, is to an extent modified in the course of the epic. They spend a lot of time in other places. They visit the Ethiopians en masse to attend sacrifices on a huge scale, but they may also attend any other place on earth where sacrifices are offered. They come to Troy and its environs to intervene in the action. Even Zeus, though he never comes to earth (or at least sea level),⁹ moves from Olympus to Ida to get a better view. In fact, he is presented as worshipped on Mt Ida – he has a temenos and an altar there (8.47–8), and the human characters often address him as ‘ruling from Ida’ just as Chryses calls on Apollo ‘ruling Tenedos’, and Achilles, more remarkably, addresses Zeus as ‘you who live far off and rule over wintry Dodona’ (16.233).¹⁰ They think of particular

⁹ Although this is clearly implied by stories of his sexual union with mortal women, of which the poet is well aware, e.g. 14.323.

¹⁰ Dodona is a very long way from Troy, but somewhat less far from Achilles’ homeland of Phthiotis.

Gods as living in particular earthly locations; it is the Gods as a group who 'have their homes on Olympus'.

But can the Gods really be in a place at all, in the sense that human beings are? The whole concept of prayer implies that the Gods can be present anywhere at will, or at least that they can hear and attend to their worshippers over vast stretches of space. When Achilles prays to the Zeus of Dodona, he is using a *modus operandi* which is quite different from his communications with him in Book 1, where he speaks to Thetis and Thetis intercedes with Zeus on his behalf, a procedure which suggests only a quantitative, not a qualitative, difference between Gods and humans. Since the characters of the *Iliad* pray and sacrifice quite a lot, the real-life assumption that the Gods are not subject to spatial limitations is certainly implied in the *Iliad*. But in keeping with the humanising depiction of the Gods, they are also sometimes shown as constrained by space, though to a lesser extent than are mortals. They must move from one place to another, but far more quickly and efficiently than humans can. Thus they may use the quickest means of transport known to humans, the chariot – but their horses and chariots can travel at high speed through air and sea. They can swoop down from mountain peaks like birds. Or, more plausibly perhaps, they can simply go as quickly as a man can think 'I wish I were in such-and-such a place' (15.79–83). It is hard to see why one method of transport is chosen over another. They can, however, all be taken as emphasising the superiority of Gods over mortals in their relative freedom from normal limitations.

Other passages seem to lay emphasis on the restrictions. Some places are far away even for the Gods. Thetis cannot contact Zeus until he comes back from visiting the Ethiopians with the other Olympians (and similarly, at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Athena can act when she does because Poseidon is away in Ethiopia). Even when they are relatively near, the Gods do not always perceive everything. Zeus on Ida is notoriously distracted from the battle below by the seductive wiles of Hera (14.159–355), but even before this he has turned his attention away from Troy to study the affairs of the Thracians, Mysians and others (13.3–6), allowing Poseidon to interfere on behalf of the Achaeans. There is no sense that a God is different from a human, able to deal with many things at once – and yet this must be at least a passive, background hope of those who pray.

The Gods of the *Iliad*: interaction with humans

I have suggested that the Iliadic Gods are seen somewhat inconsistently as both like and unlike humans in the limitations imposed by locality. A parallel phenomenon is seen in the two types of divine–human interaction observable

in the epic. On the one hand, there are the normal channels of communication between humans and Gods – prayer, sacrifice, dreams, oracles and so on – and on the other, there are modes which seem less plausible, more fantastic, and which at the same time evoke Gods who are more like humans – sexual and parental relations, for instance. The epiphany stands somewhere between the two groups, because Greeks of the historical period did experience divine epiphanies, yet not so frequently nor so – almost – routinely as do the heroes of the *Iliad*. These two types of interaction show not only a dichotomy in conceptions of the Gods, but also indicate something about humans: the heroes of the epic were men of another age, privileged to hold converse with Gods at a much lesser distance or a much more nearly equal level than is possible for us now. Divine limitations and human excellence go together; perhaps the famous dictum of ‘Longinus’,¹¹ that Homer made his men Gods and his Gods men, is not so far from the mark.

The heroes of the *Iliad* pray frequently, and in ways as far as we can tell that are strikingly similar to those of the Greeks of later times and ‘real-life’ situations. They pray with some special request in mind, they remind the Gods of their past benefits and promise gifts for the future if their prayer is granted. Very often they perform animal sacrifice, whether to bolster up their request or to make good a promise, or even as a pious preliminary to eating. The centrality of animal sacrifice to Greek religious practice is abundantly clear from other sources, and in the epic it is indicated from an Olympian perspective by the keenness of the Gods to receive sacrifice, wherever it may be performed and – other things being equal – their regard for those who offer it: Hector’s generous offerings are the main reason given by Zeus for his favour towards the chief Trojan fighter (24.66–70). Nonetheless, it is also clear that in real life and less heroic situations, there were many less elaborate, less expensive and more usual offerings made to the Gods; but the characters of the *Iliad* are heroes of a past age, and offer only the grandest, most splendid gifts to the Gods. We miss, too, in the *Iliad* the regularly recurring ritual, the monthly or annual sacrifice so much a part of polis life. This must be due to the more purely narrative demands of a war story, describing dislocated communities; the Achaeans are far from their ancestral sanctuaries, and even for the Trojans, city life is hardly normal. The scene (6.297–312) where the Trojan women attempt to propitiate Athena, in response to a communication of the seer Helenus, has a dramatic urgency and relevance which would be lacking in more routine sanctuary scenes.

Helenus here represents another facet of communication with the divine which reflects more normal experience, the realm of the oracular and

¹¹ *Subl.* 9.7.

prophetic. The oracular shrine is known to the *Iliad* (see Achilles' prayer to Zeus of Dodona, above), but the nature of the story demands that more prominence be given to the (mobile) individual who is skilled in *manteia*, the interpretation of signs and portents sent by the Gods. Here the Gods communicate at a distance, because the message that is conveyed is seldom of direct concern and relevance to the prophet, its first human recipient. However, sometimes signs are more obvious and can be interpreted by anyone – for instance, at 10.274–6 Athena sends a heron to the right of Odysseus and Diomedes, which they recognise as indicating her favour.

Direct communication with the Gods through a waking or sleeping vision was not uncommon during the historical period, but the waking form especially appears much more frequently in the *Iliad*. As ever, the Iliadic heroes were that much more privileged, that much closer to the Gods. For all that, when they do appear to humans the Gods very often put on a human disguise, typically for instance when they are encouraging their protégés or their favoured side. There is no consistency, though: in the most often cited of all these appearances, Athena is instantly recognisable to Achilles (1.199–200). As well as the frequency, it is the authorial perspective, the claim to knowledge about the Gods, which differentiates the Homeric accounts from any real-life experience. Athena appears to Achilles because she has been sent by Hera, who cares for both Achilles and Agamemnon and wishes to avert a fatal outcome. Typically, in fact, an epiphany scene is preceded by some narrative or description of the God who appears, an exposition of his or her motives, and often a communication with another divine figure. A further not uncommon feature of the Homeric epiphany is physical intervention, not to be found (one supposes) in real-life events: Aphrodite removes Paris from the battlefield in a cloud of mist (3.380–2), Apollo snatches Aeneas from Diomedes and takes him to recover in his temple on the acropolis (5.438–50). The importance of such episodes to the plot should make one rather sceptical about the claim that magical and supernatural elements are lacking in the *Iliad*.

Sometimes Gods intervene in human affairs without actually appearing to the humans involved. Hera puts it into Agamemnon's mind to encourage the Achaeans (8.218–9), or, more physically, Apollo destroys the Achaean wall like a child kicking a sandcastle to pieces (15.361–6). This is very much in line with expectations of the Gods' behaviour elsewhere, and has a close relation to their function as cause and explanation. What is distinctive is the attribution of clear personal motives to an individual deity, and even more so, the all-knowing perspective from which the narrative is told.

A notable feature not just of the epic but of Greek mythology in general, is the extent of sexual relations between divine and human characters. This

and the consequent birth of heroes is the theme of the Hesiodic *Ehoiai*; the storyline of the Homeric epics does not suggest a particular prominence for the motif, and indeed most of the main heroes have human fathers, even grandfathers. But the propensity of the male deities to take human lovers and beget human offspring is nevertheless an important part of the divine background, from Sarpedon, son of Zeus and Laodameia (6.198–9), to charming vignettes such as that describing the birth of the Myrmidon Eudorus:

... a maiden's son, borne by the lovely dancer Polymele, daughter of Phylas; the powerful slayer of Argos desired her when he saw her among the group of girls dancing for clear-voiced Artemis of the golden spindle. Straight away guileless(?) Hermes took her secretly to an upper room and lay with her, and she bore him a fine son Eudorus, exceedingly fast of foot and a good fighter. But when Eileithyia of the birthpangs brought him into the light and he saw the rays of the sun, strong Echeclus son of Actor offered countless gifts and took Polymele to his house, while the old man Phylas brought up and cherished the child well, loving him as though he were his own son. (16.180–91)

Such affairs and entanglements are not presented in any way as problematic. Much more difficult, and less common, are the affairs of Goddesses with mortal men. Since sex, to the Greek mind, normally implies the domination of the woman by the man, such relationships subvert the proper order of things and threaten the superiority of the Gods, which is why Calypso in the *Odyssey* claims that the male Gods always want to put an end to them (v.118–29), and why the immortal Thetis was reluctant to marry the mortal Peleus (18.432–4), and eventually left him. It is one more sign of the specialness of Achilles that he is the result of such a rare and paradoxical union. And of course there is implicit in the poems the awareness that divine parenthood was a feature of the age of heroes, a time when human beings were greater and somehow closer to the gods; such claims were made only very rarely (and with what degree of conviction?) for contemporaries.

The strangely omniscient standpoint of the epic narrator allows us to witness, not merely infer, certain things about the attitude of the Gods to the human beings who so preoccupy them. First, they are interested in mortals, and not just those of the Achaean cities and the Trojan plain; they visit the Ethiopians, they observe the affairs of the Thracians and Mysians (1.423–4, 13.3–6). Each deity has his or her favourites (and often un-favourites) among cities and individuals. They may give them special gifts, as Apollo gives a bow to Pandarus (2.826–7), or they may bargain with each other about their mortal preferences, as Hera notoriously would allow Zeus to destroy her favourite Achaian cities in return for the fall of Troy (4.50–4). Being

passionately involved in promoting the interests of their protégés, they often come into conflict with each other. On one level, then, human affairs are an arena in which each God can act competitively against the others. But when this threatens to get out of hand, peace can be restored by getting things in perspective; it is not worth getting worked up over mere humans, after all (1.573–6, 21.462–7). This near contempt can be modified or varied with pity, especially by Zeus, who feels pity not only for his favourites like Sarpedon and Hector, but for the human condition in general: μέλουσί μοι ὀλλύμενοί περ, ‘I care for them, mortal though they are’ (20.21). Seeing the mistreatment of Hector’s body, all the Gods except the most staunchly pro-Achaian feel pity (24.23–6). These two attitudes, pity and disregard, spring from an unquestioned superiority in strength, status and durability – almost everything, in fact, except ethical considerations, which though not absent from the *Iliad* are not a major concern of its Gods.

The Gods in the *Odyssey*: differences between the epics

When we think of the Gods of Homer, and especially of their relations with each other and the glamorous yet strangely uncomfortable world that they inhabit, it is mainly episodes from the *Iliad* that come to mind and form our picture. The one major exception, the story sung by the minstrel Demodocus of the adultery of Ares and Aphrodite and the vengeance of Hephaestus (VIII.266–366), has been convincingly interpreted as a sophisticated pastiche of Iliadic motifs.¹² Otherwise, though many similarities remain, the Gods of the *Iliad* seem to have been toned down in the *Odyssey*, to have become less colourful and less clearly individualised. Even the number of deities involved is diminished: Zeus, Athena and Poseidon alone are the main actors, with a few appearances from Hermes, and a number of non-Olympian Goddesses, immortal yet very specifically localised on earth (or, in the case of Ino-Leucothea, in the sea).

This last point is clearly related to the different focus of the *Odyssey* story, for although Odysseus is presented as a superhero, no doubt, he is still only one individual, and his affairs are not of such overwhelming importance that we could expect all the Olympians to take sides on the issue. Those Gods who do have an interest, however, are depicted along clearly Iliadic lines – in fact, the favour of Athena towards Odysseus is already shown and remarked on in the *Iliad* (10.245, 23.782–3). The hatred of Poseidon is a new motif, deriving from an episode in the *Odyssey* itself, but the type of relationship, originating in a personal affront, is entirely consonant with the motives for

¹² Burkert (1960).

the Gods' enmities in the *Iliad*. Even within this framework, however, less play is made with the relationships of the Gods than we might expect if we took the *Iliad* as model. There are plenty of scenes between Athena and Zeus, with the Goddess pleading for help to be given to her favourite, but whereas Poseidon clearly hampers Athena's efforts (e.g. VI.325–6, 329–30) the opportunity for a full-scale quarrel between the two is passed over; rather, it is Poseidon's absence which gives the plot its impetus. It is as though the most spectacular elements of the Olympian scenes of the *Iliad* have been separated off and relocated, the fantastic into the sub-Olympian world of magic and monsters through which Odysseus travels, and the emotionally charged into the arena of human relations and human–divine relations. With the single exception of the Ares and Aphrodite story (which is, after all, only a song sung by a court entertainer), there is much less to offend and scandalise in the behaviour of the Odyssean Gods. True, they hardly satisfy Homer's critic Xenophanes' alternative conception of 'one God, greatest among Gods and men . . . neither in form nor in thought like human beings' (21 B23 DK), but though their behaviour is human, it is not spectacularly bad behaviour, nor, for the most part, are they made to look ridiculous. Where the function of the Gods of the *Iliad* often seems to be to contrast with the serious, heroic and tragic human characters, these Gods, though obviously more powerful than humans, at the same time form much more of a continuity of character with them. This is true both on a general level and more specifically in the main characters: it is in the *Odyssey* that the reason for Athena's favour towards Odysseus becomes explicit – she finds him appealing because he is like her, intelligent and devious (XIII.296–9).

'Gods behaving badly' is not then a theme prominent in the *Odyssey*, and this facilitates the much greater concern with human morality that they display in this epic. In the *Iliad*, there is some human expectation that Zeus, at least, will act to punish wrongdoing – but this is a view we hear only occasionally, mainly from Menelaus (3.351–3) and Agamemnon (4.155 ff.), who regard themselves as aggrieved parties. It has occasionally been denied that there is any real difference between the epics in this regard, because in the *Odyssey* also the bulk of the evidence for the Gods' interest in morality comes from the opinions of the human characters.¹³ It is, however, an overwhelmingly more prominent theme among Odyssean characters, and in view of the clearly programmatic statement of Zeus at the poem's outset (1.32–43), that mortals' sufferings are due to their presumptuous folly (*atasthaliai*), it seems impossible to deny that the Gods think in moralistic terms. It is true that Zeus does not state 'We punished Aegisthus', but the

¹³ See Winterbottom (1989), Yamagata (1994).

whole tone of the speech suggests his attempt to direct human beings in the proper ways of behaviour – a radical shift from the divine attitudes displayed in the *Iliad*.¹⁴ Of course, the shift is not complete – we have already remarked that the motives of both Athena and Poseidon are essentially personal. But this point is not emphasised equally throughout the poem. Poseidon's anger is the motive force behind the first part of the story, the delayed and difficult return from Troy, but in the second half of the poem he fades out of the picture entirely. Nowhere does he appear encouraging the suitors in their insolent behaviour – indeed, it is Athena who makes them yet more overbearing and arrogant, so that Odysseus may be all the more angry and their punishment more certain (xviii.346–8). The view of the Gods presented in this second half of the poem has moved still further from the Iliadic presentation of individuals in conflict. Now the Gods form a united front, rooting for the success of Odysseus, with Zeus at their head and Athena as active participant in the detailed working out of the plan. And this unity, it is strongly implied, is founded on a moral basis: personal favouritism apart, it is simply right that Odysseus should triumph over his enemies and be reinstated as ruler of Ithaca. The suitors are wicked men who deserve their punishment; it is not just the characters who tell us this, but the author himself: 'There would be no more unpleasant supper than this, which the Goddess and the strong man were about to place before them, for they had previously devised [or, they were the first to devise] unfitting things' (xx.392–5). It is Athena who leads the action, but she has the full and willing support of Zeus and, it seems, the Gods in general. Her Iliadic-style personal championship of Odysseus blends effortlessly into the more moralistic concept in which the Gods (eventually) restore the upright and punish the wicked.

'Homer's Gods' between epic and religion

Apart from a few Linear B documents naming individual deities, the Homeric poems are chronologically the first testimony we have to Greek perceptions of the Gods.¹⁵ They also seem to have been formative; Herodotus' statement, that Hesiod and Homer 'made a theogony for the Greeks and gave

¹⁴ A clear exception here is Zeus's anger with 'crooked judgements' in 16.384–88 – but this is a simile, not part of the main narrative. Within the main story itself, the bare facts might seem to support a 'justice of Zeus' interpretation (Lloyd-Jones (1983)). Paris is to blame, a Trojan broke the truce, Troy will fall, as Agamemnon predicts (4.160–8) – but although both offences are very specifically against areas of concern to Zeus (hospitality and oaths) we, unlike Agamemnon, can see Zeus's 'real' attitude. When this Zeus brings about the fall of Troy it will be with sorrow and not with righteous indignation.

¹⁵ Unless with M. L. West we date the *Theogony* earlier (West (1966) 40–8).

the Gods their eponyms and divided up their honours and crafts, and indicated their appearances'¹⁶ is well known. Yet in some ways they seem to be unlike what we know of the Gods from later sources. Their interaction with humans, their relations with each other, though they have points of contact with what we know from elsewhere, are importantly different. This prompts us to ask at what level of seriousness or acceptance the Homeric deities were understood. Did the Greeks believe in the Gods of these myths?¹⁷

'Literal' belief is perhaps an impossibility. All talk about the divine is to a degree metaphorical, because it is necessarily beyond our everyday experience, and certainly beyond the closely related constraints of language. This is as true of the Greece in which the Homeric poems took shape as it is of the settings of the most sophisticated theological systems. That said, there are different kinds of metaphors and different reactions to them, different degrees of acceptance. If we talk about the divine as 'father' or 'mother', we are using a familiar relationship and experience to try to say something about the less clear and less familiar. If we tell a story such as that of the child Krishna making the whole universe appear in his mouth, we are making a statement, among other things, about the divine in human form. In the same way, we could understand, for instance, the aerial chariots of the Homeric gods as a way of saying that their users are not subject to ordinary spatial limits. But what are we to make of their quarrels with each other and their partisanship in human affairs? The quarrel scenes seem to be designed largely for entertainment, while the partisanship, if it is a metaphor, might seem to be telling us about the chanciness of human affairs rather than saying anything about the Gods; the Gods would themselves be part of the metaphor, not something to be explained or clarified. So here a metaphorical presentation of the Gods will have been built on and elaborated by other elements. On the other hand, if we do try to take quarrels and partisanship as statements about the Gods – as has been done in various contexts from antiquity onwards – their literal application is obtrusive and disturbing. Hence from a relatively early date Homer's depiction of the Gods was seen as problematic: in the late sixth or early fifth century, Xenophanes was famously blaming Homer and Hesiod for 'ascribing to the Gods all things that are shame and disgrace among mortals',¹⁸ and proposing further that the divine is not like this, indeed not like human beings at all. Simple rejection of the 'miserable tales of poets',¹⁹ not least by the poets themselves, was a popular strategy in the fifth century. After all, the Muses know how to tell many things that merely

¹⁶ Hdt. 2.53.2.¹⁷ Cf. Veyne (1988).¹⁸ 2I B11 DK.¹⁹ Eur. *Her.* I, 346.

seem like the truth.²⁰ The alternative, promoted rather enthusiastically in the Hellenistic period and later, was to maintain that Homer's depictions of the Gods were not only metaphorical, they were also allegorical. In these systems, Homer's versions of the Gods were actually statements about the physical universe (Hera = air, Hephaestus = fire) or about ethical and psychological matters (Athena preventing Achilles from killing Agamemnon represents wisdom, argued at length in Heraclitus' *Homeric Allegories* of perhaps the first century AD).²¹ This method involves radical rereadings of the whole texts of the epics, which then become puzzles to be read only with the help of a key. The problem of the Gods is solved at the expense of the poems.

The poems themselves – at least as it appears to us today – do the opposite. They pursue their vision of human heroism, glory and suffering at the expense of a plausible and satisfying treatment of the divine.²² I said at the beginning that the outline stories of both poems could be told without reference to the Gods; these are not poems about Gods, but about human beings. These human beings inhabit a world of which the Gods are an unquestioned part, but still, within each epic, the Gods are there to illuminate, comment on and contrast with the depiction of human actions and the human condition. Of course in the process they bear more than a passing resemblance to the Gods as the Greeks knew them in other contexts. Consider for instance this scene from the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (275–80), where the disguised Goddess reveals herself as divine to the amazed family which has given her hospitality:

Saying this, the Goddess changed in stature and appearance, casting off old age and putting on beauty all around. A lovely perfume diffused from her fragrant clothes, and radiance shone far about from the deathless flesh of the Goddess, her fair hair flowed down her shoulders, and the close-built house was filled with light as bright as lightning.

All of this is entirely compatible with the epiphanies of the *Iliad*, but the effect is quite different. Demeter's changed appearance is described in attentive and loving detail, quite unlike the fast-paced description of the appearance of Athena to Achilles in *Iliad* 1:

²⁰ Hes. *Theog.* 27, cf. XIX.203. ²¹ On these interpretations, see Lamberton (1986).

²² I should perhaps clarify that by this I mean a version of the divine which (although not necessarily problem-free) can reasonably be the object of relationship and belief. Modern readers who find plausibility and satisfaction in Homer's Gods are quite legitimately appreciating them as a way of saying something about the world that humans inhabit. They are not, I think, proposing to start worshipping these deities.

Athena came from the sky, for white-armed Goddess Hera had sent her, loving and caring for them both [Achilles and Agamemnon]. She stood behind him, and took hold of his fair hair, appearing to him alone; none of the others saw her. Achilles was amazed, and turned round. Straightway he recognised Pallas Athena – her terrible eyes shone. . . .

Here the shining of the eyes might be regarded as a very abbreviated form of the physical signs of divinity in the *Hymn* passage, and the amazement of Achilles certainly parallels that of Metaneira and her family. But the emphasis is firmly on Athena as a player in the (human-based) action, on what she does rather than how she is or how she appears.

The point comes through even more clearly when we consider the words that are spoken and the purpose of the epiphany. In line with what we have already been told, Athena tells Achilles not to kill Agamemnon but to withdraw from the fighting, thus creating the main plot-line of the *Iliad*. Demeter has been searching for her abducted daughter, and her interest in mortal affairs is tangential to this: she wishes to reward the family who have been kind to her, then rebuke them for their lack of understanding. She reveals her divine form in order to explain – too late – the real situation, and to announce what will happen next – the establishment of certain rites at Eleusis. A religious matter, in other words; something that relates to the following generations as well as those of the story itself,²³ and one in which human–divine relations are centred on, and move towards, the divine rather than the human. This is obviously not the intent of the epics. The account of Demeter in the *Hymn* is a compelling one, whereas the central figure in *Iliad* 1 is Achilles, and we get only a side-glimpse of what might make Athena compelling. Even Achilles recovers quickly enough from his astonishment to ask Athena why she has come – is it to witness the insolence of Agamemnon? But the family of Metaneira, and with them the poem's audience, are focused entirely on the Goddess; the child Demophon, the original stimulus for the whole episode, lies forgotten on the floor.

In this way, the Gods of epic have been subordinated as a central concern to human beings, and yet within the world of the poems, for the characters themselves, they remain superior. Even Achilles could not defeat the river-god: θεοὶ δὲ τε φέρτεροι ἀνδρῶν, Gods are stronger than, or superior to, men.²⁴ The result is a double perspective. As long as we focus on the main

²³ Cf. *Hymn* 265–8, 274–5.

²⁴ 21.264. Diomedes wounds and so overcomes Aphrodite in *Iliad* 5 – so an individual mortal may excel an individual God in one particular field, especially when encouraged by another God. But we are told that those who try to subvert the hierarchy by attacking a God are not long-lived.

drift of the poem, and what human–divine relations tell us about the human condition, we have a vision that is at once heroic and (especially in the case of the *Iliad*) tragic. If we allow the focus to shift to the Gods themselves – and the poet of the *Iliad* seems sometimes to encourage this, with his frequent scene-setting on Olympus – the result is entertaining, intriguing, but ultimately problematic. Certainly the Greeks tended to scepticism about the knowability of the divine, but that did not necessarily mean that any picture was as likely to be ‘correct’ as any other. In Homer, a way of speaking about the Gods which is properly metaphorical has been made literal, elaborated on and pushed to its limits. This is why ‘belief’ in the Gods of Homer could never be fully given and yet could not exactly be withheld either.

FURTHER READING

A very great deal has been written about the subject of the Homeric Gods; this note is extremely selective. On the religious background, a marvellous compendium of information and interpretation is Burkert (1985); pp. 119–25 deal specifically with the place of Homer. A very influential and largely persuasive overview of the Gods in Homer, especially in the *Iliad*, is to be found in Griffin (1980), especially 144–204. Although his main interest is in the literary function of the Gods, Griffin argues strongly for their ‘reality’; so, from a different perspective, does Emlyn-Jones (1992). Among those who incline to the opposite view are Tsagarakis (1977) and Erbse (1986). Other perspectives on Gods and mortals are to be found in Thalmann (1984) and Kullmann (1992). Of the modern works cited in the notes to this chapter, Dodds (1951), Lloyd-Jones (1983), Willcock (1970), Winterbottom (1989) and Yamagata (1994) may be particularly mentioned.