

The role of the gods in the iliad, a poem by homer

[Literature](#), [Mythology](#)



What role(s) do the gods play in the narrative of the Iliad?

This is a world of two levels. One the divine, the other human; a vast part of the Iliad's plot, action and meaning lies in their interlinking. That there are gods is as much a reality as the men Homer portrays. Although most obviously seen as fully-fledged individuals with particularised roles like that of Zeus the 'chief' and Hephaestus the 'peacemaker' (mirroring human personalities, Agamemnon the 'overlord' and Nestor the 'diplomat', usually in a comic and trivialising manner), they are nonetheless mysterious figures of extraordinary power and influence who practice a ritualised relationship of prayer and sacrifice with mankind. Whatever their characterisation, this all-pervasive presence in the poem makes them integral. If nothing else, the sheer number of appeals for heavenly aid places them implicitly in the drama. Indirectly and directly, they are there to steer the course of the Trojan War, as when Athena convinces the foolish Pandarus to fire the arrow that reignites the war in Book 4, and Zeus brings out the scales of immortal justice, which is also that of human fate and determines the death of Hector. Yet on a less serious perhaps level, they are capable of providing a bit of light relief. Another function to weigh against is their usefulness in creating contrast and stature. Counterpoints to the mortal realm, the differences that always separate man and god both define the tragic destinies of heroes and give them their dignity. When something happens, when immense feeling is felt, and Homer telling his story with the aid of the gods wants to emphasise its cosmic scale, you may be certain that the Olympians are there, behind it, watching it and sometimes moved by it.

From the beginning, the wrath of Achilles is not alone in effecting the plot. The first word, and principal driving force, may be the rage of Achilles, but this is soon followed in the narrative by a divine motivating source. 'and the will of Zeus was accomplished / since that time when first there stood in division of conflict / Atreus' son the lord of men and brilliant Achilles'. Here the gods are explicitly involved in the fate of men and the Trojan conflict; they are 'the ones who drive on the 'action'. As it is at the start so it is at the end when the very human reconciliation in Book 24 is masterminded by the gods. 'so [Zeus] spoke', and his delegates conduct 'Priam to Achilles and [order] Achilles to yield to him the body of Hector'. The repetitive force of the many imperatives in the king of gods' speech to Thetis (24. 104 - 119), 'go', 'command', 'tell', is merely the poetic expression of the 'will' that pervades and orders the entire tale. As a compositional device, the gods are enormously vital. Not only broadening the scope of the 'Achilleid' from one man's anger into a bunch of threads on the gods' inevitable loom, the 'plan of Zeus', '... also enables the poem to allow the Greeks to be beaten without losing face, as a side-effect of superior immortal resolve. It smoothes out the plot and aids the preservation of heroic dignity. In a combination of both these narrative roles, the gods actively intervene in the affairs of heroes. For, the rescue of Aeneas by his patron gods, his mother Aphrodite (5: 318) and the sympathetic Poseidon (20: 325), serves to prevent the wasteful loss of warriors' lives in otherwise thrilling duels (the tale can hardly bear a bloodbath of the noblest and best) and operates as a literal 'deus ex machina' to fulfil the poet's awareness of the total story. The powerful god of the sea saves the mortal 'for fear / the son of Kronos may be angered if now

Achilles kills this man. It is destined that he shall be the survivor . . .

Obviously Homer knows that this shall be the case and the gods are his omniscient, omnipotent bearers of future events.

The Iliad is both retrospectively and prospectively founded on a divine level. Their predictive knowledge of the Trojan War, its end and everything in between, 'And glorious Hector shall cut down Patroclus / . . . In anger for him brilliant Achilles shall then Hector . . . / [and then] the Achaians shall capture headlong Ilium', ' . . . ' (15: 59 – 68), is consistently reiterated and forms a large part of the poem's tragic irony. When Zeus foretells the death of his son in battle with Patroclus, it is repeated again only moments before the fatal encounter: 'among [those he will kill shall be] my own son, shining Sarpedon', '' (15: 67); ' / ' Ah me, that it is destined that the dearest of men, Sarpedon, / must go down under the hands of Menoitios' son Patroklos' (16: 432). The cleverness of this arrangement is that the audience is also emotively complicit in his death. They 'know' even at the point he starts struggling in the dirt like an animal, 'a blazing and haughty bull' (16: 481), that it is useless and he will die. 'Tears of blood', (16: 460), are wept by his immortal father though and this all-too-human response points to another aspect of the gods that defines their narrative position. Not just human-like in their appearance, they are to be 'regarded as truly anthropomorphic'. Subject to the same feelings as the human combatants, this makes them sadly more effective 'than the poet's own voice' at creating 'pathos and foreboding' through their prognostications. They can be personally involved in a way that Homer simply cannot.

This is true also of their intense relationships and partisanship. The Olympians are depicted as a family divided; ' Her father / Kronides caught her against him . . . / and questioned her: " Who now of the Uranian gods, dear child, has done such things to you . . ." / Artemis . . . answered him: " It was your wife, Hera of the white arms, who hit me, / father, since hatred and fighting have fastened upon the immortals', ' (21: 508 – 513). There are two points to this familiar characterisation. One is that such human parallels reflect a relatable situation presenting a former world of peace. Like the developed vista of the two springs in which the Trojan women used to wash their clothes ' in the old days / when there was peace, before the coming of the Achaeans' (22: 156), the heavenly domestic drama offers an alternative, more pacific vision for the Iliad. On the other hand, there is the very pungent fact that as with any family the immortals ' behave under Zeus . . . as individuals'. They have their own accustomed roles: Hermes is the one to whom ' it is dearest / to be man's companion', '(24: 335 – 336), while Aphrodite is concerned largely with the ' lovely secrets of marriage'. What's more, such characterisations do indeed inform their behaviour. Hermes accompanies Priam on his perilous journey in Book 24, most appropriately for an end that while devised by gods is to do with human matters and human empathy, and requires a sympathetic hand to guide an old man. The goddess of love, in turn, fulfils her persona when in Book 3 she tries to inflame Helen with desire for her husband, ' you would not think / that he came from fighting against a man; you would think that he was going / rather to a dance', . Conversely, far from being human-like in their distinct characters, they may yet be stranger and more figurative. After all,

Aphrodite inspires lust; she could very well be Lust. ' Forces that we would consider psychological may also be attributed to an external and divine power'; abstract personifications, the gods in this perspective are more literary figures than believable entities. Herodotus' belief that ' it was Hesiod and Homer that created a theogony for the Greeks' supports the idea of a flat religious expression of the pantheon within the text. However, this has been named naïve, coming as ' a not very profound remark' from an author who had not the benefit of any ' prior source'. In any case, their family unit is like any family: too ' temperamental and argumentative' to be meant as anything other than real characters. They feast, ' thus thereafter the whole day long . . . / they feasted', (1: 601), laugh, ' But Hera and Athena . . . began to tease the son of Kronos', (5: 425 – 6), and fight for their chosen sides as much as the men involved, ' for we two, Pallas Athene and I, have taken / numerous oaths and sworn them in the sight of all the immortals / never to drive the day of evil from the Trojans'(20: 310 – 12). For all their specific personalities, some more defined than others, the Olympians resemble in their Homeric portrayals nothing so much as a court hierarchy, all under the aegis of one Father and divided amongst themselves by different loyalties.

Hera's statement of bitter, implacable hatred for the Trojans is not only peculiar to her (and Athena's) role in the poem, their job being to support the Greeks and destroy their enemy at any cost, but forms that retrospective framework mentioned previously. The ' Judgement of Paris' is the cause that is never explicitly mentioned except in a hint at the last book, '[they] kept their hatred for sacred Ilion as in the beginning, / and for Priam and his

people, because of the delusion of Paris / who insulted the goddesses when they came to him in his courtyard / and favoured her who supplied the lust that led to disaster' (24: 27 - 30). This is the reason for the animosity that leads the queen of the gods to 'gather my people and bring evil to / Priam and his children', 4: 30 - 1). This is why Troy falls. Of course, there is the concept of justice and right on the side of the Achaeans. When Menelaus is wounded by the archer Pandarus in Book 4, Agamemnon sees it as a breach of oaths and 'they must pay a great penalty, / with their own heads'. The emphatic anaphora of, the second one further enjambed, has the powerful cadence of ritual, the sure trust of a mortal in the righteousness and strength of the gods' laws. They certainly have the raw force to do it. Apollo's 'foul pestilence', (1: 10), is the first terrifying vision the Iliad presents of the divine will in action. Again, like Hera and Athena's anger, it drives the beginning of the plot: his sign of awful disfavour leads the Greeks to petition Agamemnon to return his prize, then he in turn forces Achilles and then . . . Still what is interesting is that Apollo's reasons for righteousness are entirely selfish; the hurt done to his earthly representative dishonoured him. Rather than an externalised, impersonalised figurehead of religious morality (Chryses is a priest whose daughter has been violated), he is primarily a 'mixture of awesome power and quarrelsome pettiness, reflected in ethics by his mixture of roles as guarantor of justice and amoral self-seeker'.

The number of prayers and sacrifices sent up to the gods shows them in the light of a reciprocal relationship with humanity. Man 'makes sacrifices', to palliate the wrath of Apollo in Book 1 and consecrate oaths in Book 3 between the two sides. Direct addresses are even more common, and

revealing of the ambiguity of the gods' attitudes towards and their positions concerning humans. So, at moments of great peril and importance, the divine are appealed to: Book 6, when the Trojan women beg for the goddess Athena to go easy on them and remember their piety towards her (258 – 9) and Book 24 (307 – 313), Priam seeking some sign of Zeus' support for his seemingly crazy mission. The latter is answered; the former not. Athena is not thinking of the laws of reciprocity or 'human fairness' in rejecting the poor women. Her role has more to do with the upholding of a personal grudge than any moral judgement. Thus, the gods can reject the world of mortals as easily as they intrude to change or drive it. This curious paradox, of absolute involvement and identification, and yet blasé, callous detachment, may be seen in the fateful decision of Book 4. Agamemnon may think that the wielder of the thunderbolt, a force of nature, will grant Troy's destruction 'in anger for this deception', (4: 165). In actuality, Zeus and Hera carry out a chilling exchange; compelled by her passionate hatred for the people of the man who slighted her, she agrees to hand over the fate of her favourite cities to her husband in return for Ilion, 'all these, / whenever they become hateful to your heart, sack utterly',. The simplicity of the imperative underscores her casual dismissal of the human life and achievement that is supposed to mean the most to her. In contrast to the *Odyssey*, whose opening lines illustrate the function of the gods as punishers of mortal immorality, 'they were destroyed by their own wild recklessness . . . and the [Sun God] took away the day of their homecoming' (i. 7 – 9), the divinities of the *Iliad* are more awful, selfish and apathetic.

If there is an implicit moral to Homer's story of Troy it would be Achilles' statement on how the interplay of gods and men affects the world: 'Such is the way the gods spun life for unfortunate mortals, / that we live in unhappiness, but the gods themselves have no sorrows'. This is the fundamental part of the divine; to reflect to an extent, but ultimately show more by their differences, what it is to be human. It is a tragic vision. It is also a unifying one. Trojans and Greeks suffer the same mortal frailties and crucially the same gods. Unlike Virgil, who presents the Egyptians on the Shield of Aeneas with barbaric idols, Homer injects not only fairness, but also a common humanity into his dealing of two feuding people who nevertheless exist under one sky and one pantheon. Both limited by age and death, the Lycian Glaukos and the Greek Diomedes know men as 'miserable', and the gods as those 'who live at their ease', (6: 119 – 211). While heroes, however, 'godlike', are doomed to die and fail at some point in their careers, their heavenly counterparts are portrayed 'uncontrollably', laughing and listening 'the whole day long', to the lyre of Apollo (1: 601 – 4).

Understandably, Homer's gods have been accused of levity and 'frivolous irresponsibility'. When Apollo blithely summarises the tragedy of mankind, 'Shaker of the earth, you would have me be as one without prudence / if I am to fight even you for the sake of insignificant / mortals, who are as leaves now', (21: 461 – 5), the audience is reminded of the trivial goings-on of the gods in battle. A parody of real combat, the 'theomachia' of Book 21 sees Artemis with her ears boxed, just as Asteropaios who was so proud of the generations that preceded him 'like leaves on a tree' is killed at the hands of Achilles. The contrast presents the yawning chasm between mortal and

immortal that no hero, not 'even Patroclus', (21: 105), can bridge. Yet this ultimate 'pathos' gives Homer's warriors a greater dignity that makes their inevitable fall both more tragic and more glorious. A paradox, this is clearly summarised by Longinus as the rendering of 'the men of the Trojan war gods, and the gods men'. Heroism is explained as the willingness to accept death and still fight on; how can the gods reach that height if they are never to be faced with such a choice? However, there is seriousness in the figure of Zeus at least that emphasises his higher status as a divinity. The famous simile where he, in his role of punisher of the unrighteous, sweeps away in a vast flood those mortals whose 'decrees are crooked' (16. 385 – 95) represents the formidable justice of the king of the gods. Such a natural manifestation of moral force though is not the norm in the Iliad. Rather his, 'eye', is turned more on the world of men entire than those who contravene his laws. What interests the Olympians are not the ethics of the situation, as may be seen in Zeus and Hera's agreement, but the panorama.

The distance between gods and mortals Apollo refers to in Book 21 enables them to 'see' humans like another audience in perhaps their most vital narrative role. Thetis' 'inconsolable grief', and terrible foreknowledge make her the unique link between the two levels. In the same way, the gods are involved in the universe of men and removed, providing the listener with characters that are agents everywhere in the plot and passive commentators. For example, in Book 4, they are 'gazing down on the city of the Trojans' (4), and in Books 8 and 16 the same. Thus, when Zeus weeps in Book 16, as active griever of events and observer, we weep too; when in

Book 8, he simply sits down to watch, we do also and are further alerted to the enormity of the passage.

In fact, the presence of the divine very simply elevates the mortal Trojan landscape into something worthy of attention. Whether to an audience of immortal beings or the real people drinking it all in, the story of the Iliad is remarkable, exciting and tragic. Its gods are an essential part of this.