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## Homer Answers his Critics.<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Heraclitus begins his allegorical interpretation of Homer with the admonishment: “If he meant nothing allegorically, he was impious through and through, and sacrilegious fables, loaded with blasphemous folly, run riot through both epics.” Modern criticism roundly rejects Heraclitus’ defense of Homer’s integrity, preferring to treat his poems as straightforward narratives of the actions of gods and mortals. But there is ample evidence of Homer’s sophisticated use of divinities as symbols rather than agents, and reason to suppose that Homeric epic emerged in dialogue with attacks on the anthropomorphic representation of gods, like that of Xenophanes. I propose to raise the question of Homer’s method through discussion of a few representative passages, beginning with Athena’s intervention to prevent

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Achilles from slaying Agamemnon in Book I of the *Iliad* and concluding with the battle among the gods in Books XX-XXI. Particular reference will be made to Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*.

**KEY-WORDS:** Homer, allegory, Heraclitus, mythography, Radin (Paul)

At a time when ancient poets, and above all Homer, were regarded as sources of wisdom, and when traditional religion was being subjected to radical criticism from ethical and philosophical points of view, it was inevitable that the representation of the gods in epic should rouse suspicion. For the standing of Homer, we may cite Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 1.10.10), who affirms that music is the most ancient of the literary arts – he is referring to poetry accompanied by the cithara – and notes that this is confirmed by modern poets, in support of which he cites Vergil’s *Aeneid*, where Iopas sings of the wandering moon and the travails of the sun (*canit errantem lunam solisque labores*). Similarly, Julius Caesar, in his *De bello Gallico* (6.13–14), ascribes to the Druids a knowledge of nature and of the power of the immortal gods (*de rerum natura, de deorum immortalium ui ac potestate*). But the gods were now being held to a much stricter standard of morality than mortals, and deprived even of a physical resemblance to human beings. It suffices to mention Xenophanes’ complaints that “Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all sorts of things which are matters of reproach and censure among men: theft, adultery and mutual deceit” (frag. 11), and that “mortals suppose that gods are born, wear their own clothes and have a voice and body” (frag. 14); of a piece with the latter are his observation that the Ethiopians and Thracians say their gods are “snub-nosed and black” or “blue-eyed and red-haired,” respectively (frag. 16), and his still more pungent remark that if horses, oxen, or lions could draw, they would represent the gods as similar to themselves in appearance (frag. 15). Defending Homer’s authority in religious matters against such a critique was clearly a challenge.

The only way to do so was to argue that Homer’s descriptions of the gods were in some way mysteriously meant. There were two basic strategies in this regard, though they overlap and are not always separable: the symbolic and the allegorical. For the allegorical, we have Heraclitus’ detailed exegesis of some of the most troubling passages in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Heraclitus begins his interpretation

of Homer with the admonishment: “If he meant nothing allegorically, he was impious through and through, and sacrilegious fables, loaded with blasphemous folly, run riot through both epics.”<sup>2</sup> By way of illustrating his approach, we may mention the passage in which Aphrodite’s mother, Dione, consoles her daughter after she has been wounded by Diomedes: “Hera, too felt the agony, when the mighty Heracles, son of Amphitryon, pierced her right breast with his triple-barbed arrow.” Heraclitus explains (34): “in representing the wounding of Hera Homer wants to show us precisely that Heracles was the first to use divine reason in order to bring structure to the confused mist [*aer*] which clouds every individual’s mind; he did this by ‘wounding’ every human being’s ignorance by repeated reproofs. Heracles therefore shoots his arrows from ground to heaven, because every philosopher, in his mortal and earthly body, despatches his thought, like a winged arrow, to the realms above. Homer added ingeniously, ‘striking with three-pointed shaft’ — the ‘three-pointed’ missile concisely suggests the three branches of philosophy,” that is, logic, physics, and ethics. Now, this is plainly over-ingenuous, and inclines one to agree with Donald Russell that the entire treatise was perhaps more in the nature of a rhetorical exercise than a serious defense of Homer. For the symbolic method, we may cite Plutarch’s essay, *How a Youth should Listen to Poems*. Plutarch argues that epic has its own usages, which the student of literature must understand. Thus, “Hephaestus” in Homer may refer to the actual god, but it may also merely signify fire, which this god symbolizes (23A-B). Calling Ares “blind,” as Sophocles does (fr. 754), would be blasphemous if used of the god, but not if the reference is rather to war. Again, the name “Zeus” may signify the ruling god but it may also stand for fate or chance. The ancient poets resorted to this imagery, Plutarch says, because they did not yet have a special term for the concept of accident or *tukhê* (24A), although they knew that events occur randomly. As a rule of thumb, Plutarch advises that whenever Zeus malice or some other vicious quality is ascribed to Zeus, we may be sure that the poet is speaking metaphorically (cf. 24B). Lucretius too allows that Neptune and Ceres may designate water or grain, provided that such usage does not encourage superstitious beliefs about the nature of the gods (2.655-60).

This is all very well as a device for what we might call “safe reading,” which allows students to enjoy the ancient epics without danger to their moral education,

<sup>2</sup> Citations of Heraclitus are from Russell and Konstan (2005). Cf. *Longinus On the Sublime* 9.6-7, who calls a passage in Homer “blasphemous and indecent unless it is interpreted allegorically.”

although it is not easy to construe, say, the wounding of Hera in this way without resorting to some pretty *recherché* mental acrobatics. But the question remains, at least for us: did Homer intend his poems to be read this way? Allegory has long since fallen out of favor as a literary device; W.H. Auden, in his delightful little book, *The Enchafèd Flood or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea*,<sup>3</sup> cited this as one of those “revolutionary changes in sensibility or style” that are very rare in the history of taste. It is thus all the more natural for us to rescue Homer from the stigma of such artifice, which, we imagine, only took off in the decadent era of late antiquity, in the hands of such figures as Prudentius or Martianus Capella. In addition, for all that we now reject neo-Kantian views of primitive mentalities, such as those proposed by Lucien Lévi-Bruhl, Ernst Cassirer, and Bruno Snell, we are still, I think, in the grip of such theories and find it hard to believe that Homer or his audience had anything like so sophisticated a theology as to worry about the anthropomorphic representation of the gods. Of course, we do not believe that Homer’s characters actually had “split minds,” as proposed by Julian Jaynes in his rather silly but surprisingly influential book entitled *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*;<sup>4</sup> Jaynes supposed that when Athena descended from Olympus to prevent Achilles from slaying Agamemnon in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, Achilles really imagined that he was conversing with an external interlocutor, although in reality he was experiencing an inner dialogue between the two parts of his brain, which were physically more separated in early mankind than they are today.<sup>5</sup> But we accept that the Homeric gods could appear to mortals, whether in their own form or another, and that they behaved in some of the disreputable ways that troubled poor Xenophanes, without offending the taste or convictions of Homer’s audience. There was thus no reason for Homer to resort to subtle distinctions between literal truths and symbolic aspects of the gods: Xenophanes and the so-called Ionian enlightenment were yet to come, and Homer could rest content with an uncritical depiction of his pagan deities in all their all-too-human antics.

There is another way to explain, or explain away, the more egregious behavior, as it may seem to us, of the gods in epic, and this is to treat it as a literary device. Neither Homer nor his audience necessarily imagined that Hera was really so

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<sup>3</sup> Auden (1951).

<sup>4</sup> Jaynes (1976).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jaynes (1976) 117.

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shrewish with Zeus on Mount Olympus or that Hera actually smacked Artemis on the chest and sent her running to her mama; these are simply fictions that are stuff of poetry: they lend drama and excitement to the poems, and what is more, allow Homer to represent domestic scenes in what is otherwise largely a narrative of men at war, and to add a touch of humor to his grim chronicle. But how are we to know where, and whether, to draw the line between genuine pagan belief and mere stories? How would Homer have responded to criticisms like those leveled by Xenophanes, and shown that the literal-minded philosopher had missed the point? For I believe that Homer and his public could and did think about such theological matters in a critical spirit. Indeed, I imagine that versified censures of some of the more egregious depictions of the gods may well precede Xenophanes and the sixth century, and have been in the air in oral form long before; if this is so, then we may imagine Homeric epic emerging in tandem with such critiques, just as it did alongside other poetic genres such as lyric and elegy.

I draw my inspiration for this conception of Homeric theology from the classic work by the American anthropologist Paul Radin entitled *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, published in 1927. Radin was responding to the view that Native Americans had a primitive and unreflecting idea of divinity, in contrast to the profound religious understanding vision of Christianity. As Radin noted, there existed “an ineradicably established tradition that all the aborigines encountered by Europeans were simple, untutored savages from whom little more could be expected than from uncontrolled children,” and that “much of this tradition, in various forms, disguised and otherwise, has persisted to the present day.” The view was given further credibility by nineteenth century evolutionary anthropology, such as Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1870), which assumed that “primitive peoples represent an early stage in the history of the evolution of culture.” Radin himself takes as the premise of his book “that among primitive peoples there exists the same distribution of temperament and ability as among us”;<sup>6</sup> hence, his object is “to describe primitive cultures in terms of their intellectual class, from the viewpoint of their thinkers” (ibid.). For thinkers they had, whether few or many, as we ourselves have in our own society. What is more, Radin observed that, “though primitive man may describe life in a religious terminology it is not to be inferred that in the vast majority of cases he

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<sup>6</sup> Radin (1927) 5.

regards a purely mundane happening as due to supernatural agency.”<sup>7</sup> Our tendency to underestimate the subtlety and sophistication of so-called primitive peoples may constitute something of a professional handicap; thus, Radin affirmed that, “Paradoxical as it may seem, it is nevertheless a fact that few people are, on the whole, so unfitted by temperament to study the simpler aspects of the life of primitive people, and by implication their emotional and intellectual manifestations, as the average cultured scholar and university-trained ethnologist.”<sup>8</sup>

Homer’s epics are pervaded by gods, who act in a wide variety of ways and are described in what we may call different registers. In some cases, the gods seem transparently to serve as symbols, as Plutarch observed. Thus, when Athena intervention to prevent Achilles from slaying Agamemnon in Book I of the *Iliad*, it is plausible to take her as representing Achilles’ own better judgment. Heraclitus cites these verses:

He [i.e. Achilles] was drawing his great sword from the  
scabbard when  
Athena came from heaven: white-armed Hera sent her,  
because she loved and cared for both alike.  
Athena stood behind and gripped Achilles  
by his yellow hair; to him alone she appeared,  
no other saw her. Amazed, Achilles turned:  
at once he knew Athena: fearful flashed her eyes.

Heraclitus then remarks:

The surface meaning of this passage is that, as Achilles is actually drawing his sword, the goddess, leaving her occupation in heaven with incredible speed, stands there to stop a foul murder. With a graphic gesture, she seizes Achilles from behind by the hair. Yet behind these ideas, in the allegory, lies a very splendid and profound piece of knowledge. And once again Plato, so ungrateful to Homer in his *Republic*, is shown by these lines to have stolen his psychological theory from him. Plato divides the whole soul into two parts, which he calls the rational and the irrational. Within the irrational part, he sets up a more specific division, splitting it into two sections and calling one the “desiderative” and the other the “spirited.” He also gives each part a home, as

<sup>7</sup> Radin (1927) 22.

<sup>8</sup> Radin (1927) 11.

it were, and a residence in the body.... [Homer] gives us the episode of Athena as an allegorical confirmation of this doctrine. For when Achilles, bursting with anger, reached for his sword, and the reason residing in his head was eclipsed by the passions in his breast, his mind was gradually freed from the intoxication that irritated it, and recovered its sobriety and better state. This change of heart due to sane thinking is very properly identified in the poem with Athena.... Now a goddess coming to help would surely have contrived a complete pacification of passion; but since the reason involved was a human one, it held back the sword (as was necessary), and actual physical violence is cut out, though there still remain relics of anger; for great outbursts of passion are not completely done away with in a moment.<sup>9</sup>

This does not seem like a piece of over-subtle special pleading, but could well be the way that Homer's audience, or at least the thinkers among them (as Radin would put it), understood the episode. There is a hint, perhaps, in Homer's explicit assertion that Athena was visible only to Achilles. What, we may wonder, were the other Achaeans imagining when they saw Achilles pause and engage in conversation with someone who was not there. Today, of course, we would conclude that he was speaking into his cell phone, but it is clear that Achilles' exchange with Athena occurs outside narrative time, a kind of stop-action in which the most that might be perceived by others would have been a momentary hesitation on his part. Homer is signaling his public here on how to understand the passage.

Sometimes ancient critics did throw out the baby with the bathwater. Take the case of the plague that Apollo visits upon the Achaeans, after Agamemnon mistreats his priest, Chryses.

Here is Heraclitus' interpretation:

Envy, always vile and malicious, has not even spared the opening of the first book. It has had a good deal to say about the anger of Apollo, claiming that his randomly discharged arrows incidentally destroyed the innocent Greeks, and that his wrath is so unjust that Agamemnon, despite the offence he did to Chryses, suffered no extraordinary consequences (though he did wrong, and ought to have been punished), whereas the people who called upon him to respect the priest, and take the splendid ransom became the incidental victims

<sup>9</sup> Trans. Russell and Konstan (2005) 17-20 (excerpted).



of the folly of the man they failed to persuade. However, looking carefully at the truth underlying these lines, I believe that they do not describe Apollo's anger, but the misfortune of a plague, which is a spontaneous rather than a divinely sent disaster (6).

Heraclitus argues at length that the season in which the *Iliad* takes place is summer, when the heat made plagues more likely, and Apollo was conventionally associated, he says, with the sun: "So, since Homer assumes the Sun to be one and the same as Apollo, and since disasters of this kind are caused by the Sun, he has made Apollo the physical cause of the plague" (8). The problem with this interpretation is that it eliminates Apollo's role entirely and hence any connection between Agamemnon's behavior and the plague, which turns out to be a mere accident. Apollo surely avenges the insult to his priest, but he does so by means of a pestilence, which works the way such epidemics do, striking livestock and people at random, with no distinction among the guilty and the innocent. Heraclitus is not wrong to note the season: had it been winter, Apollo would, one may suppose, have taken his revenge in some other way than by a plague. That the gods work through nature would have been easily understood, I think, by Homer's audience, though they may also, on occasion, call attention to their presence by some extraordinary intervention, such as a thunderbolt on a clear day.

I am reminded of an example adduced by Paul Radin, who reports that primitive people "may tell you, if directly interrogated, that a poisoned arrow discharged for a short distance into a deer trail will cause the death of a deer that is to be hunted on the following day. What inference can we very well expect a person to draw from such a statement but that a magical nonrational rite has achieved a practical and all-important result?"<sup>10</sup> Radin goes on to explain, however, that someone who observed this ritual "did not select any trail at any time of the year, but a particular trail at a particular time of the year. We must assume that he knows from unlimited practical experiences that he is selecting the proper conditions for his task." Radin adds: "I once asked a Winnebago Indian whether the rite of shooting an arrow into a trail of which he had no knowledge would be effective and received a prompt and

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<sup>10</sup> Radin (1927) 15.



amused denial.”<sup>11</sup> Apollo too is savvy enough to pick the right season for this particular manifestation of his displeasure.

I conclude this discussion with an episode that is particularly challenging to those who would moralize Homer or redeem his representation of cantankerous gods, namely the outright battle, or rather fisticuffs, among the deities in Books 20 and 21 of the *Iliad*. Heraclitus is himself at some pains to account for it, noting first that “these tales cannot even at first sight be entirely convincing to most people” (53), and then mentioning, only to reject, an astrological interpretation. His own solution is to read the episode as the confrontation between virtues and vices or opposing elements. Thus, if Apollo faces off against Poseidon, what is meant is the antagonism between fire and water (56), and when Athena trounces Ares, it is the war between wisdom and folly; Homer himself calls Ares “mad, finished evil, double-faced,” whereas Athena “is famed among all gods for counsel and for cunning” (54). There may be some truth to this view: Ares cuts a poor figure in the poem, much of the time, and it is possible to see him as a symbol of passionate rage. But there is also, I think, a narrative element that prepares the audience to hear this episode in a way that is different from the battle scenes among mortals. Book 20 begins with a very curious council among the gods, to which Zeus summons all divinities – not just the usual Olympians, but every last river, every kind of nymph. It is hard to imagine where they all found seats, however ample Zeus’ palace may have been. Ocean, to be sure, does not attend, but Poseidon does not fail to heed the order, for all that he had earlier resented Zeus’ imperiousness; but he presumably speaks for all when he asks what plan (*boulê*) Zeus has in mind (20.15). This sounds like the introduction to a new twist in the narrative, announcing a change in that original *Dios boulê* that launched the entire epic. Zeus replies that Poseidon already knows the plan: he is worried lest Achilles in his fury may breach the walls of Troy before the destined time. Zeus’ plan is to grant permission to the gods to enter the fray on the side they favor, while he remains above the conflict, free to enjoy the spectacle (*terpsomai*, 20.23). The gods duly take their positions, five on each side, but the clash is postponed until well into Book 21; in the meantime, Achilles continues his rampage, which culminates in his struggle with the river Xanthus (he is among those deities taking the part of the Trojans), and almost drowns until Hera dispatches Hephaestus to fight water with fire,

<sup>11</sup> Radin (1927) 16.

until the scorched river Xanthus surrenders and abandons the defense of Troy (21.372-776). Only now do the other gods engage with each other, as Zeus happily looks on, indeed breaking out in laughter (*egalasse*, 21.389).

I suggest that Homer's audience, or at least the thinkers among them (and they may have been the vast majority), understood that the narrative was entering a surreal plane. As the internal spectator, Zeus' delight cues the audience as to how the scene is to be appreciated: this is for fun, not serious like the mortal conflict. The encounter between Xanthus and Hephaestus is easily understood as symbolic – a river swollen with corpses is checked by a blazing conflagration – and this prepares the way for the more anthropomorphic brouhaha that follows. Finally, Zeus' new plan leads nowhere, since the contention among the gods serves only to enhance the advantage of the Achaeans, and Achilles, nothing daunted, continues his attack: indeed, when we next see him, he is compared, rather oddly, to smoke from a burning city (21.522-25), a simile that evokes just the premature conquest that Zeus had meant to prevent. Homer has marked out an interlude, and expected his listeners to recognize and enjoy it, without supposing that it was intended as sober theology. Some might even recall that the last time immortals were wounded was in Book 5, when Diomedes was given permission to attack Aphrodite and Ares; Book 20 is five books from the end of the poem, and the ring composition may have reinforced the sense that such episodes are carefully located and quarantined from the rest of the narrative. As for the Xenophaneses in the audience, Homer might well have supposed that this was answer enough to their complaints.

I am suggesting, in sum, that the Homeric epics employ poetic devices, not wholly unlike those that Plutarch identified in the essay cited earlier, to alert hearers to shifts of register and so disarm charges of naivety or worse in his representation of the gods. If we think of the epic bards as composing in full awareness of the rather humorless critiques leveled by poets in the rival philosophical tradition, and responding obliquely but self-consciously to such charges, we may gain a better appreciation of how the gods were viewed in the archaic age. I have just scratched the surface of the texts, if that, but I believe that other episodes can be productively examined in this manner, and I hope that such an enterprise may help to rescue Homer from the charge of “blasphemous folly.”

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