



Book 18: The Gods in the *Iliad* and the Role of Thetis

Below you will find an essay considering the role of the gods in Iliad 18.

Essay

One of the key features of the *Iliad* is the involvement of the gods in the affairs of men. Looking only at the first two hundred lines of the poem, we find no fewer than three major divine interventions: (i) Apollo's sending of a plague through the Greek camp, (ii) Hera putting the idea in Achilles' mind to call an assembly, and (iii) Athena's restraining of Achilles to prevent him from killing Agamemnon. In addition to this, the same two hundred lines see the introduction of a priest and a prophet: the former, Chryses, prays to Apollo to punish the Greeks for their ill-treatment of him; the latter, Calchas, reveals to the assembled Greeks why Apollo is acting as he is.

Divine interventions are common throughout the rest of the poem, too. In Book 3, Paris is saved from Menelaus when he is spirited away by Aphrodite. In Book 5, Athena helps Diomedes injure both Aphrodite and Ares, but is prevented from killing Aeneas by Apollo. In Book 11, Poseidon fights alongside the Greeks to protect the Greek camp, breathing strength and courage into the two Aiantes. In Book 20, Aeneas is plucked out of the fighting by Poseidon. In Book 21, it is only the timely intervention of Hera and Hephaestus that saves Achilles from drowning in the river Scamander. In Book 22, Athena returns Achilles' spear with which he has missed Hector. In Book 24, Hermes guides Priam across the battlefield in the middle of the night and helps him open the massive gate into Achilles' compound. The list could go on and on.

Most of the gods in the poem are partisan towards one side or the other. In Book 16, Apollo is described (accurately) by Achilles as having 'much love for the Trojans' (16.94), and indeed the god actively supports the Trojans throughout the poem. As well as the plague in Book 1, his deeds include: protecting Aeneas from Diomedes in Book 5, disarming Patroclus in Book 16, distracting Achilles in Book 21 by posing as the Trojan Agenor, breathing strength into Hector's legs in Book 22, and so on. The Greeks, for their part, can count on the support of Poseidon, Hera, and especially Athena. In Book 21, the gods stop supporting their particular sides and begin fighting each other directly: Athena against Ares, Poseidon against Apollo, Hera against Artemis. The *Iliad* is a poem where the gods are intensely interested in the affairs of men.



But the *Iliad* is also a poem where the gods are utterly indifferent to the affairs of men. In Book 21, Apollo and Poseidon are on the point of fighting one another when Apollo backs off: 'You would not say I was in my right mind if I do battle with you for the sake of wretched mortals, who are like leaves – for a time they flourish in a blaze of glory ... and then again they fade lifeless' (21.462-6). In other words: why should we bother fighting over mere mortals? In Book 24, Achilles explains to Priam that the gods are 'uncaring' (ἀκηδέες). In Book 1, we are presented with two major quarrels: one among men, and one among the gods. When Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel over the fates of Briseïs and Chryseïs, it sparks a series of events that leads to pain and misery, death and destruction – the whole *Iliad*, in other words. But when Zeus and Hera quarrel over Thetis' visit to Olympus, the argument is quickly resolved and the gods resume their banquet, enjoying their food and wine and the entertainment of a choir of Muses. The difference could not be more stark.

There are moments in the *Iliad* where the gods feel some of the pain that men and women do, but these are fleeting and lack anything like the depth of feeling of their mortal counterparts. In Book 16, Zeus agonises about saving his son from death, decides not to do so, and sends down drops of blood from heaven – not in grief, but in 'honour' of his dead son. In Book 15, Ares is grief-stricken when he finds out that his son, Ascalaphus, has been killed, but is almost immediately comforted by Athena, who tells him simply that: 'better men than he ... have already been killed, and will be killed yet. It is impossible for us to save everyone's family and children' (15.139-41). Ascalaphus is never mentioned again.

But then there is Achilles' mother, Thetis, the immortal goddess who in Book 18 mourns for the fate of her son with an emotional intensity that of many of the mortal women in the poem. Indeed, as Achilles says to her in Book 18, her lot is actually *worse* than that of mortal women: the grief of mortal women can be ended by death, whereas her immortality ensures that hers will be 'limitless' (μυρίον, 18.88). Moreover, as an ancient commentator on Book 18 pointed out, while mortal women such as Andromache are tragically unaware of what is going to happen to their loved ones, the divine Thetis is tragically aware of what is going to happen to hers. When reading (or hearing) the opening line of her speech at 18.54, her pain is almost palpable: her utterance of ὦ μοι ('alas!') not once but twice, the claim that she is 'wretched' (δειλή), and one of the most extraordinary *hapaxes* in the whole poem, δυσσαριστοτόκεια ('wretched mother to the best of sons'), emphasises the acuteness of her grief and despair.

In the *Iliad*, pain and suffering are supposed to be the preserve of mankind rather than the gods. The most common descriptors for the gods in the *Iliad* include 'deathless', 'blessed and 'everlasting'. Men, by contrast, are 'wretched'. In Book 24, after Achilles and Priam weep for those they have lost, Achilles reflects on the meaning of human suffering: 'This is the fate the gods have spun for poor mortal men, that we should live in misery, but they themselves should have no sorrows' (24.525-6). Achilles is almost right. Almost every god in the *Iliad* does live free from care. But he should have remembered his mother. With her tragic foreknowledge of what is going to happen to her son, she grieves for his death before it has even happened. When



Achilles does die, as he himself says in Book 18, her immortality – now a curse rather than a blessing – ensures that her grief will be limitless (μυρίον).

Before we leave Thetis to her limitless sufferings, however, we should think briefly about her role in Book 18. From a purely narrative point of view, this is simple enough: Thetis is the only means by which Achilles can acquire a new set of divine armour, without which he cannot return to battle.

But Thetis serves a range of other important roles in this scene, too. First, there is the symbolism of the scene, which is designed to resemble the funeral of Achilles, despite the fact that it is actually *Patroclus* who has died. As soon as Achilles hears the news of Patroclus' death, for example, he pours ash and dirt over himself (18.23-4) and lies on the ground. At this point his body is described as μέγας μεγαλωστί ('great in its greatness', 18.26), a phrase elsewhere used only of corpses. This image is enhanced by the arrival of Thetis, who goes up to the 'body' of her son and clasps his head in her hands (18.71) in what was a typical gesture of a female in mourning. The arrival of the Nereids completes the scene: they represent the other female mourners who were present at Greek funerals. The addition of Thetis and the Nereids enhances the imagery of the Greek funeral, providing a much more powerful sense of Achilles' funeral than simply Achilles lying on the ground.

Second, there is Thetis' contribution to the pathos of the scene. When Thetis arrives at the Greek camp, the first thing she asks Achilles is why he is so upset, given that his demands to Zeus in Book 1 have been answered to the letter: 'Look, all that you asked has been brought about by Zeus, when you held out your hands and prayed that all the sons of the Achaeans should be penned back by the sterns of their ships through want of you, and be put to terrible suffering' (18.75-77). Thetis is the only character who could have asked this question at this point in the poem: she is one of only three characters in the poem who know the details of what Achilles asked from Zeus in Book 1, while she must be the only character who does not yet realise that Patroclus has been killed. Her innocent confusion adds to the tragic irony of Achilles' situation: he had indeed asked for this all to happen, and yet... he did not ask for *this*.

Finally, Thetis contributes to the gravity of Achilles' decision to return by leaving it until now to reveal to him that he will die shortly after killing Hector: 'I must lose you to an early death, for what you're saying: since directly after Hector dies your own doom is certain' (18.95-6). Achilles has previously been told only that he is destined to a short life if he remained at Troy, but is given no other details about the circumstances of this death. Thetis' revelation at this point in the narrative is news to him, but it sets him up for one of the most powerful speeches in the poem:

'Then let me die ... since I was not to help my friend at his killing! [...] And now I shall go, to find the destroyer of that dear life, Hector – and I shall take my own death at whatever time Zeus and the other immortal gods wish to bring it on me.

18.98-99, 114-16



B L O O M S B U R Y

The poet could easily have had Achilles announce his decision to return to battle as soon as he found out that Patroclus was dead. By having Thetis reveal what this decision entails for Achilles, however, the poet can drive home the enormity of Achilles' decision at exactly the moment that he makes it. By revealing his fate here, Thetis allows Achilles to demonstrate why he is the greatest hero in the *Iliad*: he becomes the only hero in the poem who knows exactly what will happen to him if he returns to battle – and then decides to do it anyway.