

Homer's Gods: a Comment on their Immortality

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A TRAIT of Homer's gods which is proclaimed in well over a hundred passages in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is their immortality: they are called ἀθάνατοι, αἰὲν ἑόντες, αἰειγενέται. It may therefore come as somewhat of a shock to a modern reader, especially if he has been reared in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of a godhead whose immortality endures from everlasting to everlasting, whose being is so essentially immortal as to preclude even the thought of death, to find such passages as these:

(1) The god Hephaestus, son of Zeus and Hera, explains that, when he was thrown from Olympus and landed in Lemnos, there was little life (θυμός) left in him (*Iliad* 1.593);

(2) The god Ares would have perished in his brazen prison had not Eriboea caused Hermes to set him free (*Iliad* 5.388–91);

(3) The god Hades needed the services of Paean to cure him of a wound which had laid him low among the heaps of dead (*Iliad* 5.395–402);

(4) Ares again, wounded by Diomed, needed the services of Paean; and the language used parallels that found in the third example (*Iliad* 5.899–901).

One may well ask, What sort of immortality is this? Indeed, the usually prudent Willcock¹ is so troubled by the second passage as to say, "That a god could perish is carrying anthropomorphism rather far." It is the purpose of this note to show that, on the contrary, Homer was probably receding from a still more anthropomorphic position.

Aside from the anthropologically-centered works cited below, the numerous histories and handbooks of Greek religion have, with two exceptions, little or nothing to say about the immortality of Homer's gods, which they apparently take for granted. Their indices under

¹ M. M. Willcock, *A Commentary on Homer's Iliad, Books I–VI* (London 1970) 169 on *Il.* 5.388.

the headings Immortality, *Unsterblichkeit* and the like, refer the reader to discussions of man's beliefs in and hopes for the immortality of the human soul. The two exceptions are Rose² and Nilsson.³ Rose says

They [the gods of the myths] are not even essentially immortal, it would appear, but rather made so by their divine food and drink, ambrosia and nektar (idealizations, it may be, of honey and the preparations made from it, such as mead). Ares . . . would have perished in his chest if he had not been rescued. On the other hand, to feed on ambrosia even for a time now and then makes a man immortal. No doubt opinions differed as to exactly how efficacious the divine diet was. Even so, gods can be wounded and then there flows a sort of blood, which Homer calls *ichor*, a word used later in medical language to mean serum. Or they can be knocked senseless by a heavy blow, or otherwise made unconscious.

In an earlier work, Nilsson covers much of the same ground:

Homer's . . . anthropomorphism presents the gods as possessing every human need and weakness. . . . But rationalism reflects that there must be a distinction between gods and men, and a purely physical distinction too, since gods are not subject to death like men. The answer is typically rationalistic. If gods are immortal, it is because their food is different from that of mortal men. Not blood but *ichor* flows in their veins.

Neither scholar, as far as I have been able to discover, expatiates elsewhere on these brief statements. Nor does either scholar, in this connection at least, refer to an important point: though Homer's gods were immortal, their predecessors in the evolution of Greek religion had not been so at all!

The Cambridge classical anthropologists⁴ were fascinated by the phenomenon of the cyclically dying nature god-king, upon whom immortality, as attributed to the Homeric Olympians, must be considered a later overlay. Jane Harrison puts it rather emotionally:

² H. J. Rose, *Gods and Heroes of the Greeks* (London 1957) 59.

³ M. P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, tr. F. J. Fielden (Oxford 1925) 157.

⁴ J. G. Frazer, *The Dying God* [= *The Golden Bough*, Pt. III] (London 1930) 3-4; J. E. Harrison, *Themis*² (Cambridge 1927) 467-69; Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*² (New York 1930) 1-55. See also W. F. Otto, *The Homeric Gods*, tr. Moses Hadas (New York 1954) 131-39; Emily Vermeule, ed., Martin P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (Berkeley 1972) vii-xiii, 1-34.

“The crowning disability and curse of the new theological order is that the Olympian claims to be *immortal*. . . .”⁵

If the immortality of the Homeric gods is an overlay upon an earlier tradition of gods who were subject to death, we may find the explanation of the anomalies with which this note is concerned in a trait of Homeric composition which has been well-documented in other connections.

Homer, it has been shown, reworks for the purposes of his grandly designed heroic epic, intended, or presented as intended, for the lords and ladies of a warrior culture, certain earlier elements which had gained popularity among the audiences of earlier bards of much less lofty pretensions.

I have tried to show elsewhere⁶ that the anomalous story of the slaughter by Odysseus of Penelope’s suitors is the result of the fact that Homer reworked into his epic framework a folk-tale of the ‘little tradition’, that of the guest who outstays his welcome and eats his host out of house and home. The dénouement of the tale, in which the wasters are destroyed by the gods, had become an ineradicable part of the story, expected by the hearers with considerable emotion and not to be omitted no matter how the tale was otherwise modified. The story of the wastrels’ destruction, coupled at the courtly level with the theme of a returning hero’s identification by a test of strength, produced, I hold, the story of the massacre as we have it, with the returning hero as the slayer instead of the gods.

Karl Reinhardt, in an essay first published in 1938 and republished in 1948 and 1960,⁷ had already posited a similar blending. In his view the genus of immortal gods grandly conceived is blended with an “älteres, gröberes . . . vorhomerisches ‘Genus’,”⁸ shown by

⁵ *Op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 467. It may be noted that no supernatural being, however *eternal*, may be considered *immortal* if subject to cyclical death, even if this is regularly followed by resurrection. This is indeed made clear by Jane Harrison’s contemptuous reference to a claim of *immortality* on the part of the Olympians.

⁶ H. L. Levy, “The Odyssean Suitors and the Host-Guest Relationship,” *TAPA* 94 (1963) 145–53, and the references there cited. *Cf.* also *idem*, “Echoes of Early Eschatology in the *Iliad*,” *AJP* 69 (1948) 420–21, and the references there cited.

⁷ “Das Parisurteil,” in C. Becker, ed., Karl Reinhardt, *Tradition und Geist, Gesammelte Essays zur Dichtung* (Göttingen 1960) 16–36. To some extent Reinhardt’s concept was anticipated by Murray’s view that our present *Iliad* is a highly polished version of earlier rather barbaric material: Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (Oxford 1907), esp. 237–38.

⁸ *Op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 23.

earlier bards as engaged in battles in which they wound each other fearfully, and—what is of crucial importance for our discussion—are actually killed. How was Homer to retain the excitement and vividness of these battles of the supernaturals without forfeiting his lofty concept of Olympian gods who are deathless? Homer, says Reinhardt, and I gratefully adopt his suggestion, created for this purpose a new concept of battles in which gods were involved. These battles are now to be represented as conducted “as if” the gods were capable of dying. Thus the warring Olympians bluster, threaten each other and enter into combat *as if* it were a matter of life and death. The poet, having exploited to the full the excitement that this make-believe exposure to deathly peril permits, always draws back before any of the gods actually dies. Thus Homer eats his cake and has it too, to the great delight of his hearers and the marked enhancement of his epic narrative.

What of the rôle of fate in all this? Early in the twenty-second *Iliad*, for example, Apollo twits Achilles for ineptitude in attempting to kill a god who is fated to be immortal. But what does ‘fated to be immortal’ really mean? Is it not the same thing as saying that in fact the Homeric gods never do die? They are possessed of what might be called an existential immortality. Lattimore has put it well in another connection: “fate . . . is the same thing as the story; which is what did happen, and therefore, by hindsight, what had to happen.”⁹ Thus it may be said that it was the fate of the pre-Homeric Greek gods to die, that of the Homeric Olympians not to.

If the theory here presented is accepted, then the anomalies which have concerned us represent not an excessive incursion on Homer’s part into anthropomorphism but rather a contrivance by which the poet manages to save for his epic the cherished episodes of a tradition in which the gods were indeed mortal, while at the same time accommodating the vivid action to his new higher concept.¹⁰

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⁹ Richmond Lattimore, “Man and God in Homer,” *PAPS* 114 (1970) 421.

¹⁰ Those who accept this theory may not find it too fanciful to see in the didactic language of certain verses a relic of a stage at which audiences had to be reminded that, whatever may have been the case with earlier divinities, the *Ἄλμπια δώματ’ ἔχοντες* were *ἀθάνατοι*: *Il.* 5.342 *τοῦνεκ’ ἀναίμονες εἶσι καὶ ἀθάνατοι καλέονται*, 402=901 *ἠκέσατ’ οὐ μὲν γάρ τι καταθνητός γ’ ἐτέτυκτο*. By the fifth century, Empedocles had returned from the Homeric to a pre-Homeric concept of the gods, holding them to be “long-living” but not deathless: cf. Erwin Rohde, *Psyche*, tr. W. B. Hillis (New York 1925) 384, 407 n.98.