

Gods of Intervention and Disguise in Homer

Michael Betrus

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When a group of people in a particular culture produces writing that endures for readers of future generations, it often includes answers to some of life's deepest questions. Therefore, this form of art, writing, often reveals how an individual or culture conceives of the supernatural and the purpose of humankind. This characteristic of writing is seen in its earliest forms. For example, in one of the earliest known law codes, the Code of Hammurabi, the Babylonian king writes of Marduk, a god of righteousness, who had "dominion over earthly man" and "sent me [Hammurabi] to rule over men, to give the protection of right to the land" (Johns 1904, 33-34). This trend, visible here from approximately 1750 B.C., continued in later cultures and expanded beyond law codes. A millennium later, nearing the end of ancient Greece's Dark Age, Homer—either a single poet or group of people—composed two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, both shaped by the Trojan War. In the *Iliad*, Homer emphasizes the ninth year of the Trojan War and the wrath of the hero Achilles, while the *Odyssey* is a narrative depicting the Achaean warrior Odysseus' prolonged and painful return home to Ithaca from Troy. The deathless gods are integral to the plots of both of these tales. In these two ancient epics, the immortal gods play an intervening role, interacting with mortals and each other in ways that are often self-serving or deceitful. Because Homer depicts the gods as central to the realization of individuals' fates and the characters attribute much power and majesty to the limited immortals, their presence helps explain the cause of both experienced suffering and good.

In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer demonstrates that the gods involved in the stories have personal motives for particular actions instead of possessing a will completely submitted to or in sync with a higher moral code or being. Their reason for involvement in mortal affairs is often for selfish or personal reasons. In the *Iliad*, the earlier story, two of the major gods, Hera and Athena, support the Achaean forces because of the Judgment of Paris, in

which Paris, a Trojan, rejected their offers in light of Aphrodite's offer of the most beautiful woman, Helen. Near the end of the epic, when the other gods urge Hermes to steal Hector's dead corpse from Achilles' control, Homer writes that "neither Hera...nor the grey-eyed virgin goddess [Athena]" were pleased, because they "still nursed the hatred they'd conceived for sacred Ilion, and Priam, and Priam's people, through Aléxandros's blind delusion" (*Il.* 24.25-28). In this "blind delusion," Paris (Aléxandros) had "despised them, but had praise for the one who furthered his fatal lust" (24.29-30). As a result, the two rejected goddesses housed bitterness and therefore acted in ways helpful to the Achaean forces, even if it meant clashing with other gods. In book eight, Athena and Hera leave to stop Hector's charge toward the Greek ships but are quickly stopped by a Zeus-sent Iris, returning to the other gods at Olympus. Zeus then addressed all of the gods and questioned the disheartened goddesses, telling them that he would have defeated their cause and destroyed them. Homer then tells readers that "so he [Zeus] spoke, but Athena and Hera went on muttering against him, sitting side by side, planning trouble for the Trojans" (8.392-458). The power and words of Zeus, king of the gods, were not enough to deter the two from helping the Achaean forces. So while Athena and Hera are supportive of one another, their interactions with Zeus suggest that the Greek conception of the gods was not merely full of harmony and unity in thoughts and actions. Homer develops a similar theme with the role of Athena in the *Odyssey*.

In the *Odyssey*, the Ithacan hero Odysseus is doomed to a toilsome and tear-filled journey home once he mutilates and blinds Polyphemus, son of Poseidon and a Cyclops. As Odysseus and his men were escaping the island of the Cyclopes, Polyphemus prayed to his father, Poseidon, asking that Odysseus "will never go back home...or get there late and with no honor, in pain and lacking ships, and having caused the death of all his men, and let him find more

trouble in his own house” (*Od.* 9.528-536). Poseidon then granted the prayer. Homer lays the foundation of the *Odyssey* for readers with this critical event in mind. Athena goes to Zeus, feeling that Odysseus has suffered “for too long,” and asked her father, “why do you dismiss Odysseus?” (1.45-63). Zeus then responds that he has not forgotten the sensible hero but rather that “Lord Poseidon rages, unrelenting, because Odysseus destroyed the eye of godlike Polyphemus, his own son...so now Poseidon prevents Odysseus from reaching home but does not kill him” (1.68-76). Athena’s outright compassion and unfolding support for Odysseus contrast the will of Poseidon to make the Ithacan king suffer on his homeward journey. Athena supported Odysseus because of his sacrifices to her, courage, and intellect; she felt that his qualities mirrored hers as goddess of strategy. The work of Zeus and Athena to get Odysseus out of his trapped state on Calypso’s island reveals the typical Homeric conception of the “deathless gods”—often displaying dissent toward one another in effort to realize their own desires in the world of the mortals. Furthermore, Poseidon is not the only god or goddess who exceedingly supports the cause of one of his children. Back in the *Iliad*, Thetis’ unwavering care for her son, Achilles, shapes the narrative and Achilles’ reentry to the Trojan War. In book one, after Agamemnon takes Briseïs, Achilles wept and appealed to his mother, asking her to petition Zeus “in case he may be minded to assist the Trojans, drive back the Achaeans” in order that “Atreus’ son, wide-ruling Agamemnon, may know his delusion in failing to honor the best of the Achaeans” (*Il.* 1.408-412). Thetis honors her son’s request, and Zeus’ favor toward Thetis motivates his unfolding support for the Trojans, which goes against the wishes of Hera, his wife. As personal or selfish reasons prompt further and more direct involvement by the Olympian gods in the affairs of mortals, Homer often writes of the gods using disguises and deceit to help accomplish their purposes.

Homer depicts Athena as a goddess who frequently employs different disguises as she seeks to realize her goals in the world of the mortals. While Athena does display the ability to apply the power to change one's appearance to mortals, most often Athena herself is the subject of her power to disguise. The *Iliad* zooms in on the ninth year of the Trojan War and includes the stories of both Achilles' withdrawal from battle and then his return after Hector kills his comrade Patroclus. Athena, who had already empowered Achilles and other Achaean warriors with divine strength several times throughout the war, finds a most opportune moment for disguise when the Trojans retreat to within their city walls and Hector is left outside them. Hector decides to face Achilles rather than seek safety, driven by *aidos*, a fear of being shamed and humiliated amongst his own people. After Zeus holds up his golden balance and Hector's fate falls and points to Hades, Athena travels to the scene. She first encourages Achilles, telling him that they "two will bring back to the ships great glory for the Achaeans by killing Hector, great glutton for combat though he is!" (22.217-218). The goddess of strategy next appears to Hector but instead in the appearance and voice of his fellow Trojan, Deiphobos. She tells Hector that, in light of Achilles pursuing him around the entire city, "let's make a stand, hold fast here and defend ourselves!" (22.231). When Hector expresses his appreciation for Deiphobos joining him, Homer provides both Athena's response and insight to her strategic craftiness:

To him then replied the goddess, grey-eyed Athena:  
 "Honored brother, indeed my father and lady mother  
 begged and implored me in turn, as did my comrades,  
 to stay back, so greatly do all of them fear Achilles;  
 but the heart within me was worn down by bitter grief.  
 Now let's both attack him head-on, let us fight it out  
 with no sparing of spears, and discover whether Achilles  
 will kill us both, and carry our bloodstained armor back  
 to the hollow ships—or rather fall victim to your spear."  
 Speaking thus, with her cunning Athena led him on. (22.328-247)

Athena disguises herself in order to get Hector to fight Achilles and fall to his fate, death. As their fight unfolds, Hector cries out for Deïphobos and receives no answer, realizing that “it’s Athena who’s been here deceiving me!” (22.299). Rather than reveal herself and therefore her purpose, Athena’s absence as Deïphobos is what gives her away. While in other circumstances it is advantageous to reveal her identity, her lack of doing so in this case is what serves the Achaean cause best, as it leads to death of the greatest Trojan warrior. However, Homer also demonstrates circumstances in which Athena supports a hero’s cause by disguising herself and later revealing herself in an effort to strengthen her influence in the given situation. The *Odyssey* contains examples of this second scenario.

In this second epic, Homer emphasizes the divine power to disguise in the interactions between Athena, Odysseus, Telemachus, Penelope and her suitors. The supportive Phaeacians send Odysseus home with a vast array of gifts, and he is laid on his homeland’s shore. When he wakes up, he does not “recognize the place from which he had been absent for so long,” because “Pallas Athena cast a mist upon it, so she could tell him how things stood and make him unrecognizable to his own wife and family and neighbors, till he paid the suitors [of his wife] back for how they misbehaved” (*Od.* 13.189-195). This deceptive work of misting the city is one of four primary ways that Athena uses a power of disguise as the second half of the *Odyssey* unfolds. Soon enough, she appears to a weeping, seemingly lost Odysseus, telling him in the appearance of “a shepherd, young and soft-skinned as a prince” that he is on the famous land of Ithaca (13.221-249). Soon thereafter, Athena “changed her body to a woman’s” and tells Odysseus, “You failed to recognize me: I am Athena, child of Zeus. I always stand near you and take care of you, in all your hardships” (13.289-303). Once Odysseus lies about his true homeland, Athena reveals herself in the manner quoted above and provides Odysseus with words

of encouragement and support. Athena had disguised the land so that she would be able to speak with the heaven-favored hero first, and she disguised herself as a native of the Ithacan land. These two deceiving, divine tricks preceded the later transformations, in which Odysseus approaches his wife, son, the swineherd, and the suitors as an old beggar and Athena appears as Mentor for the second time in the epic. In these interactions disguise is employed so that Odysseus can test the loyalty of his wife, son, and other characters, gain information, and remain unrecognizable “till he paid the suitors back for how they misbehaved” (13.194-195). Earlier, prior to Odysseus’ return, Athena had disguised herself as Mentor in her time with Telemachus, an old and trusted friend of Odysseus, to help validate the prudent counsel that she provides and in order that she would be unrecognizable to the suitors. Upon Odysseus’ return to the house, she later appears as Mentor to end the conflict, making Odysseus’ household and the rebel Ithacans “swear solemn oaths of peace for future times—still in her guise as Mentor” (24.548-549). Athena exercises her power to disguise in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in ways that can be both harmful and supportive, depending on both the recipient and the circumstances. Homer’s emphasis on this deceptive power adds a sense of mystery and divinity to the immortal gods who are typically depicted with many mortal characteristics or traits. Furthermore, Homer attributes much power to the gods, adding explanation to the ploy of events and the realization of “fate.”

Homer’s heroes and characters ascribe dominion and power to their superiors, the deathless gods. This characterization fits in its larger Greco-Roman context: societies often explained wholesome outcomes or suffering in terms of the power and rule of a seemingly endless set of deities. In the *Iliad*, Zeus’ son Sarpedon is at risk when he and Patroclus, Odysseus’ friend, charge at each other. Homer then depicts a conversation between Zeus and Hera in which the former has a divided heart: “Shall I snatch him [Sarpedon] up while he lives

still...or shall I let him be vanquished by Patroclus, Menoetius's son?" (*Il.* 16.435-438). In response, Hera reprimands her husband, telling him that Sarpedon's fate to die at this point in the war has been "long since determined" (16.441). Zeus' contemplation depicts a Greek belief that the gods had some ability to act against fate or change it, even if they are usually constrained or act in accordance with it. This element to Homer's portrayal of the divine is also observable and frequent in the *Odyssey*. When Odysseus begins to recount his wanderings of misery to King Alcinous of Phaeacia, he rhetorically asks, "Where shall I start? Where can I end? The gods have given me so much to cry about" (*Od.* 9.15-16). As seen above in the story of Poseidon granting Polyphemus' prayer, Odysseus' afflictions are given a divine origin. Moreover, in addition to mortals attributing their circumstances to the gods, they also speak of divine power when a human achieves a high level of success or demonstrates unfathomable courage and skill. For example, when Amphimedon's spirit narrates to Agamemnon the killing of the suitors in the Underworld, he asserts that "it was apparent some god was helping them" as Odysseus' side of the conflict, "impelled by rage, rushed around the palace, killing" the suitors (24.182-184). Amphimedon believed divine assistance was present because of Odysseus' strength and success with the bow. Because of this display of shocking and impressive skill, he characteristically assumed a god was present in aid. The presence of the gods in these epics provides or adds to an explanation of why things occur as they do—because of the gods' desires or the existence of fate.

Through the stories narrating the rage of Achilles and the return of Odysseus, Homer provides insight to a Greek conception of the gods rooted in the Bronze and Dark Ages that influenced generations and cultures to come. The Homeric characterization espouses the Greco-

Roman motif regarding the divine: immortal beings with a power to disguise and a desire to intervene, providing an explanation for much suffering and good that mortal humans experience.

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