

# A Note on the 'Mortality' of Gods in Homer

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THE CONTRAST BETWEEN A *θεῖον γένος* (*Il.* 6.180) and the *γενεὴ ἀνδρῶν* (6.146) pervades the whole of the Homeric poems.<sup>1</sup> The gods, who live on ambrosia and nectar, are immortal and forever young. Yet the Homeric gods at one time did not exist and were born; Zeus did not always hold sway; gods act and react much like human beings, and are subject to suffering.<sup>2</sup> In short, Homer's picture of the divine existence does not make absurd the idea that gods may ultimately die, as is said to be the case with Ares at *Il.* 5.388–91:

*καί νύ κεν ἔνθ' ἀπόλοιτο Ἄρης ἄτος πολέμοιο,  
εἰ μὴ μητρυιή, περικαλλῆς Ἡερίβοια,  
Ἐρμέα ἐξήγγειλεν· ὁ δ' ἐξέκλεψεν Ἄρηα  
ἤδη τειρόμενον, χαλεπὸς δέ εἰ δεσμὸς ἐδάμνα.*

But if the immortality of the Homeric gods may be said not to be very firmly established, that is not, I believe, because their immortality is "an overlay upon an earlier tradition of gods who were subject to death" and because "Homer was probably receding from a still more anthropomorphic position," as has been suggested by the late Harry L. Levy.<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, the question may more profitably be considered from a somewhat different angle. The following remarks are offered as a contribution towards a more adequate understanding.

Lethal violence amongst the gods may have been part of the pre-Homeric epic tradition, along with certain other coarser traits (*e.g.* the rising to life of dead heroes). However, a new spirit seems to be characteristic of the Homeric poems. It is generally agreed that Homer reworks elements from the earlier tradition for the

<sup>1</sup> Some important aspects of this contrast have been well treated recently by J. Griffin, "The Divine Audience and the Religion of the *Iliad*," *CQ* n.s. 28 (1978) 1–22; *cf.* his *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford 1980) Ch. VI.

<sup>2</sup> See *e.g.* *Il.* 7.204, 8.33, 13.352, 18.54, 20.293, 24.105.

<sup>3</sup> "Homer's Gods: a Comment on their Immortality," *GRBS* 20 (1979) 215–18 (hereafter 'Levy').

purposes of his heroic epic.<sup>4</sup> Thus when gods fight, as in the battle of the gods in *Iliad* 21, it is not in earnest. Whilst the gods are in no real danger, Homer exploits to the full "the excitement that this make-believe exposure to deathly peril permits," as Levy puts it (218).

Elsewhere, serious violence may be presented in stories within the poems—as part of a past reality, as it were. This is the case *e.g.* at *Il.* 1.396–406 (Achilles to Thetis on the revolt of the other Olympians against Zeus); 14.256–59 (Hypnos to Hera on Zeus's treatment of him on an earlier occasion); 15.18–33 (Zeus to Hera on his former treatment of her); 18.394–405 (Hephaestus to Thetis on his being thrown down from heaven).

The main incidents in such stories may be part of pre-Homeric mythology, used in a Homeric context so that it contributes a certain vividness to the narrative without seriously forfeiting the lofty concept of the Olympians. But such stories often give the impression of being innovations, having been invented to serve some specific purpose in the narrative. They supply reasons and arguments when characters in the poems have important points to make.<sup>5</sup> One may suspect that they have no existence if they are bereft of their specific *raison d'être*, which is to be found in their Homeric context. I shall apply this point of view to those four passages in the *Iliad* which, according to Levy, seem to imply a possible 'death' of gods and to indicate that "though Homer's gods were immortal, their predecessors in the evolution of Greek religion had not been so at all!" (216).

The first one is that of Hephaestus being hurled from Mt Olympus (*Il.* 1.590–93).<sup>6</sup> In fact, this story does not even imply mortality on the part of the god. What Hephaestus says, simply, is *ὀλίγος δ' ἔτι θυμὸς ἐνῆεν*. The god was exhausted, to be sure, but no more than that.

The three other examples are all found in *Iliad* 5. At the end of that book (890–901), Paeon cures Ares of a wound that has been inflicted upon the warrior-god by Diomedes and Athena in a violent encounter (853–63). Ares flees to Mt Olympus and shows Zeus his *ἄμβροτον αἷμα καταρρέον ἐξ ὠτειλῆς* (870). Full of indig-

<sup>4</sup> See Levy 217 with references to Karl Reinhardt and Gilbert Murray; see also W. Kullmann, *Das Wirken der Götter in der Ilias* (Berlin 1956) 9–41.

<sup>5</sup> For this kind of innovation, see especially B. Braswell, "Mythological Innovation in the *Iliad*," *CQ* n.s. 21 (1971) 16–26.

<sup>6</sup> For this version of Hephaestus' fall from heaven as compared with that in Book 18, see Braswell (*supra* n.5) 20–22.

nation at Athena, who sent Diomedes to fight even immortal gods, he is glad he could escape (885–87):

ἦ τέ κε δηρὸν  
αὐτοῦ πήματ' ἔπασχον ἐν αἰνῆσιν νεκάδεσσιν,  
ἦ κε ζῶς ἀμενηνὸς ἔα χαλκοῖο τυπήσι.

Ares is here associated with the corpses on the battlefield; he risked to be so badly hurt as to remain among them for a long time, or live ἀμενηνός.<sup>7</sup> Ares surely was exhausted. But he does not need Paeon as a life-saver. Paeon provides ὀδυνήφατα ('pain-stilling') φάρμακα. Ares recovers: οὐ μὲν γάρ τι καταθνητός γ' ἐτέτυκτο (901). I think it is fanciful to see in the "didactic language" of this verse "a relic of a stage at which audiences had to be reminded that whatever may have been the case with earlier divinities, the Ὀλυμπια δώματ' ἔχοντες were ἀθάνατοι."<sup>8</sup> The lesson to be learnt is not one about newer gods as opposed to earlier ones, but about gods as opposed to men.

The final scene of the fifth book, moreover, must be seen against the background of the whole of the book. There Diomedes in close cooperation with Athena performs astonishing acts of valor, including the wounding of both Aphrodite and Ares. Diomedes is allowed by his divine patron to experience things unparalleled in the *Iliad*.<sup>9</sup> As one of his victims, the god Ares on the other hand is associated very closely with the human realm. When Athena and Diomedes first find him, he is taking spoils from a human victim (5.840ff)—a unique situation for a Homeric god to be in! Ares is singularly human both in this respect and in his pathetic suffering. But he is in no mortal danger.

The two remaining passages in Levy's list both belong to Dione's consolation-speech to Aphrodite (5.382–415), who has been wounded by Diomedes. Dione tells (395–402) how the god Hades, having been wounded by Heracles, went off to Mt Olympus ὀδύνησι πεπαρμένος (399) to be healed by Paeon (401–02):

τῶ δ' ἐπὶ Παιήων ὀδυνήφατα φάρμακα πάσσω  
ἠκέσατ'· οὐ μὲν γάρ τι καταθνητός γε τέτυκτο.

As with Ares, there is nothing here to detract from the idea of a god's immortality and nothing which indicates an earlier 'mortal'

<sup>7</sup> See P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique . . . s.v. μέμονα*: "ἀμενής 'sans force' (E.), d'οὐ ἀμενηνός dit notamment des âmes des morts, mais significant aussi 'sans force'."

<sup>8</sup> So Levy 218 n.10.

<sup>9</sup> See my *Die Diomedesgestalt in der Ilias* (*SymbOslo Suppl.* 25 [1978]) 47–94.

version. It is moreover important to observe that the poet uses parallel language of Ares and Hades (401f = 900f), and that the visit of Hades to Mt Olympus is parallel to the Olympian visit of Aphrodite (and of Ares) in the same book, who also go there to be healed. Thus with elements of action and language ready to hand, the poet creates—or possibly reworks—a mythological episode to serve as a *paradeigma* for the acting and the suffering seen in the *Iliad*.<sup>10</sup>

The paradigmatic function must be kept in mind also when one considers the first episode told by Dione to Aphrodite. After his imprisonment by the Aloads, Ares would have perished in his brazen prison had not Eeriboea caused Hermes to set him free (5.388–91, quoted at the beginning of this article).<sup>11</sup> *καί νύ κεν ἔνθ' ἀπόλοιτο*—this is the nearest Homer comes to a 'dying god'. But again this trait in the story is only to be explained with reference to its context within the poem. The picture of Ares nearly dying is mirroring the main incident in the immediate Iliadic context that Aphrodite is just emerging from (311–13):

*καί νύ κεν ἔνθ' ἀπόλοιτο ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Αἰνεΐας,  
εἰ μὴ ἄρ' ὄξυ νόησε Διὸς θυγάτηρ Ἀφροδίτη,  
μήτηρ, ἣ μιν ὑπ' Ἀγχίση τέκε βουκολέοντι.*

Again the situation in the *paradeigma* is created out of the Homeric context, which it echoes.

Logically, *Iliad* 5.388 implies that the poet reckons with the death of a god as an ultimate possibility. But we need perhaps not speculate as to how the poet might have conceived of such a thing happening within the theological framework of his world. Ares dying in the brazen jug is not only a hypothetical and past possibility; it is so to speak an *ad hoc* possibility in Book 5. The scene must be understood, first, in the light of the general tenor of that book, in which some gods appear rather too human (Aphrodite trying to save Aeneas with her *peplos* and being wounded by Diomedes; Ares taking spoils from a human victim and being

<sup>10</sup> For innovation in such contexts, see M. M. Willcock, "Mythological Paradeigma in the *Iliad*," *CQ* n.s. 14 (1964) 141–54; "Ad hoc Invention in the *Iliad*," *HSCP* 81 (1977) 41–53. The mythological *paradeigmata* in Book 5 are discussed in my *Diomedesgestalt* (*supra* n.9) 61–68.

<sup>11</sup> The warrior-god in the brazen jug may go back to very ancient ideas about the imprisonment of gods; see K. Meuli, "Die gefesselten Götter," *Gesammelte Schriften* II (Basel/Stuttgart 1975) 1035–81, esp. 1077f. Yet it is difficult to know whether a story like the one in Book 5 might have formed part of a pre-Homeric tradition. Imprisonment, at any rate, does not of itself imply that the god dies.

wounded by Diomedes and Athena); and, second and more specifically, in the light of the fact that the *Ares-paradeigma* is coloured by its context (388a=311a).

The gods are there, and are the way they are, as a counterpart to the human world—for *poetic* reasons, one could say.<sup>12</sup> At another level, this holds true also of the gods in such tales as those that we have considered. They have correspondingly little source-value both for pre-Homeric mythology and for pre-Homeric religion. Rather than pointing back to “a still more anthropomorphic position,” they seem to me to testify to the full-fledged anthropomorphism of the Homeric gods and to the poet’s modelling of the gods in his poems, according to the needs of his art and his craft.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. K. Reinhardt, *Die Ilias und ihr Dichter* (Göttingen 1961) 446–52, esp. 447, and Griffin’s work (*supra* n.1).