



The Independent Heroes of the Iliad

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THE INDEPENDENT HEROES OF THE *ILIAD*

MY objective in this paper is to consider the question of the mysteriousness or numinosity of the gods in the *Iliad* by examining first how heroes talk about and react to the gods, and second how Homer handles fate. My aim is to integrate the findings into a wider thesis about the *Iliad*'s narrative strategy.¹

Griffin (1980) 152 discusses the mysteriousness and numinosity of Homeric gods, and cites *Il.* i 43-52, *Od.* iii 371-82, xix 33-42, saying 'It is perhaps worth emphasising that in each of these ... episodes, we see not only the god behaving like a real god, mysteriously, but also the characters who are present at the moment of revelation responding to it in what can only be called a religious way: adoration or reverent silence'. My point is very simple. This is not how the heroes themselves *talk* about the gods, nor (in the *Iliad* at any rate, I believe) is it how they *react* to them. To summarise my broad conclusions: when heroes talk about the gods, they talk of their power and their unpredictability. When they react to the gods, they do so as if they were reacting to very powerful humans, who may be friends or enemies. I see no indication anywhere in the *Iliad* of the heroes either talking about or reacting to the gods reverently, as if they regarded them as mysterious, numinous, venerable beings.² This, of course, is not to

¹ Two referees have acutely pointed out problems with the method. First, the work of Irene de Jong (1987) has blurred the crude distinction I wish to maintain between 'what humans say' and 'what the poet says'. Second, (here I quote the other referee) 'I would wish that the .. distinction between what "Homer" says and what "his heroes" say was qualified with reference to the variables of emphasis and projection ... sometimes it does not matter "who is talking" (because it hardly impinges on us). At other times it does impinge and it does matter'. To the first, I think I must say that if de Jong's work invalidates my thesis, so be it. I cannot see myself that it does. To the second, I think the weight of evidence for what I am arguing is so overwhelming as to override the 'variables of emphasis and projection' (which do, of course, exist). In other words, the heroes' view of the gods is so consistent throughout the poem that such variables, in this case, do not add up to enough to disturb the general thesis.

I refer to the following works by name and date: J.S. Clay, *The wrath of Athena* (Princeton 1983); I.J.F. de Jong, *Narrators and focalizers: the presentation of the story in the Iliad* (Amsterdam 1987); M.W. Edwards, *Homer, poet of the Iliad* (Johns Hopkins 1987); J. Griffin, *Homer on life and death* (Oxford 1980); A. Heubeck, S. West and J.B. Hainsworth, *A commentary on Homer's Odyssey vol. 1 introduction and books i-viii* (Clarendon 1988); J.B. Hainsworth, *The Iliad: a commentary vol. iii books 9-12* (Cambridge 1993); R. Janko, *The Iliad: a commentary vol. iv books 13-16* (Cambridge 1992); P.V. Jones, *Homer: Odyssey 1 and 2* (Aris and Phillips 1991); O. Jørgensen, 'Das Auftreten der Götter in den Büchern τ-μ der Odyssee', *Hermes* xxxix (1904) 357-82; G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: a commentary vol. i books 1-4* (Cambridge 1985); G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: a commentary vol. ii books 5-8* (Cambridge 1990); J.V. Morrison, *Homeric misdirection* (Ann Arbor 1992); M. Mueller, *The Iliad* (London 1984); S. Richardson, *The Homeric narrator* (Nashville 1990); T. Rihll, 'The power of the Homeric βασιλεις', in J. Pinsent and H.V. Hurt (eds), *Homer 1987* (Papers of the Third Greenbank Colloquium April 1987, *Liverpool Classical Papers* no.2), (Liverpool 1992) 39-50; R.B. Rutherford, 'Tragic form and feeling in the *Iliad*', *JHS* cii (1982) 145-60; A. E. Samuel, *The promise of the west* (Routledge 1988); S.L. Schein, *The mortal hero* (Berkeley 1984); M.S. Silk, *Homer: the Iliad* (Cambridge 1987); O.P. Taplin, *Homeric soundings* (Oxford 1992); W.G. Thalmann, *Conventions of form and thought in early Greek epic poetry* (Baltimore 1984); M.M. Willcock, *The Iliad of Homer books 1-12* (Macmillan 1978). All otherwise unmarked references are to the Oxford text of the *Iliad*. I am extremely grateful to Professor Alan Sommerstein and the *JHS* referees for their help, as I am to M.M. Willcock (University College London) and David West (University of Newcastle upon Tyne), who submitted an early draft of this paper to a searching *ἔλεγχος*, from which it emerged battered but considerably improved.

² The distinction that Homer maintains between his full, privileged understanding of events (expressed in the narrative) and human, partial understanding (expressed in what characters say) has been investigated by Jørgensen (1904), cf. Clay (1983) 1-25, Richardson (1990) 123-39, R.B. Rutherford, 'The philosophy of the *Odyssey*', *JHS* cvi (1986) 153 n. 43, M. Winterbottom, 'Speaking of the gods', *G&R* xxxvi no. 1 (1989) 33-41. Cf. the well-known phenomenon of human and divine proper names for the same thing (see e.g. Kirk [1985] on *Il.* i 403-4). de Jong (1987) 214 puts the case for the sort of analysis I wish to make as follows: 'when analysing divine interventions in the *Il.* one should distinguish systematically between the presentation and interpretation of NF₁ [i.e. the poet] and of the speaking characters. Differences between the two versions should not be ascribed, I think, to differences in religious belief or concepts between NF₁ and characters, but to a difference in narrative competence (the NF₁ is omniscient and knows more than the characters) or rhetorical situation' (here de Jong gives the example of Paris wishing to excuse his defeat vis-à-vis Helen). Taplin (1992) 129 says 'The Iliadic gods are a mixture of awesome

deny that when Homer as narrator describes the gods, he may invest them with these glamorous qualities.³ But it is not the way his humans talk about them.

At the same time, I would like to raise a general question mark (no more) over the application of such terms as 'whim', 'the irrational', 'the inexplicable' to the heroes' understanding of (that is, what the heroes say about) the gods. While the heroes are always saying the gods are unpredictable, I do not think it is nit-picking to assert that that is not the same as saying that they are whimsical or irrational.⁴ The National Lottery and football pools are unpredictable, but they are not irrational, even if one fails to understand how they work.

I. TWO SCENES AT THE START OF THE *ILIAD*

At the start of the *Iliad*, Apollo inflicts a plague on the Greek camp for the insult done to his priest Chryses. Achilles knows plagues come from Apollo (i 64) and proposes action. Calchas confirms Apollo is angry and says Chryses' daughter must be returned (i 93-100). She is, with appropriate sacrifices (i 430-49), and Apollo is appeased (i 456-7). As a rational sequence of events in the eyes of those engaged in them, this is unimpeachable.⁵ Everyone knows why the plague has happened. Appropriate action is taken and it ends. The god is seen as one who acts not randomly or mysteriously, but rationally. Humans therefore can analyse the problem correctly and come up with the solution. Indeed, we are close to magic here—'the art of influencing the course of events by compelling the agency of spiritual beings' (*SOED*)—only Homer suppresses the magical, and emphasises the rational. There is divine grandeur here, of course—Apollo's descent like night, the scenes of sacrifice, and so on. But such grandeur is evident in narrative, not speech.⁶

At i 188-222, Athena comes down from heaven at Hera's behest to prevent Achilles killing Agamemnon (i 195-6). As he is drawing his sword, she seizes him by the hair from behind (no one else sees this, Homer tells us - i 198). Achilles is amazed (he has just felt his hair pulled),⁷

power and quarrelsome pettiness, reflected in ethics by their mixture of roles as guarantors of justice and as amoral self-seekers'. The question I wish to clarify is 'in whose eyes?'

³ Compare, for example, v 719-52, viii 41-77, xiii 17-31, xiv 346-51, xvi 431-61, 644-93, xvii 441-55, xviii 478-613 (and cf. Schein [1984] 51-2). See also e.g. oaths and sacrifice at n. 6, and the miracles on p.111. One may argue about the precise extent to which these passages demonstrate divine glamour and majesty (as a referee pointed out); but that humans never talk in these terms goes without saying.

⁴ So, e.g. 'In the context of a society over which the Olympian gods rule, Achilles is pursuing an almost hopeless task...human success or failure can only be attributed to the whims or wills of the gods, fate, or both' (Samuel [1988] 45). '[The gods] function as a higher power, and provide an explanation of otherwise inexplicable events' (Edwards [1987] 125). 'For the human characters in the *Il.*, irrational evil comes from the gods' (Edwards [1987] 128, though he goes on to point out that for the poet, these evils are not irrational 'if one believe in gods like these'). I stress that these quotations are selected to serve my purpose: they are not supposed to characterise the whole picture of divine activity discussed in these works, which are extremely valuable and on which I shall draw in the course of this paper. I am obviously more in sympathy with e.g. Silk (1987) 30 and Mueller (1984) 125-33.

⁵ Mueller (1984) 126 is aware of the reasonableness of the interaction between men and gods: when a god intervenes, 'the outcome is always an action that is perfectly intelligible in human terms.'

⁶ Other sacrifices and oath-ceremonies are referred to with more or less elaboration at e.g. ii 305-7, 402-31, iii 268-301, iv 44-9, viii 548, ix 357, xi 726, 771, xxiv 33, 65-70. If I were to argue against my thesis, I would concentrate on passages like these, especially where the heroes call on the gods to witness oaths and curses. It is only here that I, at any rate, get any sense of the gods' numinous majesty expressed in a human's words, e.g. ii 402-18, iii 267-301, ix 453-7, 561-72, xix 257-68. Nevertheless, the ritual context of such passages is very strongly marked. This is special language for special events (cf. M. Leumann, *Homerische Wörter* [Basel 1950] 22-23). In Homer, such language is restricted to ritual occasions.

⁷ A referee points out that Achilles' amazement may not be due to this, comparing e.g. iii 398 and iv 97 where the way the divinity looks to the human is enough to create ὄμβρος (cf. N.J. Richardson, *Homeric hymn to Demeter* [Oxford 1974] 188-90, though he does not deal with this passage). But at i 199, as the poet makes crystal clear, Achilles has not yet seen Athena because she approached him from behind. All he has done is felt her tugging his hair.

turns round and recognises the goddess by her glowing eyes (she is, after all, γλαυκῶπις)⁸ (i 199-200). They discuss the situation, Achilles agrees to restrain himself in return for eventual compensation, replaces his sword, and Athena goes back to Olympus. Achilles' opening words to Athena hardly express reverent adoration: 'You see what Agamemnon has done to me? He'll pay for it'. He may have been amazed when he felt his hair being pulled, but no such feeling registers when he sees the goddess. He sheathes his sword only when Athena has given him a firm promise of compensation for Agamemnon's insult. This is not the attitude of a man who is overwhelmed by the divine presence. Nor does Athena speak like someone who is used to commanding men's unquestioning obedience: observe her polite αἴ κε πίθηαι (207) and πείθεο δ' ἡμῖν (214). As Willcock (1978) on i 207 remarks 'The goddess can advise but she does not compel: the decision and the responsibility remain with Achilles'.⁹

This scene is unquestionably impressive and thoroughly divine in character (those shining eyes at i 200). Griffin is surely right to reject the argument that the passage is 'little more than a figure of speech' for a change of heart in Achilles (Griffin [1980] 158-60). But what numinosity there is in the passage lies in the narrator's scene-setting, not in what his characters say.

It is remarkable, in fact, how characters respond when they come, or think they might have come, face-to-face with divinities: they might as well be facing very powerful humans. At iii 399-412 Helen with a passionate outburst refuses to do what Aphrodite has asked of her—even, surely ironically, addressing Aphrodite as δαίμονίη at 399 (see Kirk [1985] *ad loc.*). She has to be threatened into obeying (414-17). At v 180-91, Pandarus wonders whether it really is Diomedes he has been shooting at (181), or whether it is Diomedes protected by a god (185-6), or a god (183). From the way he talks, it seems all the same to him: his only reaction is to vow to smash his bow if ever he gets home (212-16). At v 433 Diomedes sees clearly that Apollo is protecting Aeneas, but still attacks him: he desists only when Apollo calls on him to retreat, which he does—a little (τυτθὸν ὀπίσσω—v 440-3). Griffin (1980) 155 is right to remark on the grandeur of Apollo's rebuke: my interest is in Diomedes' cool reaction. He is not even afraid of the god, merely careful to avoid (ἀλευόμενος) his wrath (*cf.* Silk [1987] 87). In v 596-606, Diomedes observes that Hector has Ares with him. He shivers and stops, baffled, like a man unable to cross a seething river, and then calls on the Greeks to retreat in orderly fashion—there is no taking on the gods in combat.¹⁰ At v 800-824, Athena rebukes Diomedes for not being as good as his father Tydeus. Diomedes answers that he is merely following her instructions. See, for further examples, vii 43-53, xi 195-213, xiv 361-87, xv 236-62, xvi 513-31 (where Glaucus at least has the grace to recognise the god and rejoice [γῆθησεν] when Apollo hears his prayer and heals his wound), xvii 326-431, xviii 169-201, xxi 284-300. Had these encounters not been with gods but with humans, there would have been nothing remarkable about the exchange of views expressed.¹¹

⁸ If this is what γλαυκῶπις means: *cf.* e.g. Kirk (1985) on i 200.

⁹ A referee draws my attention to Zeus's 'compulsion' of Achilles at xxiv 116, expressed in the same way. This is how gods and humans frequently interact in the *Il.*. Rihl (1992) 46 argues strongly that power is negotiable in the *Il.*: 'neither Zeus nor Agamemnon have an unchallenged right to command' and need to adopt different tactics (from bluster to persuasion) to get their way.

¹⁰ A referee adds v 407, where Dione tells Aphrodite how foolish Diomedes is to fight the gods—that man does not live long—and vi 128-41, where Diomedes informs Glaucus that he will not fight with him if he is a god.

¹¹ Even this analogy has its weaknesses. I can find, for example, only seven places where humans fear the gods (iii 418, v 827, 863, ix 244, xx 380, xxi 248, xxiv 170) and four where they fear Zeus's thunderbolt (vii 479, viii 77, 138, xvii 594-96). I discount xiii 624, xxiv 358, 689. As for humans fearing humans, I gave up counting when I reached fifty examples. Again, the heroes rarely acknowledge the gods even when their prayers are answered. They sometimes rejoice, like Glaucus at xvi 530-1 or Achilles at xxii 224 (though note that at xxii 393 Achilles claims the victory was all his doing), but more often than not they carry on without any acknowledgement at all, e.g. Ajax at xvii 645-55. A notable exception is x 570-1.

II. THREE MIRACLES

(i) iii 369-447: Aphrodite rescues Paris from death at Menelaus' hands, and carries him off to deposit him in Helen's bedroom. Aphrodite then summons Helen to join him. Menelaus searches in vain for his vanished opponent. The breaking of Paris's chin strap (iii 375) is assigned by the poet to Aphrodite but it is capable of a natural explanation and Menelaus is not surprised by it. He nonchalantly lobs the empty helmet into the crowd (iii 377-8), and turns to finish off his enemy (iii 379-80). It is at this moment that the miracle happens and Aphrodite wraps Paris in mist and whisks him away (iii 380-2).

Homer has described to us, his audience, a supernatural event. The question is: how do his characters respond to it? Paris makes no response at all. To judge from his words, no miracle has taken place. This is strange, since he was its beneficiary, and it was something to boast about when a god openly helped a hero (*cf.* e.g. xxii 270-1). Does the rather cryptic *παρὰ γὰρ θεοῦ εἶσι καὶ ἡμῖν* (440) constitute his reaction? Menelaus too expresses no surprise and makes no attempt to explain what has happened. Hector does not enlarge on the matter either at vi 326-31. In other words, the characters treat what is presented to us as a transparent miracle as if it were a given, a *datum* of human experience. They certainly do not speculate on the irrational or the inexplicable.

(ii) xx 321-52: Poseidon blinds Achilles, thoughtfully extracts Achilles' spear from Aeneas' shield and returns it to him (Achilles, of course, will need it when he meets Hector), and then hoists Aeneas up and away across the ranks to the edge of the fighting. Achilles angrily (*ὄχθησας*) exclaims that he sees a *μέγα θαῦμα* because the spear lies on the ground but there is no Aeneas, but, unlike Menelaus, draws the right conclusion: the gods have intervened to save his opponent. 'What the hell', he concludes (*ἐρρέτω*): he won't be back in a hurry. One cannot say there is much 'adoration or reverent silence' here. Achilles is equally brusque with Apollo at xxii 20. Apollo has disguised himself as Agenor and led Achilles a merry dance. Apollo mockingly reveals himself and the furious Achilles says he would take his revenge on him, if he were able. This is the way a hero can, admittedly *in extremis*, address a god in the *Iliad*.¹²

(iii) xvi 786-867: Patroclus charges for the fourth time, and Apollo hits him. He knocks off his helmet, shatters his spear and breaks his corselet. Euphorbus stabs Patroclus as he tries to retreat, and Hector finishes Patroclus off. They exchange words before Patroclus dies.

As Griffin rightly says (Griffin [1980] 153), 'The combination of mystery, power, and effortlessness, marks this as a divine intervention': it is surely a scene unmatched in intensity, pathos and potency in the *Iliad*. Yet this transformation elicits no comment from any human actor. It might all be a mystery to us, but it is not to them. It is left to Patroclus to point out that (though he did not see them) divine agencies were involved: first, Zeus and Apollo, both of whom (he seems to think) stripped him of his armour (xvi 843-6); then fate and Apollo 'killed' me, he says (xvi 849, as do Achilles' horses at xix 411-14), and of men Euphorbus. That this is not what in fact happened (to be pedantic) is interesting. But then, how could Patroclus know? He was attacked *from behind* (xvi 79, *cf.* Athena's approach to Achilles from behind at i 197). But he has put two and two together (he had, after all, been warned that Apollo would attack him if he went too far—xvi 91-4, 288), and got it almost right: and by throwing in 'fate' and 'Zeus' too, he incidentally removes yet more glory from Hector.

¹² In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Enkidu makes the same sort of comment to the goddess Ishtar after he has slapped her in the face with the shoulder of the Bull of Heaven: 'If only I could get at you as that does, I would do the same to you myself' (VII v in *Myths from Mesopotamia*, tr. by S. Dalley [Oxford 1989]).

Patroclus, in other words, like any good historian, has given a rational account of what some might see as an irrational event. Indeed, as far as the humans' response goes, Apollo's intervention might never have happened. The whole episode is neither inexplicable nor mysterious nor irrational, to judge from the words of the speakers. Mueller (1984) 127, points out here that the 'violation of divine causality is emphasised'. By Homer, yes, but not by the characters.

For further miracles, see e.g. v 311-516, xv 355-66, xviii 205-6, xix 1-18,¹³ 38-9, 352-4, 404-24, xx 441-6, xxi 221-382, 597, xxii 276-7, xxiii 184-191, xxiv 18-21, 416-23. It is superfluous to work through them all. These miracles are negotiated by the human actors without comment or with an offhandedness that would (one imagines) better characterise encounters between humans. It is almost as if the heroes expect the gods to intervene. We, of course, may feel the gods are using their superior force irrationally. It never crosses the heroes' minds to say that.

III. DIVINE POWER

I cannot find any speech by any human being in the *Iliad* which talks of the gods as mysterious beings. Humans talk in terms only of the gods' *power*—almost exclusively, their power to help them or hinder them, for which gods can be praised or blamed. For humans, gods are either on their side or against them. This increases the instability of human life, but it does not make it irrational or mysterious. There is nothing necessarily irrational or mysterious about superior force.

So, at viii 139-44, Nestor points out to Diomedes that Zeus gives victory to one man on one day, to another on another. Today, they are losing—so retreat (*cf.* xi 316-19). At iv 160-8 and 235, Agamemnon is full of confidence that Zeus will help him to take Troy; but at ix 17-25, Agamemnon points out Zeus's power to do what he will: Zeus had agreed to let him take Troy, but he had deceived him (*cf.* Achilles at xix 270-5, blaming Zeus in similar terms). At xiv 69-73, Agamemnon contrasts the present, when Zeus helps the Trojans, with the past, when he helped the Greeks (*cf.* Ajax at xvi 119-21). At xv 490-3, Hector observes that Zeus can increase and diminish people's strength—and now he is diminishing the Greeks' (*cf.* Ajax at xvii 629-33 and Aeneas at xx 242-3). At xvii 176-8, Hector says that Zeus can drive a man into battle and on other occasions terrify him witless. At xxiii 546-7 Antilochus, thinking he is to be robbed of second prize in the chariot race, says Eumelus should have prayed to the gods (*sc.* to win). These sentiments could be duplicated many times.

Consider the evidence for prayer to the gods in the *Iliad*. I count thirty-four direct prayers for help.¹⁴ All of them are utterly self-interested; all of them make specific requests for specific

¹³ A referee rightly points out that the Myrmidons are afraid of the armour (xix 15). Here it is only Achilles who looks at it with pleasure. The referee adds xviii 205-6, but this is different. As far as Achilles is concerned, nothing miraculous is happening. Again, however dramatic the Trojan response to his appearance and shout, they do not acknowledge it as a miracle either.

¹⁴ i 37 (Chryses to Apollo to punish the Greeks), i 407 (Achilles via Thetis to Zeus for glory), i 451 (Chryses to Apollo to end the plague), ii 412 (Agamemnon to Zeus to destroy Troy and Hector), iii 320 (the armies to Zeus over the outcome of the duel), iii 351 (Menelaus to Zeus to have revenge on Hector), iv 119 (Pandarus to Apollo to kill Menelaus), v 115 (Diomedes to Athena to kill Pandarus), vi 305 (Theano to Athena to kill Diomedes), vi 240 (Hector tells the women to pray to the immortals), vi 476 (Hector to Zeus concerning his son), vii 179 (Greek troops to Zeus, about the winner of the draw to fight Hector), vii 202 (Greek troops to Zeus that Ajax win), viii 242 (Agamemnon to Zeus that the Greeks be not destroyed), viii 346-7 (Greeks to all the gods under Hector's onslaught), viii 526 (Hector to Zeus and the other gods that he will rout the Greeks), ix 170 (Nestor to Zeus for his mercy), xi 183 (the embassy to Achilles, to Poseidon), xi 454 (Phoenix's father to the furies), xi 568 (Meleager's mother to Hades and Persephone), x 278 (Odysseus to Athena for glory), x 284 (Diomedes to Athena for protection), x 462 (Odysseus to Athena for guidance to the Thracian camp), xi 735 (Nestor and his men before battle, to Zeus and

action; most of them arise from life-or-death situations. None of them expresses to me any sense of adoration, reverence, numinosity, or mystery.¹⁵

While it is true that merely counting examples does not tell one much about the weight of importance an author attaches to any episode (there was, after all, only one Embassy to Achilles), it still strikes me as surprising that the heroes offer so few prayers to the gods in the course of the *Iliad*. There is so much they could seek divine aid for, but they never do unless life and death are at stake (or victory and defeat in games, virtually the same thing for these heroes), and they never express gratitude and rarely even acknowledge help received.¹⁶ What is even more surprising, by contrast, is the number of times that the gods intervene on behalf of heroes without being invoked. This occurs far more frequently than the heroes' prayers to the gods. Consider, for example, the incessant uncalled-for interventions of Apollo, Athena, Poseidon and Zeus in v, xi-xv, and xvii in particular, as they intervene to support their favourites or advance their cause.

I have asserted that the heroes in the *Iliad* never talk in terms of divine mystery and numinosity. One cannot prove a negative. All one can do is to ask for counter examples. There are, for example, the three moral allegories of the *Iliad*. First, there is Phoenix's theological discussion of the Λιτοῖ at ix 497-512. This says nothing more than that the gods respond to those who sacrifice to and supplicate them (as the Greeks well know—*cf.* the Chryses' episode in Book 1 already discussed). Far from wrapping the gods in mystery, Phoenix's aim is to explain graphically and with the utmost clarity how they work. Second, Agamemnon discusses ἄτη at great length at xix 86-138. His purpose is to move the blame for his clash with Achilles from his own shoulders onto Zeus's. This is a very practical argument, which does nothing to enhance our impression of the Greek leader. The 'mystery' of the gods is the last thing Agamemnon has in mind: his whole purpose, like Phoenix's, is to demonstrate the way they work, and why the quarrel with Achilles is not his fault. Third, Achilles reflects on Zeus's dispensation of good and evil at xxiv 525-33: to some he gives mixed good and evil, to others unmixed evil. This is part of Achilles' *consolatio* to Priam. Achilles uses it to show Priam that he has not (as he averred) lived a life of unmixed evil (xxiv 494-5), but one of mixed good and evil (543-9), just like Peleus (534-42). What strikes me is the clarity of Achilles' analysis. It does not read to me like the insight of a man who finds life an irrational mystery, lived at the mercy of numinous gods.¹⁷

Athena), xv 372 (Nestor to Zeus that the Greeks be not destroyed), xvi 233 (Achilles to Zeus for Patroclus' safety), xvi 514 (Glaucus to Apollo to heal his wound), xvii 45-6 (Menelaus to Zeus before attacking Euphorbus), xvii 498 (Automedon to Zeus for courage (?)), xvii 645 (Ajax to Zeus to shed light on the battlefield), xxiii 194 (Achilles to the winds to set Patroclus' pyre alight), xxiii 770 (Odysseus to Athena to give him speed), xxiii 871 (Meriones to Apollo to hit the target), xxiv 308 (Priam to Zeus to grant him an omen for a safe journey to Achilles).

¹⁵ The same holds for prayers offered to Zeus to witness events or seal oaths (iii 276, 298, vii 76, 411, xix 259); 'statement' prayers, where a god is invoked, though not asked directly for help (e.g. iii 365, xii 164); and wishes (ii 371, iv 288, vii 132, x 329, xii 275, xvi 97, xvii 561, xviii 8, xxiii 650). See also n. 6 and Bremer (n. 16) on how comparatively ungrateful the heroes seem to be for the gods' help.

¹⁶ See J.N. Bremer, *Greek religion* (Oxford 1994) 39.

¹⁷ In n. 4, I disagreed with Edwards (1987) who suggested that the gods acted irrationally in men's eyes (though *cf.* Edwards (1987) 136, where he rightly says 'the poet needs to satisfy his audience's desire to find an order and rationality in human experience'). Achilles' speech here seems to me to support my disagreement. The rationality of the gods' intervention in human life, expressed in terms of (e.g.) *quid pro quo*, just deserts, or however it might otherwise be expressed, is simply not raised. Life, says Achilles, is not irrational. It is simply lived under divine control. In human eyes, then, the gods' acts may seem capricious or unpredictable—but that is not the same as irrational. Interestingly, the only time that the issue of human deserts is raised is in relation to τιμή, and there, of course, we are talking about human deserts in human eyes—a very different, and deeply contested, issue (as Taplin [1992] 50-1 rightly emphasises).

Nor does Achilles have anything more interesting to say about the relations of men and gods in his great speech in reply to Odysseus during the Embassy at ix 308-429. Here surely was the chance for a poet who was impressed by the mystery of the gods to raise the issues involved—after all, it is the *Iliad's* greatest human dilemma. He does not take it: for it is, indeed, a *human* dilemma, related to human τιμή. So Achilles talks exclusively in human terms, with cursory references to sacrifice and gods' general oversight (357, 392) and nods in the direction of Zeus's power at ix 377 and 419-20 (I discuss Achilles' fate later on in this paper).

Finally, a general sweep through the poem. At various points in the *Iliad*, characters exclaim how much the gods help, love or honour someone. At others they pray warmly to them (e.g. x 277-95, xi 363-4). Paris praises the gifts of Aphrodite at iii 64. At iv 235 Agamemnon asserts Zeus will not give help to liars. At xiii 631-9, Menelaus acknowledges that Zeus is renowned for wisdom, but wonders whether this can be true since he is favouring the Trojans, and at xiii 730-4 the gods are credited by Poulydamas with giving men different gifts (*cf.* Diomedes at ix 37-9 on Zeus's gifts to Agamemnon—honour superior to anyone else's because he holds the σκήπτρον, but no ἀλκή). The superiority of Zeus over men is acknowledged at e.g. xvii 176-8. I can do no better. If we are looking for signs of humans' belief in the mystery of the gods, they look pretty thin pickings to me.¹⁸

To summarise: the characters fully acknowledge the power of the gods and their extreme predictability in some cases, but unpredictability in others, but have nothing to say about numinosity, mysteriousness or reverence (*cf.* de Jong [1987] 228 'human characters...see what their human nature allows them to see'). These characteristics are reserved for the narrative. By the same token, I am not persuaded that the heroes have any problems with 'irrational' or 'inexplicable' gods. They simply find them more powerful, and willing to wield that power in any way they want to.

IV. FATE IN THE *ILIAD*

What, however, of fate? Here surely is a dark and numinous area, where humans grope for understanding in the face of an arbitrary and meaningless universe.

The facts about 'fate' in the *Iliad* can be briefly stated. Of the four most important words used to express the idea of fate in Homer, πῶτος is always a synonym for death, μόρος always refers to death except in the phrase ὑπὲρ μόρον, μοῖρα (the most common word) always refers to death except in the phrases ὑπὲρ/κατὰ μοῖραν, and in a few places where it means 'share, portion, part' (x 253, xv 195, xvi 68, xix 256).¹⁹ Only αἶσα (which also means 'share, portion' like μοῖρα) takes on any broader connotations of generalised 'fate' (e.g. v 209, xv 209, xvi 707). That said, the places where αἶσα is associated with 'death' easily outweigh the exceptions. As for the actual working of 'fate', it is made clear at xx 127-8 and xxiv 209 that it marks 'at a man's birth the circumstances, and especially the moment, of his death' (Hainsworth [1988] on *Od.* vii 196-8, which, however generalising it may look, must also be included if the analysis of 'fate' is correct; *cf.* Janko [1992] 5-6).²⁰ Even so, one's fate (i.e.

¹⁸ Janet Watson points out to me by letter that only major Greek heroes (Achilles, Odysseus and Diomedes) converse with undisguised gods. Lesser heroes, she goes on, like the Aiantes, 'may be aware that a god has addressed them in the likeness of a mortal but do not know which one' (and she cites xiii 68-72). This observation seems to me at one with the general argument of this paper.

¹⁹ The exceptions are xix 87 where Μοῖρα is associated with Zeus and the Erinyes, and xxvi 49 where Μοῖρα are said to give men an enduring heart. In these places it is clearly personified as a god. My analysis is rather different from that of Schein (1984) 62-63.

²⁰ A referee astutely points out that all these references are put in the mouths of the characters.

moment of death) is not necessarily invariable. It can be conditional on other circumstances, and consequently in those circumstances a man can even be said to be in control of his 'fate' (see Jones [1991] on *Od.* i 34).

Heroes in Homer acknowledge the existence of fate—since it effectively means 'death' they have little option—but do not live their lives oppressed by that knowledge. Thus Hector at vi 487-89 says that since everyone is born with an inescapable μοῖρα, he cannot die before his time comes.

In Achilles, however, Homer chooses to create a character who has, through his mother, unique and privileged access to the will of Zeus (xvii 409) and knows his fate from the very start of the *Iliad*. As early as i 352, he tells us that he will be short-lived (μινυυθῶδιος). Further, his mother Thetis also informs him when he will die—shortly after he has killed Hector (xviii 96). Yet what is interesting about this is the lengths to which Homer goes to disguise the facts about Achilles' fate—or at least, to confuse them. Thus Thetis repeats her prophecy about Achilles' short life at i 417-18, and again at i 505-6. But this is contradicted by Achilles himself at ix 410-16, where he states unambiguously that Thetis told him he has two possible fates awaiting him: either he fights at Troy and dies young, or he goes home and lives to a ripe old age. Now, we know that he will return to the fighting, because Zeus prophesies it at viii 473-7: Hector, says Zeus, will not stop fighting till he has roused Achilles back into battle, when Patroclus is dead. But Achilles, (as far as we know by ix), does not know this: and it would be unthinkable for Achilles in ix to be lying, especially after what he says about liars (ix 312-4). It is, in fact, only in xviii that it is unambiguously revealed that Achilles' death will follow immediately he has killed Hector, and it is Thetis who reveals it (xviii 96, cf. xviii 98-9, xviii 329-32, xxi 110-13 etc.).

This lack of precise clarity about, indeed, often outright ignorance of, Achilles' fate is in fact a permanent feature of the narrative. At xvii 408-9, Homer reports that Achilles had often heard Thetis telling him of Zeus's will that he would not sack Troy either with Patroclus or without him (cf. Apollo at xvi 707-9). At xix 328-30, Achilles says that earlier he had hoped that he alone would die at Troy and Patroclus would return safe and sound to Phthia—as if he had known even before the Trojan War started that he would die at Troy. This sits oddly with xvii, and directly contradicts ix. At xxi 275-8, Achilles says his mother had told him he would die under Apollo's shafts at Troy. This is the first time we have heard this detail or that it was Thetis who told him. Or is this another of the things about the will of Zeus that Achilles says his mother used to tell him before he ever left for Troy (xvii 409)? At xxii 359-60, Hector adds further detail: Achilles will die at the Scaean gates and Paris as well as Apollo will be involved. The picture becomes finalised not through the mouth of Thetis, but of Achilles' dying enemy, to be further confirmed by the dead Patroclus in a dream at xxiii 80.

But this does not exhaust the cunning of Homer's method of dealing with fate, the future, or even the will of the gods (as Edwards [1987] 136 says: 'Fate is the will of the poet'). An inspection of the text reveals that the gods' knowledge too about fate can be as qualified and provisional as that of the humans. I take the fall of Troy and the death of Achilles as my examples.²¹

²¹ See further S. West (1988) on *Od.* iv 379-81, who shows (with examples) that 'Homer's gods are omniscient in a rather limited sense'. Greek tragedy also manipulates fate inconsistently for, I would argue, a similar literary effect: cf. e.g. the oracles in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes* (see M. Davies, *Sophocles' Trachiniae* [Oxford 1991] 268-9). Homer deals with Patroclus' fate more consistently. At viii 477 Zeus announces it is ordained (θέσφατον) for him to die, and at xvii 268-73 movingly helps to protect him: he had not hated him while he was alive, comments Homer, impressing on us the needlessness of Patroclus' death. At xviii 9-11 Achilles tells us that he knew all along from his mother that 'the best of the Myrmidons' would die at Troy, which he now sees meant Patroclus. At xix 328-33, Achilles says he had hoped he alone would die at Troy and Patroclus would return.

First, the fall of Troy. It is not surprising that, despite the omens (for omens are slippery things), humans should wax optimistic (ii 330, iv 164-5, 237-9, vi 476-81), pessimistic (v 489, vi 447-9, ix 417-20) and uncertain (ii 252-3, 348-9, iii 92-4, iv 415-17, vi 526-9) about whether Troy will fall or not.²² But that gods should do so comes as something of a surprise. Hera seems to envisage the possibility of the Greeks losing (ii 157-62, v 714-8). Zeus wonders whether to encourage friendship between the Greeks and Trojans (iv 16). Poseidon thinks Zeus might spare Troy (xv 212-17), while Zeus thinks Achilles may storm it *ὑπέρμυρον* (xx 30) and Apollo is afraid it will be stormed that very day (xxi 516-17).

The certainty of the death of Achilles is also strangely elided in places. On the one hand, Thetis tells Hephaestus of it at xviii 440-1, and he responds sympathetically at xviii 464-7. At xix 408-17, Achilles' horses foresee his death. At xx 337 Poseidon says to Aeneas that he must keep clear of Achilles for the moment: only when Achilles is dead should he fight among the leaders again. At xxi 588-9, the Trojan Agenor foretells his death, and at xxii 359-60, on the point of his death, so does Hector.

Yet neither Zeus nor Hera says anything about Achilles' death at xviii 356-67, when the success of Hera's plan to ensure Greek victory is specifically under discussion. At xix 344-5, when Achilles has been grieving for Patroclus and thinking about his own death at Troy, Zeus suggests Athena comfort him for his grief but omits to say anything about his death. At xxi 216-17, the river god Scamander seems to think there is a possibility that Zeus has granted Achilles the power to take Troy, and at xxi 316-23 he says Achilles will be buried under sand and silt. At xxiii 150 and 244-8, where it seems that Achilles is announcing his death to everyone, no one responds.

I do not wish to make more of this than there actually is.²³ But the fact is that even on such an issue as the death of Achilles, Homer seems to go out of his way to muddy the waters, sometimes revealing the fact that it is fated and the gods know all about it, sometimes suppressing it or revealing that even the gods' knowledge is imperfect.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to develop two propositions. First, when Iliadic heroes talk about the gods, they do so as if they regarded the gods as no more than very powerful humans. They are forces that have to be taken into account, there are tried and tested methods of winning them to your side, and when they are appealed to, they can be both predictable and unpredictable in their responses. In heroes' eyes, gods are not mysterious or numinous or inexplicable or awesome. They pray to them in hard-nosed, self-interested terms. They express fear of gods far less frequently than they do of humans. Miracles are accepted almost as a *datum* of everyday human experience: life, after all, is full of surprises, some human, some divine.

Second, while there is no doubt that Troy is fated to fall and Achilles to die, the idea of fate is muffled by the poet. It looms large in certain contexts, only to be swept under the carpet in others. Even gods appear at times to be ignorant of its existence.

Homer is not a theologian. He is an epic poet. Gods and heroes are the engine of his poem, and he must develop a narrative strategy for their effective deployment. What, then, is the overall narrative strategy which Homer serves by articulating this picture of men, gods and fate? Broadly, it is a world which maintains a balance between free human activity and all-powerful

²² Hainsworth (1993) on xii 237-43 points out that epic takes a rational view of omens, regarding them as confirmation or discouragement of decisions already taken, rather than allowing them to determine the action.

²³ On Homeric 'misdirection,' see Morrison (1992), cf. de Jong (1987) 68-81. Taplin (1992) 198 describes the changing revelations as 'the Homeric technique of increasing precision'.

divinities imposing their will on and constantly intervening in the cosmos, a world in which there is some sense of balance of forces between man, fate and the gods, where it is possible for men to play a full and free part.²⁴ Strictly, this world-view is irrational, of course. If gods are all-knowing and all-powerful, men cannot be free. But the conceit allows Homer to compose epic, and to have his cake and eat it, by juxtaposing the two worlds and focusing now on one, now on the other.²⁵

This is not a new thesis, of course: Homer's rationalising tendency and the balance he maintains between human and divine responsibility are well recognised (see e.g. G.S. Kirk, *The songs of Homer* [Cambridge 1962] 380, Edwards [1987] 137, Silk [1987] 82, Kirk [1990] 1-14, Janko [1992] 1-7, Taplin [1992] 96 ff, 207 ff). But it is, I think, strengthened by this analysis which points up the strong sense of the independence of the human heroes. They feel no fear in front of gods. They summon the gods to help as little as possible. They are happy to accept divine assistance when it is offered, but give no sign of craving for it. Heroes, in other words, see gods as powers to be negotiated with only *in extremis*. Otherwise they see no reason to turn to them. Everyday issues of, for example, battle strategy and tactics and human man-management are never submitted to the gods for their involvement (only the Embassy to Achilles is—ix 172, 183-4—but that is not an everyday issue: it is one of life and death). These are matters for human discussion, for the Nestors, Odysseuses, Poulydamases and Hectors of this world, not the gods. When things go against them, it is accepted that this is the divine will and that is the end of the matter. Here we see that deep pessimism that runs through Greek literature as a whole, but also that desire to be free of divine control so characteristic of Ionian rationalism and later Greek thought (of which Homer is a more than merely temporal forerunner).

Now we can understand why Homer handles fate in the way that he does. As we have seen, Homer chose to elide and obscure it. His purpose surely was to heighten the sense that his heroes were independent human beings, making their own decisions.²⁶ This is why the prophecies of Thetis were revealed in the piecemeal and rather inconsistent way they were. Achilles must be seen to be acting as a free agent, otherwise the epic and Achilles' story would

²⁴ The efforts made by the gods constantly to thwart the will of Zeus (*cf.* viii 5-12) and divert the course of action so clearly predicted in places such as viii 473-7, xv 72-7 and xvii 596-614, and Zeus's own desire to change fate (e.g. xvi 431-61—admittedly fruitless, *cf.* xxii 167-85) add to this effect (in the *readers'* view) of the negotiability of existence. If the gods can play like this with the will of Zeus, and Zeus himself seems in theory able to change fate (*cf.* xvi 443=xxii 181), what price inevitable fate? How helpless are humans in its grasp? For the fluctuation of events in Homer, see Morrison (1992) 95.

²⁵ And, I would argue, accords with human experience. Many people feel that the decisions they take are entirely their own; but many of the same people at the same time look back over their lives and have the sense that God was guiding them. We are no nearer than Homer to solving the problem of divine omnipotence, free will and responsibility for action. In fact, Homer's solution (that both men and gods are 100% responsible) is remarkably appealing. *Cf.* Schein (1984) 58, Thalmann (1984) 85-6. R.Gaskin, 'Do Homeric heroes make real decisions?', *CQ* xl (1990) 1-15 (especially 6-7) is an excellent analysis of that particular problem, demonstrating conclusively that they do. This has important implications for the arguments about heroic freedom and independence in this paper.

In this respect, it is worth saying how useful a multiplicity of gods is to the poet (see further Edwards [1987] 121-42). This is the means of creating conflict in Olympus, which can be used to make sense of the swinging fortunes of men on earth (a device as old as Gilgamesh). The gods can contest among themselves the issue of their favourites (e.g. i 493-567, xiii 345-60, xv 89-238, xvi 444-9, xvi 354-67, xxiv 23-76 and the battle among the gods in xxi), and can deceive one another as they go about their business (*cf.* e.g. Apollo, learning late of Athena's schemes at x 515, and Poseidon's interventions and the deception of Zeus in xiii-xiv): see how dejected they are when they cannot intervene (xii 179-180). Men, in other words, have a chance. As they often say, the gods' favours constantly shift. Life would be intolerable if they did not.

²⁶ W. Schadewaldt in 'Die Entscheidung des Achilles' (*Von Homers Welt und Werk* [Leipzig 1965]) argues that in Achilles Homer created the first image of human freedom in the West. *Cf.* Rihll (1992) 50 '[Achilles] seeks his own freedom; freedom of action and freedom to live', and Gaskin (n. 25) 15. For the *Il.*'s human dimension, *cf.* de Jong (1987) 228: 'I submit that the *Il.* mainly presents a human vision of the events around Troy'.

become mere melodrama: mere Cyclic epic. As it is, it becomes tragic.²⁷

Hector's speech at xxii 296-305 just about summarises everything this paper has been trying to say about men's responses to the gods. To Achilles' great delight (224), Athena has intervened to deceive Hector into standing and fighting (226-47); and she even returns Achilles' spear to him (276). Battle is joined, and Hector eventually realises he has been ruthlessly tricked. He analyses the situation perfectly (the gods are summoning me to death, 297), identifies the responsible god (Athena, 299), concludes that neither Zeus nor Apollo who once supported him continues to do so (correct, 301-3), says his μοῖρα now awaits him (it does, 303), and expresses the wish to die gloriously and do something for men in the future to hear about (304-5). Gods whimsical? Mysterious? Numinous? Inexplicable? Irrational? Not in Hector's book.²⁸

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²⁷ Janko (1992) 4 points out that Homer's handling has the effect of 'leaving an undefined area between free will and natural forces...Homer's characters are seen to suffer for their choices, which is clearly tragic, and yet the whole outcome seems to be beyond their individual control or even preordained, which is tragic in another way'. Exactly. Cf. Rutherford (1982), a richly rewarding article on tragic elements in the *Il.* J. Griffin, 'The epic cycle and the uniqueness of Homer', *JHS* xcvi (1977) 39-53 and M. Davies, *The epic cycle* (Bristol 1989) between them draw out the contrasts between Homer and the Cyclic poets.

²⁸ In the light of this analysis, it is perhaps necessary to reassess some of the bolder generalisations about men and gods. Thalmann (1984), for example, talks of man being 'ultimately insignificant' (90), as does Schein (1984) 62. That is not the impression I get from the *Il.*, let alone from the *Od.*, and is certainly not the way the heroes view matters. Likewise, it is common to talk of the gods' combined triviality and grandeur (see e.g. Schein [1984] 52-3, Taplin n. 2 above). Since the heroes themselves never talk in these terms, the generalisation, I think, needs some refining.