

## THEOLOGY AND POETICS IN THE *ILIAD*

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Among some Jewish and Christian Bible Scholars there is a half-joking convention that “theology” is Christian and that the word does not apply to the Jewish religious thinkers.

Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*

**T**he cautious remark of this exergue certainly also applies to the Homeric poems, especially when many modern scholars consider the treatment of the gods in the *Iliad* to be essentially a literary treatment.<sup>1</sup> But the ancients took the Homeric gods seriously as religious beings, and some modern scholars follow them. It would be, perhaps, more correct to speak in the plural of various theological layers (if not those W. Kullmann indicated in his 1956 book), by focusing on the complex, sometimes contradictory, teleological directions of the narrative.

My purpose is to underline the “poetic” aspects and effects that the representation of the gods in the *Iliad* produce, without suspending the religious feelings and perceptions with which they were received by ancient

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1 See Dodds’s survey of the scholars (Mazon, Murray, Bowra) who found the *Iliad* an irreligious text: 1951.2. M. L. West 1997.177: “In considering the activities of the Gods in poetic narratives we must distinguish between those which are integral to the substance of a myth and those which arise from the poet’s storytelling technique. An assembly of the Olympians in Homer is not a myth, it is merely part of his mechanism for embellishing the action and moving it forward. This is true of most of the gods’ appearances in Homer.” Griffin 1978.20, sensible to the historical perspective, writes: “It seems perhaps most natural for us to think all of this [the divine interventions] as being far more a matter of literature than of real religion; but the ancients thought of Homer as one of those who formed their theology for good (Hdt 2,53) or ill (Xenophanes).”

audiences and readers. Even in the burlesque treatment that both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* bestow upon them, the gods were still felt to be the same gods as those who eventually, in other representations, would be humorless and pitiless. Once poet and audience accept the fact that gods begat heroes like Achilles, Sarpedon, and Aeneas, or a fatal woman like Helen, it is obvious that poet and audience would find normal the physical presence of Thetis beside Achilles, of Aphrodite beside Helen, and would not take it as an expedient or a fiction of the literary or epic machinery. Of course what these gods say and do in the scenes Homer stages is another matter.

What then is “literary,” or better “poetic,” in their treatment? Before answering, I must recognize the ahistorical definition of the category I am going to illustrate. For Homer and his audience, the narrative was at once theologically and literarily edifying, for no distinction between literature and theology was thinkable. A large part of ancient exegesis consists in trying to justify Homer’s representation of the gods. Theology and literature cannot in fact be distinguished and separated. For instance, when Homer creates an archaic sounding myth in order for Zeus to be persuaded by Thetis to honor Achilles and to crush the Trojans (1.396ff.; see Griffin 1978.7), we realize that it is with this invention that Thetis obtains Zeus’s approval of the plan (βουλή) that constitutes part of the plot of the *Iliad*.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, we see that this invented story rehearses for us a previous manifestation of the hostility of Hera, Athena, and Poseidon against Zeus, a model, we could say, of their new hostility against Zeus’s βουλή. This hostility—a red thread throughout the whole narrative—reveals both the burlesque aspects of Zeus’s conjugal and familial relationships and, when he asserts his will, his sublime authority (e.g., 1.524–30). Of course, the entire dramatization of the events that begin either with Thetis’s discreet allusion to the episode Achilles narrated (1.503) or Zeus’s initial refusal or silence (1.511ff.), all the rhetoric of the representation (beginning with line 511: ὥς φάτο· τὴν δ’ οὐ τι προσέφη νεφεληγερέτα Ζεύς, “So she spoke: but Zeus gatherer of clouds answered her nothing,” where the negative οὐ shockingly breaks, for the only time, the regularity of the formula), all this and all the rest is literary elaboration.<sup>3</sup> But can we deny a religious and theological

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2 The issue of Zeus’s βουλή has a long history and raises difficult problems: see Pucci 1997.171ff.

3 See the illuminating essays gathered in Bakker and Kahane 1997, devoted to the specific forms of epic rhetoric, and Feeney 1993 on how the “genre” affects the representation of the gods.

purpose and consistency to this ad hoc invented myth when it is at the source of the divine plan of the *Iliad*? To have doubts about its “tradition”—and accordingly about its “truth”—would imply doubt about the “truth” of the whole religious fabric woven around Zeus’s βουλή.

Had a member of the audience asked the poet whether this myth was his invention or not, he would probably have answered that it was the story told by the Muses. It is just in the inscrutable folds of this answer, in the leeway opened between divine inspiration and poetic skill, that criticism of the poets as liars, as unwise, etc. was made possible for early philosophers such as Heraclitus and Xenophanes. For indeed, the only evidence Homer could present for the “truth” of his myth would be his word that the Muses inspired him. However, our epic texts establish an uneasy relationship with the Muses very early: already in the *Odyssey*, the authority of the Muses begins to weaken (Pedrick 1992.36ff., Pucci 1995.215) and, in Hesiod, their “truth” has become decidedly problematic (*Theogony* 26ff.; Pucci 1977.8ff., 1997.225–27). The path to the recognition of the fictional, of the “literary,” seems to be opened.

In contrast to these texts, the *Iliad* asserts with the greatest assurance the presence and the authority of the Muses, without whose assistance the poets would hear only a rumor, a reputation (κλέος), and reach no knowledge at all (2.484ff.). In other words, the text presents a Narrator conscious of the privilege the Muses can bestow on Narrators of heroic, Iliadic songs. Through their inspiration, the Narrator will be empowered to sing the truth. This assertion cannot fail to impress the audience (as many critics have emphasized),<sup>4</sup> but whether within this assertion the text en-sconces the actual singer’s belief or what, for him, would be only a fictional pretence is impossible to say. One or the other of these alternatives may have been true on different occasions and for different singers; the text, however, consistently predicates only the Narrator’s belief.<sup>5</sup> What matters then is not

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4 Svenbro 1976 implies that the Muses are the embodiment and the personification of sociopolitical control without the approval of whom the poet could not aspire to any success or fame. See also de Jong 1987.60.

5 De Jong 1987.46ff. analyzes recent interpretations of the Invocation to the Muses. In this paper, as often in my work, I refer to the “text,” the “*Iliad*,” the “poet,” or “Homer” meaning, most of the time, the text of the *Iliad*, of the poet, or of Homer, for the text is the source, the staging entity of all intentions, figurations, focalizations, etc. that are often difficult to determine with certainty. The belief in the Muses is a textual effect that produces an *edifying* Narrator. The distinction between the singer as the actual bard and the Narrator is a necessary distinction, for the Narrator, like the Reader, is a figure that

the bard's belief but the fact that the text, in its drifting movement, confuses the neat separation between poetic inspiration as repetition or re-enactment of the Muses' truthful voice and the mere repetition of a rumor. Indeed, the same word κλέος indicates both human rumor (2.486) and the truthful "glory" of the heroes that the Muses tell the poets, especially in the plural form κλέα ἀνδρῶν ("the glories of men").<sup>6</sup> In the folds of this textual ambivalence, the mystery of Homeric theology is ensconced: the question of whether this theology speaks the language of myth, and assumes therefore the truth of myth (the awareness that its language is simply re-enacting what really happened), or whether it embellishes a rumor, a mortal narrative, transmitted by tradition and continually growing within that tradition through inventions and refinements.

The desire to detect and uncover the ambivalences, the complexities, and the tensions that play within those folds is irrepressible. Probably, however, the critic has no way to discriminate between the two modes. Leaving open the question of the "mythical truth" of the Iliadic representation of the gods, we may obtain some insights into how each "type" of representation of the divine, the dramatic, poetic representation sustains or questions the teleological plan of the divine. The relationship between poetics and "theology" can be better seen when "theology" directly touches the image the poem wants to give of itself, when the "divine" seems to leave room for poetic effects (in farcical or pathetic scenes), or when the "divine" is downgraded by the force of sought-after dramatic effects, or, finally, when the "divine" abandons the mortal heroes and leaves them in the exclusive embrace of the poet. All this implies that the gods, though remaining divine and powerful beings and never becoming symbols or rhetorical devices, are conceived as they are in the poem in order to serve the poetic purposes of the poem.

Let us begin with the first lines of the fourth book. The gods in joyful assembly<sup>7</sup> have assisted in the duel between Paris and Menelaos (1–4; all translations are my own): "Now the gods were assembled and sitting at the side of Zeus across the golden floor, and among them the goddess Hebe

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emerges from the textual process (see Pucci 1997.135 and de Man 1979). Though de Jong's analysis gives to the Narrator-Focalizer full authority and responsibility over the text, one could read her analysis as evidence that, in fact, both Narrator-Focalizer and Narratee are figures produced by the textual process, its linguistic structure.

6 Pucci 1997.31–48.

7 For the Near Eastern motif of the gods' assembly, see West 1997.177.

was pouring nektar, and they were pledging each other with the golden beakers, while gazing down at the city of the Trojans.” The emphasis on gold is traditional (here even the floor is golden) and underscores the “divine,” the “incorruptible” nature of the gods and their world. The distance and remoteness from the “human” world implicit in that emphasis contrast with their all-too-human ways of enjoying rounds of drinks (here the divine nektar), of pledging to each other, and of observing, as relaxed spectators, the duel between Paris and Menelaos.

The role of the gods as spectators of the human drama has often been emphasized by critics (Griffin 1978, Zervou 1998), without, however, sufficiently emphasizing the effect of mediation that the role of spectator produces for the extra-textual audience, the hearers and readers. For, of course, this extra-textual audience is also leisurely sitting and drinking, if the *Odyssey* gives us a realistic description of the setting in which the bard is singing (1.339–40, etc.), and observing, by means of the narrative, what is happening. Therefore the text implicitly induces the extra-textual audience (the Narratees) to receive the scene of the duel with pleasure, just as the gods do.

Yet during the preparation of the truce, and during the performance of the oaths and of the duel, Homer’s extra-textual audience is kept in complete ignorance of the divine will and therefore resembles the intra-textual spectators of the duel, who sit on the battlefield and, in 3.320ff., pray to Zeus for the death of the one who is responsible for the war. The poet draws a curtain around the Olympian spectators and actors, and he does not let us, his hearers and readers, see how this prayer is received by Zeus—as is usually the case; he suggests, therefore, that peace could be possible. But exceptionally and surprisingly, he had opened the curtain at line 302 when anonymous soldiers ask Zeus to punish the eventual breakers of the truce (298ff.),<sup>8</sup> and this time the poet tells us about Zeus’s reception of that prayer:

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8 The line οὐδ’ ἄρα πῶσφιν ἐπεκράαινε Κρονίων can be understood in two different ways: “the son of Kronos was not going to fulfill (their prayers) at all” or “not yet.” Some interpreters (Kirk 1985 among others), understand it in the latter way, and, of course, this interpretation saves Zeus’s dignity and consistency. But in order to interpret in this way, we must assume that the line refers to what is in the poet’s mind and that he is thinking of the capture of Troy. According to this assumption, then, the text would say that Zeus was not yet fulfilling the prayer for the fall of Troy. But this assumption is gratuitous: the line refers to the prayer of the Achaean and Trojan soldiers who pray for the punishment of the breakers of the oaths (3.298–301) and who, therefore, desire peace and not the capture of the city. It is also unmotivated and unclear why, at this point, the poet should think of the

Zeus will not fulfill it. We are induced to think that the breaking of the truce is possible. Here, for an instant, the extra-textual spectators (hearers/readers) identify with the gods, not only because they, like the gods, sit at leisure, but also because they know of this possibility. Yet, apart from this important exception, during the development of the duel, the poet draws a curtain around the Olympian spectators.

The ancient commentators were shocked by the pleasure the gods derive from observing the human drama. Griffin 1978.5–6 reports the words of the commentators who try to defend the gods' attitude by suggesting, for instance, that the gods take pleasure in noble things (γενναῖα ἔργα). But the commentators' moral and edifying concern obscures the real purposes of the gods' attitude. They are the intra-textual readers who effect a certain reading of the scene, first by assuring us of the truth of what is going on, secondly by inviting us *to see* the action as they see it and to be detached enough from it to enjoy it. For, in fact, pleasure is what the gods are experiencing (4.5–10a): “Abruptly, the son of Kronos tried to provoke (ἐρεθίζεμεν) Hera with mocking words (κερτομίοις ἐπέεσσι), speaking obliquely (παρὰβλήδην): ‘Two goddesses are helpers of Menelaos, Argive Hera, and Alalkomeneis Athene, and surely, while sitting apart, they are gazing down (at the duel) and taking pleasure (τέρπεσθον).’”

The words describing Zeus's mode of utterance, and therefore the intention behind the utterance itself, are not absolutely unambiguous and precise: while most readers take them to imply that Zeus provokes Hera with the hidden purpose of having her reject the peace and break the truce, others interpret differently the cutting mode of Zeus's utterance (see Martin 1989.29, Rousseau 1995). For indeed it is possible to understand that Zeus is aware that his alternative proposal to stop the war—which is in accordance with the truce—will be taken by Hera as a provocation and as a mockery or an insult.

Two very different theological interpretations are possible here: either Zeus is a cunning character who does not want to take upon himself the responsibility for breaking the truce, though he needs this to happen in order to carry out his βουλή, or he is making an honest deal with Hera, and, after this, he will yield to her as he does at other times.<sup>9</sup>

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capture of Troy. Furthermore the meaning of οὐδ' . . . πώ as “not at all” is confirmed four lines later, in 306.

9 The honest deal would imply, as Rousseau 1995 describes it, Hera's agreement that Zeus may destroy Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae: the destruction of these cities, interpreted

I leave this question open and underline instead the pleasure the two goddesses are said by Zeus to get from the spectacle. Τέρπειν is also the verb for the enjoyment derived from poetry, and it resonates even in the name of the Odyssean bard Phemius Terpsiades.<sup>10</sup> In the specular relationship that I am describing between the gods as spectators and the extra-textual audience, it is obvious that this audience is invited to agree with the two goddesses that the spectacle of the duel is pleasurable. It has been, in fact, a comic show.

Truly, Zeus's words may let us infer that he assumes that Hera and Athena get pleasure not simply from the whole event but especially from the victory of Menelaos because they love and support him. It is certainly a reasonable inference, and if Zeus emphasizes the goddesses' pleasure, he does so perversely or wisely, in order to bring out the paradox: Menelaos's victory that pleases the goddesses means the end of the war, a thing that displeases them. Probably the audience of the poem has the same worry or, at any rate, feels the same uncertainty about how things are going to continue.

Now Zeus distinguishes the attitudes of the two goddesses from that of Aphrodite (4.10b–12): "On the other hand, smiling Aphrodite stands always by Paris, and averts his death, and just now she saved him when he thought that he was going to die." Though the gods have seen Aphrodite rescuing Paris from the assault of Menelaos, they apparently have not glanced at Helen quarreling with the goddess and entering Paris's apartment with her. One explanation for this ignoring of Helen is that the episode between Helen and Aphrodite really occurs in between brackets, so to speak, outside the main action of the narrative. The two characters are even described as invisible when they cross the city to go to Paris's apartment. The whole episode seems to have been invented for its dramatic power and erotic lure.<sup>11</sup> It is remarkable that the gods toasting and watching the events

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metonymically, amounts to the destruction of the Heroic age as a consequence of the Trojan war, and this is the long-term βουλή of Zeus as it looms here and there in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*. This interpretation is subtle, but while the destruction of Troy is literal, that of the three Achaeian cities is only metonymical: an incongruence between the two destructions that, in my eyes, weakens Rousseau's ingenious argument.

10 See, for instance, *Od.* 12.188, etc. and Pucci 1987.196.

11 I have analyzed this whole episode in a paper "Prosopopée d' Hélène" to be soon published. Here I indicate the main points that sustain my assessment: (1) Iris comes to Helen and changes her frame of mind, turning her desire toward Menelaos and her lost family (3.139–40). Contrary to the strictest rule, no gods send her to Helen: she comes as

in Troy did not record this episode: does the poet know more than the gods? It seems so.

Zeus and the other gods see Aphrodite rescuing Paris, and Zeus accepts this as perfectly normal. He only remarks that Aphrodite is always at the side of Paris (παρμέμβλωκε),<sup>12</sup> as if this were a reasonable justification of her actions. There is a truce and a duel whose result must determine the end of the war, and, while all the gods are looking, Aphrodite saves the contender who caused the war and who earned the enmity of Zeus Xenios. But Zeus drinks with the other gods while gazing down at the rescue operation. The result of the duel becomes unclear (see Kirk 1985.330 on line 457). The scandal is not only that Zeus did nothing to stop Aphrodite, but also that he now finds that rescue unobjectionable, even pleasurable.

It seems that neither the gods nor the poet take this truce, its heavy ritual context, and the hopes it raised very seriously. Of course it is normal—and it is traditional—to expect that, in the course of a long war, attempts to end the war in the form proposed by Paris could occur (West 1997.214). This occasion gives the poet the opportunity to create a false expectation with its powerful dramatic suspense. He produces it, and, in order to obtain that suspense, he must draw a curtain around the divine spectators of Olympus and make their intentions unknown. Accordingly, we know nothing of what they think about this truce. He gives us only a one-line hint at 3.302 that Zeus will not punish the breakers of the sworn oaths. This line becomes staggeringly ironic when we learn that it is Zeus himself who gives Athena the task of breaking the truce (4.70ff.). The irony hinges on the blindness of the mortals who believe in Zeus's justice and/or in Zeus himself as a principled god.

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ἄγγελος (3.121) of her own message, just as Athena does in *Il.* 11.714–15. But Iris is elsewhere always the messenger of some god, of Zeus in particular. This breaking of the epic rules shows the occasionality of Iris's intervention. (2) Just when there is a pause in the fighting, Helen is presented weaving and depicting the battles that Achaeans and Trojans fought for her sake. She appears as the producer of an artistic work, and this reflects on the analogous work of the poet who includes her in his representation. Her beauty may also reflect the beauty of her work. (3) The purpose of Iris's intervention is to have Helen fully inclined toward Menelaos and heroically resisting Aphrodite's injunction to make love with Paris. On this scene, see Bergold 1977.

- 12 The only other example of this verb is to be found in a similar context at 24.73 to describe the constant presence of Thetis beside Achilles: a startling correspondence that sustains the remarks by Naas 1995.143 on the analogous turning to the self in Achilles and Paris.



We may explain Zeus's behavior by asserting either that he wants the war to go on or that Homeric gods do what they want and do not need to give explanations, but, before doing so, we have to assess the poem's narrative strategies. These strategies show one stratagem: the poet closes and opens the curtain behind which the gods comment and act depending on the emotional effects he wants to create in his hearers/readers, and he submits divine action to his poetic purposes. It is not that his gods become visible and active when they want but when he needs them to be so. He uses the gods' interventions and comments as mere devices of his poetics, even at the price of showing that the gods are completely cynical or incomprehensible. He had kept us in a certain tension during the duel as we experienced the emergence of hopes for the end of the war, but now he tells us that we, just like the gods, simply enjoyed the story. There was nothing to be afraid of with regard to the continuation of the poem, and none of the heroes has been hurt. It was good comedy after all.

We have to realize the difference between the extra-textual audience/readers and the divine spectators. We are hearing a story, they are gazing at an actual action that—this is the premise—they control and could alter.

With the mention of Paris and Aphrodite, the four characters of Paris's Judgment are singled out by Zeus and presented for the contemplation of the extra-textual audience. There is no doubt in my mind that an allusion to that judgment is already inescapable at this point (4.7–12). Kirk 1985 recognizes it at lines 32ff., where Zeus is made to ask Hera what great evils Priam and his people are doing to her to make her violently wish to ravage their city. Here, of course, the allusion is unavoidable. But Hera does not pick it up: she parades a pretext (4.26–28) for her rage. The only explicit mention of Paris's Judgment occurs at 24.25ff. (Reinhardt 1961) and is placed in a passage that describes the gods looking at Achilles' torture of Hector's body. It is apt that both the explicit mention of and the allusion to Paris's Judgment be ensconced in those passages where the gods' motivations for their feelings are exhibited. For, on the one hand, only they can know that this judgment produced those resentments, and, on the other hand, the poet can attribute such a frivolous reason as the beauty contest only to the gods themselves to justify their motivations for sharing responsibility in the tragic events.

Accordingly, Zeus, by evoking the different reactions of the three goddesses to Paris's arbitration and, later (4.32ff.), by ironically asking Hera

what are the great evils that Priam and his people do to her, alludes to the story of Paris's Judgment, an event that men do not know or refuse to mention. In this way, another ironic streak tinges the narrative, an irony that hits the gods in their frivolity.

In the analysis of the first twelve lines of the fourth book, we have recognized that the text handles its gods as the intra-textual "mediators" of the extra-textual audience; it uses their divine, unobjectionable comments or the gods' absence to steer the audience towards the feelings the text desires to produce. In this way, the function the gods play in the text is to serve or sustain one of the poetic purposes of the text, that of being so authoritative, pleasing, and exciting that no audience would want to stop listening or reading. The pleasure the gods here and elsewhere take in the spectacle of the battles turns out to intimate the poet's ambition about the effects his poetry should produce.

Twice the text underlines the irony implicit in the gods' behavior. This irony is a literary effect before being a religious comment. For irony issues from a careful reading of the linguistic means that produce it, an implicit reference to line 302 of the third book, and from an allusion to an unmentioned but famous mythical story. Irony therefore exhibits the text in the processes of its manufacture, it emphasizes the distance the text takes from the objects toward which it is ironic, leaving in the realm of the implicit (of the non-told) a judgment or a comment. This distance and this implicitness leave us wondering about the non-sensical sense or the sensible nonsense of the text's gods.<sup>13</sup> If, for mortals, it makes sense that the gods be incomprehensible, only poetics, i.e., the representation that prepares men for that arbitrary mastery of the gods, makes some sense. Poetic writing invites its hearers/readers to feel pleasure at a scene that presents the nonsense of divine behavior. Pleasure in the representation of the duel, but also pleasure in the ironic and sarcastic effects the text produces with these gods, actors of a *comédie noire*. By this amused gaze upon the seriousness of such a theology (the incomprehensibility of the gods), the text should prevent us from feeling a sort of tragic despair for the scandal of the "divine," and

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13 I borrow some expressions from the superb paper by Lynn-George 1996 on the "structure of care" in the *Iliad*. He writes that the gods make sense in not making sense, for, in so far as the work of the gods is incomprehensible to men, it makes sense of the divine inscrutable nature (p. 7). Morrison 1997.273–96 beautifully illustrates the contradictory forces of fate and free will in the case of Zeus, underlining the dramatic suspense, the heightening of the unexpected solutions, that this contradiction produces.

induce us, instead, to accommodate its incomprehensibility into the logic and the pleasure of the narrative that must go on.<sup>14</sup>

There are many other cases in which the gods are shown to enjoy battles and carnage, and Griffin 1978 has recorded them. I select the episode in the twentieth book where Zeus declares to the assembled gods that he will stay on the fold of Olympus, sitting there (ἵμενος) and, by watching the battles, will please and delight his heart (ἐνθ' ὁρώων φρένα τέρψομαι, 20.23). He invites the gods to go down and mingle in the battle; his declared purpose is to prolong the war since Achilles in his fury would easily, against destiny, storm the Trojan fortress (20.22ff.). This explicit purpose indeed magnifies the heroic performance of Achilles and his uniqueness. Once again the god declares that he will be sitting, and the verb used to describe his enjoyment is τέρπειν.

Critics have tried to reduce Zeus's cynicism by an appropriate reading: it has been suggested that he is getting pleasure mainly from watching the fighting gods, as is stated explicitly at 21.388–90, and it has been noted that Zeus in our passage at line 21 says: "I am concerned with them, though they perish."<sup>15</sup> This elusive expression induces critics to include men fighting as the object of Zeus's delight (Griffin 1978: "Zeus takes pleasure in watching [men] struggling"). Here Zeus anticipates the feeling of pleasure that he expects from the battle of the gods, and, of course, this declaration functions as a mediation for the extra-textual audience. If Zeus himself will get pleasure in watching the battle that he is preparing, if he cares in that paradoxical way about new victims and will enjoy the view of them, certainly readers and listeners of the narrative cannot be expected to have a different reaction. They, too, will sit and listen with delight to the splendid description that follows. Zeus's statement might suggest that the description of that battle is a mere farce.<sup>16</sup>

Of course the assembled gods do not only watch the events with the eagerness and the comments of theatrical spectators, they also are prompted

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14 The theological thrust of the *Iliad* could consist in Zeus's long-term plan (βουλή) to destroy the Heroic Race. In view of this plan, our scene would make perfect sense. But the *Iliad* never gives any serious reason for this plan. Here, as we have seen, the destruction of Troy is motivated only by Hera's hatred. Even this theology ends in some form of incomprehensibility.

15 Lynn-George 1996.7 paraphrases with: "They concern me even in their destruction."

16 Burkert 1985.122: "The gods . . . join battle with one another, but this is no more than a harmless farce."

by the events to act. There are three episodes in which Zeus is shown to propose a certain alternative, implying the saving of lives, but Hera rejects those alternatives and Zeus yields to her. These episodes can be regarded as, to some extent, “typical” (with repetition of formulaic motifs) or, to use the terminology of J. M. Foley, to have an “immanent and traditional referentiality.”<sup>17</sup> Each of these scenes therefore looks at the others, each acquires over-determined meaning by means of the reciprocal references.

We encounter the first scene at the beginning of the fourth book as Zeus provokes Hera with the remark that since the victory is with Menelaos, the gods must consider whether they should stir up war again or bring in friendship and peace. Hera and Athena are angry at the sheer possibility of peace, and Hera spells out her wrath (4.25ff.): αἰνότηατε Κρονίδη, ποῖον τὸν μῦθον ἔειπες, “Terrible son of Kronos what sort of thing have you said?” This line is used six times by Hera (1.552, 4.25, 8.462, 14.330, 16.440, and 18.361), always to reproach Zeus for one of his decisions or wishes; but sometimes this reproach does not move Zeus (see, e.g., 1.552ff., 8.462ff.) so that the audience, at the utterance of this line, does not know whether Zeus will or not yield. But there is a line that produces an expected reaction from the audience, when Hera says (4.29): “Do it then, but we, all the rest of the gods, will not praise you,” the audience knows that Zeus is going to yield, since when this line appears (twice in Hera’s rebukes [4.29, 16.443] and once in Athena’s rebuke [22.181]), Zeus always yields and either follows the goddesses’ advice or leaves them free to act against his wishes.

Because of this over-determination of the line at 4.29, the audience knows, even before listening to Zeus’s own motivations, that he is going to yield. In fact he presents no motivations at all, but strikes a deal with Hera: the destruction of Troy in exchange for the destruction of three Achaean cities, Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae. The deal concluded, Athena descends to Troy and arranges the breaking of the truce by persuading Pandaros to shoot Menelaos.

Zeus strikes this deal “with an unwilling heart” (4.43) because Troy is a pious city, as he says. He is chained into a paradoxical contradiction just as when he will say (20.21): “I am concerned with them, though they perish.” This repeated insoluble paradox, while indexing his incompre-

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17 Foley in Bakker and Kahane 1997.66. In my work, I call this referentiality a “textual referentiality,” by which I mean the “over-determination of meaning” of the epic “words”—exactly what Foley calls the “value-added meaning” or metonymical meaning.

hensibility for us, does not bestow upon Zeus any tragic quality or stature, for it is presented in the frame of a dark comedy of mockery and deals. Possibly this is the way for the poet to combine in his anthropomorphic Zeus both the unmovable rigor of fate and the careful heart of a god: the theological side of this combination remains inscrutable, but the representation produces a vivid image of a cynical, aggressive deal-maker who suppresses his heart's best intentions.

During the harsh exchange, Zeus emphasizes the enormity of Hera's wrath by saying that she would cure her rage only by eating Priam and his children raw (4.35–36). Since elsewhere only mortals are so described (for instance, Hecabe at 24.212f.), Zeus presents a debasing, unedifying image of Hera.

It is often said by critics that this entire scene (4.1–84) has the purpose of moving the action forward.<sup>18</sup> This is undeniable: the question that arises is whether the poet could not have invented a less rough and scandalous contrivance than this one. The implicit reference to line 3.302, an ironic comment on Zeus's breaking of the truce when mortals expect him to punish those who commit that sin, the ironic allusion to Paris's Judgment that debases Hera's motivations, the sarcasm of equating Hera to a desperate and enraged mortal mother, Zeus's giving in, and, finally, Athena's exploit that no "double motivation" theory can convincingly explain,<sup>19</sup> depict a trivial, cynical comedy that defaces the serious dilemma and decision between war or peace. Should we think of an intended criticism of the gods? Perhaps not. Comedy, even divine comedy, is pleasurable, and battles give pleasure to the gods and to the extra-textual audience: so let them not stop.

In the sixteenth book, Zeus declares to Hera that he would like to save the life of his dearest son Sarpedon. Hera reproaches him for his wish to save a man from his destiny, using the same lines we have seen in the fourth book (4.25 = 16.440 and 4.29 = 16.443: "We, all the rest of the gods, will not praise you"). As a consequence, the audience knows already that Zeus will give in.

The text cunningly prompts the readers' deduction that Zeus could save Sarpedon from his destiny if Hera and the other gods were in agreement. Yet this concession is only superficial: the readers know that Zeus

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18 "So that the action can move forward, the poet has to contrive a breaking of the truce that obtains between the Achaeans and the Trojans," West 1997.358.

19 On some divine "psychic interventions" that Lesky's theory fails persuasively to explain, see Pucci 1997.194ff.

cannot change man's destiny of death (Janko 1992.3–4). Accordingly, Zeus desists from his desire, lets his son die, and “weeps tears of blood that fall to the ground” (16.459).<sup>20</sup> Here the extravagant and sublime pity of the god (16.431) functions as a mediating example that induces the audience's pity. The *Iliad* does not grant immortality to any of its heroes. The pain for this death can only be measured by the immensity of the divine pathos, its sublime and yet also gratuitous expression.

I say sublime and gratuitous because of the complex tension that the episode triggers. The god enhances the significance of Sarpedon's heroic death. Here, as in many cases of divine activity, the text creates a scene, raises a curtain in the middle of the human action, and suspends it. The characters are unaware of what happens behind that curtain. Only we listeners and readers are privileged with this view; only we are invited to share the knowledge the Muses give to the poet; only we are allowed to witness the pity Zeus feels because of human destiny. All this may dazzle us and blind us to what the text may otherwise invite us to reflect upon. For the text contrives a cheap trick whereby Zeus is shown to be capable of changing Sarpedon's destiny if he wanted, but declines this power because of Hera's line (16.443: “We, all the rest of the gods, will not praise you,” with its unappealable motivation:<sup>21</sup> men are mortal). This trick only illustrates the need the poet feels to hide Zeus's impotence; for Zeus's impotence could mean the impotence of the whole theological machinery to change an iota in the condition of the heroes and, accordingly, to make his presence and activity useless.

But if Zeus plans the demise of the heroic race, and runs through this task without any compromise, why is he made to feel pity? From the theological point of view, this pity leads to the incomprehensibility of the divine, to its non-tragic paradox. For the *Iliad* never explains the necessity or the purpose of Zeus's plan. So, while god is incomprehensible for men, in this absence of sense, the poet builds strong drama, embellishes Sarpedon's death, and makes the extra-textual audience feel and share Zeus's pity, not

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20 See Burkert 1985.60 for the ritual of pouring blood on earth in honor of the dead.

21 At 4.29, Hera's line implied that the gods would not approve of the establishment of peace between the contenders since they want the destruction of Troy. In that passage, therefore, the line is not involved in the question of human mortality. But at 22.181, the same line does concern the inevitable mortality of men. Perhaps, therefore, by metonymic transfer, the line could index both the necessary mortality of men and the necessary destruction of the city they are defending.

reflect on Zeus's incomprehensibility. Again the "literary," by building its own effects upon the "theological" (in the sense of non-sense), uses it and downgrades it. The whole scene has a strong pathetic purpose, and the poet liked it so much that he repeated it for the episode of Hector's death.

As has been often remarked, the duel between Hector and Achilles occurs on a sort of theatrical stage on which the two warriors, running around the city, produce the action while the Trojans on the walls and the Achaeans in the field observe like spectators. All gods, too, (πάντες, 22.166) are looking at this extraordinary spectacle. As Richardson comments, they are like spectators at a sporting event. They discuss the outcome, and they are involved in what is going on—like the quarrel between spectators of the horserace at 23.448–98 (Richardson 1993.125–26). Of course they act as focalizers or mediators of readers' attitudes, tensions, and participation. Accordingly, when Zeus begins the talk with a lamenting expression (22.168f.): "ὦ πόποι, he is a dear man (φίλον), the one I see with my eyes pursued around the walls! My heart is distressed," how can the heart of the reader not feel the same pity and sympathy for Hector?<sup>22</sup>

Just as in the case of Sarpedon, Zeus asks the other gods whether Hector should be saved from death, but just as Hera reproaches him in the fourth book and in the sixteenth book, so now Athena, using some of the same lines, reproaches Zeus for his willingness to disregard the human destiny (αἴσα) to which mortals are bound.<sup>23</sup> Zeus again gives up and encourages Athena to pursue her plan (22.183–85).<sup>24</sup>

Here, too, Zeus's feeble proposal has the theological and dramatic purposes we have analyzed in the previous passage. On the one hand, the text must suggest that Zeus has the power to save and destroy as he deems best, otherwise he would not be a credible cause and inspirer of the whole

22 This point is rightly emphasized by de Romilly 1997.151: "on ne saurait mieux preparer notre pitié." Kullmann 1956.87 connects Zeus's pity with the *do ut des* principle of folk religion, for indeed Zeus praises Hector for his constant sacrificial practice.

23 At line 181, Athena repeats the formula we have already encountered twice: "Do it then, but we, all the rest of the gods, will not praise you." Why is Athena intervening instead of Hera? Possibly for economy of narrative: she is the one who often acts in the name of Hera and here she is made to act directly with the approval of Zeus. In this passage, the line unambiguously refers to the law of human mortality.

24 Taplin 1992.238 notes among the differences between Sarpedon's scene and Hector's scene that Hector was "dear" (168), while Sarpedon was φίλτατος ("very dear," 16.433), and that Zeus pays no attention to the question of Hector's burial—which will become a major issue—while he takes care to plan a burial that is φίλος for Sarpedon.

Trojan adventure. On the other, he must go through his βουλή, as it is announced at 15.50ff. and elsewhere, that consists in the capture of Troy by the Achaeans (15.71–72).<sup>25</sup>

Here at 22.178ff., just as at 16.440ff., mortal man is said to be long-since destined to his lot (αἶσα, “fate,” “destiny”). What is this fate of Hector? It seems that it is his personal destiny attached to him from his birth. It cannot be identical to the will of the gods, since the gods refuse Zeus’s proposal to save Hector by simply referring to his mortal destiny (αἶσα). On the other hand, we hear of a destiny of Hector at 22.5 when the text explains that “the fateful μοῖρα shackled Hector to remain” outside the walls. Is it the same lot, though in this case called μοῖρα? So how could Zeus save him from this *fateful* μοῖρα? Indetermination and over-determination often mark the relationship between μοῖρα and Zeus, adding still more incomprehensibility.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, the dramatic effect of Zeus’s proposal is to make Hector’s destiny a matter of concern for all the Olympians, and therefore to give a sense of the metaphysical vastness of his human fate.

This dramatic effect is enhanced by the scene of the weighing of the scales through whose visual enactment Hector’s doom receives a sort of objective necessity.<sup>27</sup> As the scales turn against Hector, Apollo abandons his favorite to his doom, and Athena, free to pursue her plan, descends to earth to help Achilles and cheat Hector. The differences between this divine intervention and that of Apollo against Patroclus are many, but one is particularly significant: suddenly the dear man, loved by Apollo and by Zeus, is abandoned. The protection Hector used to have is over. The poet makes tough and poignant for the reader Athena’s successful deception by

25 See Pucci 2000. As Morrison 1997.283 writes, prophesying the future introduces inflexibility of plan instead of openness.

26 In Sarpedon’s episode, first Zeus anticipates his son’s death (16.63–71) and then, at the moment of the action, Zeus ponders a last minute rescue (Morrison 1997.286).

27 Taplin 1992.239 considers that the scales’ outcome does not represent a decision by a higher power: “The outcome is already settled beyond doubt by Achilles’ prowess and passion, by divine determination, and for the audience—though not for the characters—by the whole shape of the narrative. The scales do not decide *who* will win, but show *when* Achilles will win.”

For de Romilly, the scales are “un marque de la solemnité du moment prévu de tout temps, mais enfin arrivé. La balance a moins un rôle métaphysique qu’un rôle littéraire et dramatique” (1997.118–19). Morrison 1997 sees that, as soon as the weighing on the scales is performed, Zeus can no longer express any personal will.



calling it κερδοσύνη (“cunning,” “beguilement,” 22.247).<sup>28</sup> She assures Achilles that she will be at his side and that together they will “carry off great glory for the Achaeans” (22.216–17).<sup>29</sup> Then she comes to Hector in the disguise of his brother Deiphobos and promises him assistance, especially in providing him the necessary spears to fight (22.226–46). When the fight begins, Achilles throws his spear in vain, but Athena retrieves it for Achilles. When Hector, after his throw, asks Deiphobos to retrieve his spear, nobody, of course, responds.<sup>30</sup>

At this point, as Hector calls to Deiphobos, who is nowhere, he understands that he has been cheated by Athena (Achilles has mentioned her at 22.270): in a heroic soliloquy, he realizes that his moment to face death has come and that the gods who usually protected him have abandoned him: “Now evil death is close to me, nor is it afar or avoidable: long ago this was dear to Zeus and to Zeus’s child the Archer who, benevolent, protected me before. Now fate (μοῖρα) has reached me. Not without struggle let me die, and not without glory, but having done a great deed for future men to know” (22.300–05).

There is little to add to these famous lines many times commented upon. Formally, critics have noticed the novelty or singularity of the language of the whole passage 297–305,<sup>31</sup> but I underline only the last two lines where ἀσπουδί γε καὶ ἀκλειῶς (“not without struggle and not without glory”) is a unique combination of words in the *Iliad*<sup>32</sup> and μέγα ῥέξας is another singular expression composed from conventional material (10.282, etc.). By this double litotes “not without struggle and not without glory,” Hector modestly raises his deed to a sublime height, a heroic expression unrivalled in all of Homer.

28 This word is a hapax in the *Iliad*, though it is found twice in the *Odyssey*: 4.251 and 14.31.

29 The togetherness is emphasized by the use of the dual *vōt* (216). This collaboration is so much felt by both Achilles and Athena that the deed of slaying Hector is often attributed, even by Achilles himself, to Athena; see 22.270–71 where Achilles tells Hector: “But soon Pallas Athena will vanquish you by my spear” and compare 22.379, 22.445–46, etc. But there is no consistency, see 22.335 and 22.55.

30 The guile of the goddess “has always disturbed Homer’s readers; bT comments that it is inappropriate (ἄτοπον) that a goddess should deceive Hector. But the Homeric gods regularly use deception to bring doom, as in the case of ἄτη” (Richardson 1993.130). Puech, *L’Iliade d’Homère* 278–79 recognizes that, for the poet, “une belle ruse lui semblait aussi admirable qu’un bel acte de courage, qu’elle fut imaginée par un dieu ou par un homme.”

31 See Taplin 1992.242, Richardson 1993.

32 The two words are individually found in some Iliadic passages: see, for ἀσπουδί, 8.512, 15.476, and for ἀκλεές, 12.318, 7.100, and *Odyssey* 1.42, 4.728, 14.371.

The content, too, is extraordinary, even from the point of view from which we are analyzing this episode, the point of view of textual consciousness. For at this point when Hector realizes that he has been abandoned by his gods, when he faces “evil death” in an absolute theological void, at this point the poet himself comes to his assistance and communicates to him an awareness of the immortality of his glorious gesture. Though sometimes it is a divinity that grants glory to the hero, here divinity has abandoned him; accordingly, the poet intervenes not to provide Hector with glory itself<sup>33</sup> but with the awareness that his gesture will acquire immortal glory through the song of the poets. Homer gives Hector consciousness of Homer’s own poetics, and has Hector dying in accordance with that poetics.

The will of Zeus, his intention to save Hector or to destroy him with Ilion, the gods’ constant care, love, and hatred for the heroes, and their divine presence at the battles, all this theology vanishes before the real factor that creates, shapes, and sustains the entire Iliadic fabric, i.e., the poetic thrust to gather the voices of the heroes as they speak and reflect on their own death and the glory that will ensue (Sarpedon: 12.328, Achilles: 18.98ff, Hector: 22.304–05).<sup>34</sup> The incomprehensibility of the gods does not touch the staggering power of Hector’s awareness, of his solitude before the realization that he is writing, by dying, his own song.

Even if the poet announces the story of how Troy or the Heroic Race fell because of the will (βουλή) of Zeus, he knows that he enters the void, the desert left by Zeus, and fills it with his song. He creates that void to install in it his funeral poem. And he wins because he himself, like his own heroes, is aware of the immortality of their voices, above and beyond the ruin that Zeus plans for the Heroic Race. The gods therefore are not the masters of the heroes’ destiny but the servants of the heroes’ poetic destiny.<sup>35</sup>

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33 Recognizing the emergence of κλέος at this point, Taplin 1992.243 writes: “In a sense, the success, the κλέος that he [Hector] wins at the moment of his failure, is confirmed every time that the *Iliad* is heard or read.”

34 This poetics is summarized in the formula that Homeric song provides κλέος (“glory”) to the heroes: see Nagy 1979, Pucci 1997.224–30. There I analyze the problems of the notion of κλέος: its double meaning (“reputation” and “rumor, gossip”), its weak power of compensation for the heroes themselves, and the condescension that it implies from the poet.

35 I have touched on the ambivalent sense of κλέος at the beginning of this paper, and I refer to my 1997 book pp. 224–30. On the return of the divine stage in the great scene of reconciliation of the twenty-fourth book, see Lynn-George 1996.