

Chapter 19. The function of irony in mythical narratives

Hans Blumenberg and Homer's ludicrous gods

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Abstract. Dealing with Greek mythology, one inevitably encounters the problem of the ambiguous treatment of the Olympic pantheon. It seems that for the Greeks, the gods could be both the object of sincere reverence and the source of ironic laughter. This apparent paradox is especially striking in the epics of Homer, where solemn veneration can in a few verses turn into mockery, and vice versa. To rationalise this ambiguity, classical scholars have often attempted to artificially separate these two attitudes by ascribing them to different authors, ages or poetic registers. This point of departure, however, was motivated by the expectations of a monotheistic and thus anachronistic model they enforced upon Greek mythology.

I want to argue that these seemingly incompatible attitudes are two sides of the same coin, and that this ironic streak of Greek mythology is inherent to its function.

For this hypothesis, I base myself on the theories of Hans Blumenberg. This philosopher and classical philologist approached myth not as a particular archaic genre, but as a continuous process of symbolisation that enables man to reduce what he called the 'absolutism of reality' (*Wirklichkeitsabsolutismus*). This liminal concept refers to a condition of being totally overwhelmed by the undifferentiated threat of the outside world. The polytheistic pantheon and the stories that surround it are considered to be the primitive means by which man succeeded to differentiate this threat, and thus to restrict it. Mediated by myth, the absolutism of reality becomes both sublime and manageable. Irony forms a part of this process.

To concretise and illustrate these theories, I will apply them to some excerpts from the Homeric epics wherein the gods are depicted in an ironical way: the battle of the gods (*Ilias XX*), the story about the entrapment of Aphrodite and Ares by Hephaestus (*Odyssea* 8.266-369), and, in particular, the beguilement of Zeus by Hera (*Ilias XIV*).

1. Introduction

I would like to start my argument with a personal anecdote. One night, when I was still very young, my father took me for a walk in a nature reserve near our house. In

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the distance we could see some flickering lights, probably street lamps or something. But my father, who loved folk tales, told me that these little stars were will-o'-the-wisps, unbaptized souls that were doomed to roam the heath. He then warned me never to beckon to these lights, for they would take it as a sign that you were prepared to baptize them and come rushing to you at such a speed that it would crack your chest. Fascinated by the story, I tarried till I dropped behind and then, terrified, half-heartedly, beckoned. The only thing that followed me as I spurted back to my father was some whirling snowflakes. In spite of this experience, surprisingly, for years I kept thinking of the little sparkles on the heath as restless souls, will-o'-the-wisps, and nothing else. But maybe it is even more surprising that I beckoned altogether. For if I did believe my father's story, even slightly, I was taking a deadly risk, and if not, the gesture would have been meaningless. At the time, I think it would be correct to say, I understood my father's story as a myth. Like a myth it was a fascinating story that defined and explained a part of the world, but at the same time it was not totally clear whether I understood it to be fact or fiction, real or unreal. By beckoning, was I acknowledging or mocking the legend of the will-o'-the-wisps?

2. Homer's ambiguous portrayal of the gods: An age-old question

This inherent ambiguity of myth, the fact that it often seems to hover between mockery and veneration, is one of its most puzzling qualities. Another good example of this mythical paradox is found in Homer's ambiguous portrayal of the Olympian gods, the subject I want to discuss here. The Homeric gods are anthropomorphic. They are not only human, but all too human even. At the same time these belligerent, pretentious and childish creatures represent exalted cosmic forces that are deemed worthy of veneration and awe. Calhoun phrases the paradox very accurately:

The scandalous tale of Ares and Aphrodite, for example, ends on a note of serene beauty and dignity; in three lines we pass from a scene that might have shocked the goodwife of Bath to the august serenity of the most sacred shrine of earth's most potent goddess (θ 360-362). That majestic Zeus whose nod shakes great Olympus, the Zeus of Phidias and of all poets, is also the furtive, henpecked husband, made querulous by the thought of Hera's nagging, who presently finds relief in a ridiculous squabble with his consort (A 528-567). In the Theomachy is this same curious intermingling of the sublime with the ridiculous and vulgar, lines that are stigmatized as unspeakably bad by Leaf and Wilamowitz and lines that can be acclaimed for their sublimity by so critical a spirit as Edward Gibbon (Calhoun 1937a: 11-12).

This seeming discrepancy in Homer's conception of Olympus, which Calhoun calls 'one of the unsolved puzzles of Homeric study' (1937a: 11) has even troubled scholars of antiquity as early as the sixth century. It led to criticism of Xenophanes, the philosopher who was scandalised by the immorality of the gods, and to the allegoric readings of Theagenes and Pherecydes, who tried to exonerate Homer with their

distorting interpretations.² It can indeed be said that it was Homer's often ludicrous depiction of the gods that sparked off the first instances of literary criticism in Western history. The problem which had puzzled many scholars in Homeric studies continued in to the twentieth century when contested passages were often disposed of as late interpolations that were consciously critical. The original epics were assumed to be composed in

‘an ‘early’ period of simple faith and sincere religious feeling in which poets sing of the gods with reverence or exalt them as the benevolent rulers of the cosmos’,

while the scandalous scenes originated in

‘subsequent periods of iconoclastic scepticism – usually a concomitant of the Ionian philosophy – in which ‘later’ poets scoff and jeer at the deities of earlier generations.’³

It was only with the work of George Calhoun that this kind of thinking lost its legitimacy. He pointed out that

‘[i]n those instances in which the cultural background of mythology or religion is definitely known we find uniformly that naive, grotesque elements appear at a very primitive level and are in no way incompatible with devout religious feeling’ (Calhoun 1937b: 266-267).⁴

Calhoun assumed that the ‘grotesque elements’ in Homer came from ancient folk tales and *Märchen*⁵ and were combined with the more solemn material for aesthetic reasons. For him, chopping up Homer in different religious strata is

‘as intelligent as would be the assumption that the tesserae of different colours in a mosaic must have been set by different hands’ (Calhoun 1937b: 272).

Today, it is obvious that Calhoun's position has prevailed. Nowadays no one would consider marking the scandalous Homeric passages as interpolations. It is clear that those philologists who once did this were projecting the expectations and characteristics of a relatively modern, monotheistic system of belief – that of their own time and culture – on that of Homer. By now we have become aware that contradiction is common in human imagination and thinking, at an individual level as well as on a collective scale, and that mythic thinking in particular tolerates discrepancies to a far greater extent.⁶

² See also Sikes 1940: 123 and Detienne 1981: 12.

³ I quote from George M. Calhoun's ‘Higher Criticism on Olympus’ (1937: 258), in which he attacks such hypotheses, principally those of Wilamowitz and Finsler. I also refer to this article for a general survey of their positions.

⁴ G.S. Kirk also stresses that there is a constant between myth and fairytale, and that seriousness and play are consistently intertwined (Kirk 1990: 31).

⁵ See Calhoun's article ‘Homer's Gods – Myth and Märchen’ (1939), where he substantiates this theory with a list of fairy tale elements from Homer.

⁶ See also Keller: ‘One of the prime characteristics of primitive social forms is the ease with which they ignore consistency. This general proposition could be illustrated at length from Homer, entirely apart from the subject of rationalisation. For example, the gods are represented as eating with men, as enjoying the savor of sacrifices; yet it is elsewhere stated that they eat ambrosia (that is immortality), that a fluid called ‘ichor’ supplies for them the place of blood, and so on. Souls are incorporeal and like

Paul Veyne's study *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* (1983) has been crucial in that respect. In this work, Veyne has demonstrated how our modern opposition's true / false, fact / fiction and belief / disbelief simply do not fit myth. These concepts are anachronistic when applied to the Greeks and their relation to mythology, because 'the distinction between fiction and reality had yet to be made' (Veyne 1988:17). So the question of whether the Greeks believed in their own myths cannot simply be answered with yes or no, because 'believing' meant something totally different to them.⁷ Veyne lays bare the historicity of the concept of truth and states that myth was not, and cannot be evaluated by that standard. It was a *tertium quid*, neither true nor false (Veyne 1988: 28).⁸ For instance, he illustrates this statement by citing the work of Dan Sperber on the mythic convictions of the Ethiopian Dorzé concerning the leopard:

[T]he leopard is a Christian animal who respects the fasts of the Coptic Church, the observance of which, in Ethiopia, is the principal test of religion. Nonetheless, a Dorzé is no less careful to protect his livestock on Wednesdays and Fridays, the fast days, than on other days of the week. He holds it true that leopards fast and that they eat every day. Leopards are dangerous every day; this he knows by experience. They are Christians; tradition proves it (Veyne 1988: xi).

So Veyne would definitely argue against the old thesis that the scandalous Olympian sections are late interpolations. Just as the leopard can be considered both a piously ascetic Christian and a dangerous predator at the same time, it is not a contradiction for the Homeric gods to be considered ridiculous childish creatures and divine cosmic entities at the same time.

However, there is an important distinction between Calhoun's argumentation and that of Veyne. While Veyne speaks of the functioning of thoughts and beliefs, Calhoun limits himself ultimately to discussing the workings of literature. He sees the two contradictory images of the gods not as two sides of the same religious coin, but as different stylistic elements that Homer combines to make his story more attractive. The sublime gods are 'the gods of religion, or of his ethical thought' while their ridiculous counterparts are exponents of a vulgar folk tradition, 'the ancient, grotesque gods of myth, crystallized in their unchanging tradition' (Calhoun 1937a: 17). In this way, even Calhoun's solution holds on to the old division. When it comes down to it, he flinches from confronting the possibility that Homeric religion is simply radically different from the modern one and inherently *allows* for this contradiction. By refusing to take the ambiguity of the Homeric gods seriously, he misses out on the chance of considering more far-ranging conclusions. For a literary work is never merely a

smoke; yet Odysseus can keep them away from his blood-filled trench at the point of the sword' (Keller 1910: 652-653).

⁷ And even for us, Veyne argues, matters of true or false, believing or disbelieving are not as clear-cut as we like to think. Another very illuminating study on the relativity of the verb 'to believe', that follows a similar line of thought, is Jean Pouillon's article 'Remarques sur le verbe 'croire'' (1979).

⁸ Marcel Detienne's *Les maîtres de la vérité dans la Grèce archaïque* (1967) should also be mentioned here, as it substantiates the fact that the concept of truth is historically and culturally defined.

literary work; it reflects a world of thought, real mentalities and attitudes.

Surprisingly, Calhoun's approach has set the tone in Homeric studies for the treatment of the problem right up to the present day. Even the sophisticated Laurence Coupe still glosses over the strangely ambiguous character of the Homeric gods by reducing them to mere literary tools:

The deities of Homer are, significantly, presented as vividly, sometimes ridiculously, anthropomorphic: they exhibit all the lust and greed, pettiness and spite, of which humans are capable. They shift their allegiances in the war according to whim, or decide to hinder the hero's progress because of some nurtured grievance. They are primarily literary devices, which help to get the tale told (Coupe 1997: 102).

Although we agree with the fact that the Homeric epics are primarily literary works and not theological treatises, we cannot ignore their powerful religious dimensions. Furthermore, the conclusion that the element of parody, even mockery, was not incompatible with sincere veneration, leaves us with the question of how both sides are interrelated. How should we conceive of this religious attitude? And what was the function of this parodical element?

In what follows, I want to propose an answer to this question on the basis of the theories developed by the German thinker Hans Blumenberg in his work *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979).⁹ Blumenberg has developed a fresh and challenging conception of the workings of myth and looks at parody as an important element of the mythical, vital to its functioning. After giving a compendious survey of Blumenberg's line of reasoning, I will further explore the meaning of the concepts of parody and irony and try to conceptually adapt them to the Homeric context. I will then attempt to prove the usefulness of these theories by checking them against the epics themselves, and apply them specifically to the three challenged passages Calhoun mentions: the Theomachy and the *Dios Apatè* in the *Iliad*, and the story of Ares and Aphrodite in the *Odyssey*.

3. Blumenberg and the absolutism of reality: Strategies to keep the gods at bay

Being both a philosopher and a philologist, Hans Blumenberg approached myth from a dual perspective. In his work, mythology refers not only to the stories we call myths, but also to a more abstract conception, a modality of imagining and thinking that gives structure to the world by narration. The point of departure for Blumenberg was the work of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who in his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923-1929) tried to bridge the gap between the Enlightenment's distrust for myth and Romanticism's idealisation of it. Blumenberg adopts Cassirer's insight of not seeing *mythos* as the opposite of *logos*, but as a preliminary phase, a steppingstone towards it. For Blumenberg the only problem with this theory is that it implies that once the stadium of *logos* is reached, myth should become redundant and dissolve.

⁹ From here on, I will refer to the English translation *Work on Myth* (1985) by Robert Wallace.

This, according to Blumenberg, has never happened. Myth is still, implicitly or explicitly, omnipresent. His conclusion is that myth cannot be a primitive and imperfect form of *logos*. Since myth is not made futile by *logos*, then it must serve some other purpose, a purpose of its own. This is why Blumenberg proposes that we stop studying myth from the point of a *terminus ad quem*, that is from the point of *logos* which should evolve in an almost teleological way, but should instead look at it from its *terminus a quo*, from the situation out of which myth originated, or from the problem that triggered it.

To conceptualise this situation, Blumenberg is forced to create a sort of anthropological myth himself, and to use what he calls a liminal concept: the *Absolutismus der Wirklichkeit*, absolutism of reality. Absolutism of reality refers to a certain state of total fear and paralysis that overtook primitive man – or should have overtaken him – when he left his biological niche as an animal and exchanged the habitat of the woods for the vast plains of the savannah. In this environment with its open horizon, to which he was no longer adapted, danger could come from anywhere. Reacting to possibilities and threats of the environment was no longer a matter of reflexes and instincts; for the first time, a future had to be anticipated:

What is here called the absolutism of reality is the totality of what goes with this situational leap, which is inconceivable without super-accomplishment in consequence of a sudden lack of adaption. Part of this is the capacity of foresight, anticipation of what has not yet taken place, preparation for what is absent, beyond the horizon. It all converges on what is accomplished by concepts. Before that, though, the pure state of indefinite anticipation is ‘anxiety’. To formulate it paradoxically, it is intentionality of consciousness without an object. As a result of it, the whole horizon becomes equivalent as the totality of the directions from which ‘it can come at once’ (Blumenberg 1985: 4).

Absolutism of reality is not the fear of some particular threat, but exactly the more radical form of anxiety that occurs when the threat *is not* specified, is everywhere and nowhere, reality itself. Against this *Angst* – the German word is more appropriate – no defence is possible because it is absolute, unrestricted by forms or names. However, absolutism of reality is a liminal concept. Man has never been overwhelmed by it in this measure. As far as we can go back, it has always been kept at bay by something that could turn this total, undefined *Angst* into ‘mere’ concrete fear, directed at a well-defined danger. This was accomplished by means of myth.¹⁰

Many factors have contributed to the exact shaping of mythical narratives including among other factors psychological, biological, and socio-political realities. Yet for Blumenberg the reasons why these stories have taken these particular forms is less important, than the fact *that they have* taken these specific forms – no matter what these forms may be. By these means, man succeeds in structuralizing his world, in

¹⁰ Blumenberg’s ‘*a quo*’- approach is consistent with Kenneth Burke’s remark on myth: ‘critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are *strategic* answers, *stylized* answers’ (Quoted in Coupe 1997: 177, italics in the original).

making it appear comprehensible, even controllable. In the first place this is not achieved through *logos*, reason, but through imagination, for reason itself only becomes possible on irrational premises:

[A]nxiety must again and again be rationalised into fear, both in the history of mankind and in that of the individual. This occurs primarily, not through experience and knowledge, but rather through devices like that of the substitution of the familiar for the unfamiliar, of explanations for the inexplicable, of names for the unnameable (Blumenberg 1985: 5).

Myth's primal function is to give the uncontrollable and indefinable¹¹ a face and a name: it takes the form of monsters and gods. By this, the horror is channelled and mitigated into milder emotions: awe, astonishment and rapture (Blumenberg 1985: 62). The mystery becomes more *fascinans* than *tremendum*, to use, as Blumenberg sometimes does, Rudolf Otto's terms.

The process of restricting the threat by naming and delimiting it leads to even further ramifications: more and more names appear to classify the sacred, with more and more stories and particularities attached to them. A mythology comes into being. The main aim of this mythology is the division of power. Therefore, Blumenberg argues, religion was originally always polytheistic. For every threatening Poseidon, there must be a helpful Athena, for every vindictive Hera, there must be a benevolent Zeus. This is also the reason why mythology loves to portray the gods as a bunch of quarrelsome children:¹² 'Not only to be able to shield oneself from one power with the aid of another, but simply to see one as always occupied and entangled with the other, was an encouragement to man deriving from there mere multiplicity' (Blumenberg 1985: 14). In a later stage, some religions will indeed turn to monotheism. I cannot go into this issue here, and will restrict myself to saying that even then mythology tries to confine the god's powers, by a covenant, a treaty he enters with man, but also by introducing saints, angels and even a Mother of God to mollify his wrath (see Blumenberg 1985: 22-23 and 140).

With this theory about the division of powers, Blumenberg provides an explanation for a multitude of properties of mythology, like the polytheistic origin of religion, the superabundance of names in mythological genealogies and the quarrelsome nature of the gods. But there is more that seems to be consistent with his theory, like the fact that the Olympians are not the primordial gods, but were preceded by several older generations. In contrast with the rude gods of the past, Blumenberg suggests, man could depict the present gods as charitable and well-disposed towards man. Moreover, the fact that Zeus had not ruled the world since the beginning of time suggested that his reign was not absolute and did not have to last eternally. The story of Prometheus, not accidentally the creator and champion of man, reminds us that even Zeus is not invincible in the end.

Of course, the function of myth is not to totally deny the threat posed by the

¹¹ Outside *and* inside us, psychoanalysis would argue.

¹² Discussing the Homeric epics, Calhoun even goes as far as to call the quarrelling of the gods the 'dominant motif of the Olympian scenes throughout both poems' (Calhoun 1939a: 22).

sacral. On the contrary, myth can only work properly if it represents the horror. But it allows us the choice of how we represent it: the Titans, the vengeful Zeus that causes the Deluge, creatures like Python and Typhon, are all set in a distant past, and the monsters that roamed the earth are consistently accompanied by heroes that get the better of them. And as the work of mythology advances, even the monsters lose their grim disposition and become alluring.¹³ This is what happened to Medusa, who through the ages iconographically evolved from a hideous beast to an image of agonized beauty (Blumenberg 1985: 15, 65-66). Blumenberg considers the Gorgon to be exemplary for the workings of myth. Her capacity to turn those who look her in the face into stone seems to suggest the paralysing panic of the absolutism of reality. Like all monsters, she is a ragbag of animal body parts. This hybrid, polymorphous body reflects the amorphous, undefined fear she symbolizes, but at the same time the minute description defines and restricts it. Apollodorus describes her with snakes instead of hair, a tongue that hung out between an enormous set of teeth, iron claws and dragon scales, but, as Blumenberg remarks, 'each of [these] details [...] makes Medusa more harmless' (Blumenberg 1985: 116-117). Myth is Perseus' mirror-shield that reflects our fears in an image we can face and by doing so enables us to conquer them. Once Medusa is defeated, we can incorporate her powers. The head becomes beneficial; it merges with the protective aegis of sublime Athena.

But next to description and division of power, there is another important stratagem of myth that Blumenberg discusses, which is the one that concerns us here, its comical character. His theory on this matter may be a valuable addition to Calhoun's insights, since he shows how the ambiguous image of the Homeric gods may be motivated by more than simply aesthetic reasons. The problem has always been closely connected to the question to what extent ancient people literally 'believed' in their myths. After all, is not mocking the gods only a step away from denying their existence altogether? Blumenberg has a paradoxical answer to this question. On the one hand, he affirms that the mockery of the gods is a form of rebellion against them, a declaration of independence. On the other hand, this mockery is not contradictory to myth. Far from that, it is one of the 'techniques of work on myth' (Blumenberg 1985: 33). Parody may seem to undermine the authority of the gods, but at the same time it confirms them, makes them possible, bearable. We can only endure a god that to some extent we know we can defy. Parody is a method that ensures we can defy them.

This is what Homer does when he pokes fun at the gods, and this is what I did when I beckoned the will-o'-the-wisps. 'To make the god endure curses, mockery, and blasphemous ceremonies is to feel out and possibly to displace the limits on which one can rely. To provoke the savior to the point where he comes [...]. One can do this, or say that, without being struck by lightning. It is the first stage of 'Enlightenment' satire, of rhetorical secularization as a stylistic technique employed by a spirit that is not yet confident of its enlightened status (Blumenberg 1985: 16-17). So

¹³ See Woodford 2003: 133-140 for some specific examples of how the images of monsters evolved during antiquity.

when I assured myself that the unbaptized souls on the heath were really not that dangerous, I was on a small scale preparing my own Enlightenment. But at the same time the gesture made it possible for me for the first time to confidently believe in these spirits; it reassured me, that by admitting their existence, I was not admitting some terrible power in the world that could not be controlled. On the contrary, the will-o'-the-wisps provided me with an image in which I could store some of the 'absolutism of reality'. With them, some of my fears were banned to the heath, to a no man's land between reality and fiction.

4. Irony, human helplessness and the divine viewpoint

Up until now, I have used Blumenberg's term 'parody'. This concept is of course inevitably anachronistic: if we follow Veyne and Blumenberg we have to assume that mockery came naturally to the Greeks when dealing with their gods. Homer mentally did not have to make the shift to a specific genre or stylistic device when he inserted his comical passages, as Calhoun would certainly have it, and as the term 'parody' implies. However, there are additional reasons why this word is not entirely adequate. A classical definition considers parody to be 'any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice' (Dentith 2000: 9). Definitions may vary, of course, but the element of a serious original seems to be elementary. In my reading of Blumenberg however, it is essential that there never *was* such an original, there never *was* an 'early period of simple faith and sincere religious feeling.' On the contrary, Blumenberg's theory implies that the mocking attitude towards the gods was the original one, and that the kind of religion that could distinguish sincerity from mockery, fiction from fact, only became possible *after* this period of 'work on myth'.

Blumenberg stresses that for him, there is no original myth, only '*Arbeit am Mythos*': 'I do not want to leave room for the assumption that 'myth' is the primary, archaic formation, in relation to which everything subsequent can be called reception. [...] [T]he process of reception has itself become a presentation of its manner of functioning' (Blumenberg 1985: 118). There is no original myth to be found, since myth is not a certain fixed genre, but a movement away from something. The parodic tone of these stories should not be interpreted as an allusion to a serious original, but rather as an essential and inextricable feature of what myth is and does. Thus, we are obliged to work with oppositions and concepts that do not suit myth because only the work of myth made these oppositions and concepts possible in the first place. It would be more correct to state that the comical engendered the serious rather than the other way round.¹⁴

¹⁴ See also Csapo 2005: 7: 'Our own concept of false narrative depends on our concept of true account, and the opposition false / true narrative is shaped by such other oppositions as myth / science, legend /

So the difficulty in approaching this problem is that our perception is fundamentally incommensurable to the Greek one.¹⁵ But if we *would* venture to use a modern term to describe this aspect of Greek mythology, I think ‘irony’ would be a good choice. For while the concept of parody relies strongly on the opposition between a serious original and a playful copy, the concept of irony has always implied ambiguity, contradiction and doubt. I will elucidate this by looking a bit closer at the theory of irony.

We use the word ‘irony’ for many and different kinds of acts and speech acts. But to keep it simple, we can begin to define it with the classical notions of simulation and dissimulation: ‘pretending to be what one is not and pretending not to be what one is’ (Muecke 1970: 25). In the schoolbook example of Marc Antony’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, when he claims that ‘Brutus is an honourable man’, Marc Antony implies that Brutus, on the contrary, is an unscrupulous murderer. But to speak of irony, there must at least be a possibility that someone might have taken Marc Anthony’s words literally. So the classical definition of irony implies on the one hand the self-conscious ironist, together with, in most cases, an accomplice audience that understands his real intentions, and on the other hand, the victim, a naive listener who is fooled by the ironist’s dissimulation (Hutcheon 2005: 43). But, as is clear even in this simplified situation, the literal interpretation must always be possible – if not, we would not speak of irony but of mockery. The essence of irony is doubt: there must always remain a certain ambiguity.

So in reality, more often than not, the ironist’s intention is not completely clear, not even to himself. This is something that distinguishes the ironist from the parodist, who can clearly draw the line between the serious original and the mocking parody. The true meaning of what is said is suspended; it is constantly shifting from one side to the other. This is what Kenneth Burke means when he poetically calls irony the ‘dancing of an attitude’ (Burke 1989: 79). Therefore, most theorists of irony also allow for broader definitions – this irony is based not on dissimulation but on ambiguity and paradox. Some go even further and speak of something like ‘general’ or ‘cosmic’ irony, no longer a simple trope, but a general attitude towards life. Schlegel, for example, considered irony to be the ‘recognition of the fact that the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality’ (Quoted in Muecke 1970: 19).

One of these theorists, Douglas Muecke, sees this general irony as a reaction to the human condition itself: irony is man’s makeshift measure to cope with his in-

history, myth or legend / literature. Westerners invented the concepts of science, history, and literature partly to distinguish our own culture thought and expression from that of mythmaking societies. How, then, could these distinctions be the same for us and them?’

¹⁵ ‘What remains extraordinarily difficult to establish is the effect of this parody on the sacred stories themselves. Part of the difficulty concerns the very status of religious myth in classical Greece. [...] [T]he categories of the modern (*i.e.* post-medieval) world simply do not translate to this early social world. [...] At all events, the Greeks seemed able to sustain an attitude or frame of mind in which the serious forms and their parodic counterparts could exist side by side, even when these serious forms – and thus their parodies - carried some of the most sacred stories of their culture’ (Dentith 2000: 40-41).

ability to understand and control the world. ‘So that what is called World Irony or Philosophical Irony or Cosmic Irony is sometimes little more than a presentation of the helplessness of men in the face of an indifferent universe, a presentation coloured with feelings of resignation and melancholy or even despair, bitterness, and indignation’ (Muecke 1970: 69). What Muecke says here about irony is, of course, almost exactly the same as what Blumenberg says about myth: both are described as a reaction to human vulnerability. One step further, and Muecke’s description of General Irony leads us right back to Blumenberg’s theories about the absolutism of reality: ‘This lightness may be but is not necessarily an inability to feel the terrible seriousness of life; it may be *a refusal to be overwhelmed by it*, an assertion of the spiritual power of man over existence’ (Muecke 1970: 36, my italics).

Since for Muecke the concept of irony touches upon the (lack of) meaning of human existence itself, it is not at all surprising that his general irony also has an important religious dimension. He starts out from the idea that the ironic smile has its origins in the experience of looking down at the misery or helplessness of others while being in a position of control:

In Lucretius, Lucan, Cicero, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Bacon, Heine, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Amiel, Tennyson, Meredith, not to mention the Bible, we find the idea that looking down from on high upon the doings of men induces laughter or at least a smile. The ironic’s awareness of himself as observer tends to enhance his feeling of freedom and induce a mood perhaps of serenity, or joyfulness, or even exultation. His awareness of the victim’s unawareness invites him to see the victim as bound or trapped where he feels free; committed where he feels disengaged; swayed by emotions, harassed, or miserable, where he is dispassionate, serene, or even moved to laughter; trustful, credulous or naïve, where he is critical, sceptical, or content to suspend judgement (Muecke 1970: 37).

Muecke claims it is based on this experience that the ironic attitude is modelled. He proceeds:

From this point of view the archetypal ironist is God – ‘he that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.’ He is the ironist par excellence because he is omniscient, omnipotent, transcendent, absolute, infinite, and free. [...] In earthly art Irony has this meaning – conduct similar to god’s. The archetypal victim of irony is man, seen, per contra, as trapped and submerged in time and matter, blind, contingent, limited, and unfree – and confidently unaware that this is his predicament (Muecke 1970: 37-38).

For Muecke, the mental construction of the concept of divinity and the ironic disposition are closely related. Muecke considers irony a paradoxical attitude of looking down on one’s own limitations from the viewpoint of a god.

At this point, I come back to our Olympian gods, who hold this same position of supreme irony. Take, for example, the final verses of Sophocles’ tragedy *Women of Trachis*:

Let all men here forgive me, / And mark the malevolence /
Of the unforgiving gods / In this event.
We call them / Fathers of sons, and they /
Look down unmoved / Upon our tragedies. /

[...] Women of Trachis, you have leave to go. / You have seen strange things, /
The awful hand of death, new shapes of woe, / Uncounted sufferings; /
And all that you have seen / Is God.

In Homer's *Iliad*, the Gods are only slightly less callous towards human suffering. They have much in common with the superior beings Jenyn describes in a passage quoted by Muecke:

As we drown whelps and kittens, they amuse themselves, now and then, with sinking a ship, and stand round the fields of Blenheim, or the walls of Prague, as we encircle a cockpit. As we shoot a bird flying, they take a man in the midst of his business or pleasure, and knock him down with an apo-plexy. Some of them, perhaps, are virtuosi, and delight in the operations of an asthma, as a human phi-losopher in the effects of the air-pump. To swell a man with a tympany is as good sport as to blow a frog. Many a merry bout have these frolic beings at the vicissitudes of an ague, and good sport it is to see a man tumble with an epilepsy, and revive and tumble again, and all this he knows not why (Muecke 1970: 30-31).

In the same dispassionate way, Apollo crushes Patroclus with a simple gesture or spreads plague in the Greek camp. In the same way, Athena light-heartedly tricks Hector into walking towards his death. But most of the time, they just gaze at us from above. Griffin even states that 'looking on' is the very essence of the concept 'god' (Griffin 1978: 1) and Austin claims that

'the first function of Homer's gods is to witness the world' (Austin 1989: 141).

But the interesting thing, of course, is that in the Homeric epics these same powerful gods are made a laughingstock in their turn. And this, I want to argue, is exactly what Homeric parody of the gods is all about: if man can conceive of being looked at ironically it is only a small step to reverse the gaze. This is also exactly what Muecke claims irony enables us to do: that is the ability to take on a double viewpoint, of changing places with the gods. Blumenberg as well would agree that man can only tolerate the overwhelming power of the gods if he is able to downplay it somehow and that this is what myth (*i.e.* parody) does. Let us then take a look at the Homeric epics themselves and see if we can recognize this pattern there. We will take a look at the three most notorious instances of Olympian ridiculousness, the ones already summed up by Calhoun: the Theomachy, the *Dios Apatè* and, finally, the entrapment of Ares and Aphrodite. The point I will try to make is that even at a very concrete textual level, we can clearly find that the helplessness of the gods is a reversed reflection of human suffering.

5. The ironic attitude and the Homeric gods: Theomachy, Dios Apatè and the entrapment of Ares and Aphrodite

The first passage we will discuss is the Theomachy. At the point where the battle over Troy reaches its peak, Zeus allows the other gods to freely participate in the battle and

fight each other. In this bombastic scene, Homer pulls out all the stops:

[O]n the other gods fell strife momentous and dire, and in different directions the heart in their breasts was blown. Together then they clashed with a mighty din and the wide earth rang, and round about great heaven pealed as with a trumpet. And Zeus heard it where he sat on Olympus, and the heart within him laughed with joy as he saw the gods joining in strife (*Iliad* XXI, 385-390).¹⁶

The first thing that draws our attention here is the peculiar role of Zeus, who stays at Olympus to enjoy the show. As far as focalisation is concerned, the position of Zeus is obviously identical to the position of the reader / listener, who is encouraged by these lines to ‘laugh with joy as he sees the gods join in strife’, as does the ruler of Olympus himself. In Zeus we immediately recognise the detached ironic onlooker, watching from up high, smiling.

And the spectacle will give him cause for smiling. It may indeed be the most striking case of the ‘intermingling of the sublime with the ridiculous and vulgar’, as Calhoun puts it (1937: 11-12). The lines that paint the gods’ descent from Olympus are truly majestic: their battle cries fill the air, and the earth shakes so hard that Hades fears it will crack and reveal the shady realms of the dead (*Iliad* XX, 47-70). The battle itself, however, is not that exalted. The gods boast and rail against each other like little children. The goddesses especially do not act very worthy. The catfight between Hera and Artemis particularly descends, ending with Hera smacking the goddess of hunt over the ears with her own bow, after which she runs off crying to Zeus like a little girl – something her father seems to find rather amusing.

The other element that immediately catches the eye is the parallel with the situation of the mortals. Human tragedy is about to culminate – Achilles is setting out to kill Hector thereby sealing the fate of Troy and consciously securing his own death sentence. Precisely at this point in the story, where the suffering becomes almost unbearable, the gods take over the battlefield and replace tragedy with comedy. There is absolutely no narrative need for this fight between the gods; it changes nothing in the outcome of the story. But it does serve as a counterweight to the battle of the humans – sometimes the duels are obviously modelled on previous combats between mortal champions. This scene of comic relief has a reassuring effect: for once we mortals watch as the gods themselves struggle on the battlefield. Even if none of them loses his life, they do all lose their detachedness and dignity. The divinity that wins the most sympathy is Hermes, who is put in against Leto, but makes his escape with the witticism that he finds it far too dangerous to fight a lover of Zeus. He unheroically tells Leto she is free to boast her victory over him amongst the gods.

In the second scene, the famous *Dios Apatè* or beguilement of Zeus, it is the father of gods and men himself who is shown up. To have free hand in helping the Achaeans, which Zeus has forbidden her, Hera plots to seduce her husband and put him to sleep. With the help of Hypnos and the magical girdle of Aphrodite, her plan succeeds: Zeus becomes so enchanted by his wife’s beauty that he does not see

¹⁶ Translation by A.T. Murray, Loeb Classical Library.

through her plans and wants to make love to her there and then. Hera for a moment feigns to object: she would be ashamed, she says, if the other gods would see them lying there together. Zeus however quickly does away with that objection:

‘Hera, fear not in this that any god or man will see, with such a cloud shall I enfold you, a cloud of gold. Through it not even Helios could discern us, though his sight is the keenest of all for seeing.’ At that the son of Cronos clasped his wife in his arms [...]. Thus in quiet slept the father on topmost Gargarus, by sleep and love subdued [...] (*Iliad* XIV, 342-353).¹⁷

Typically this scene has been interpreted both as the sacred *hieros gamos* of heaven and earth, and as a late interpolation, a sceptical mockery of the Olympians.

Again, the theme of someone looking on is extremely important for the shameful and comic character of the whole situation. Even Helios cannot look through this nebula, Zeus tells Hera (XIV, 342-345). That may well be so, but there is a gaze even more pervasive than that of Helios: for Homer himself watches on, and we with him. So we are literally placed above the highest of the gods and look down on him as he finds himself in a position of ignorance and helplessness. In the meantime, the war for Helen is going on below. But at least we know now that even Zeus is not above losing his head over a beautiful woman.

The third and last scene I will discuss is maybe the most striking example. It is the well-known story of the adulterous love affair of Ares and Aphrodite, who are caught in the act by Aphrodite’s husband Hephaestus. Hephaestus, who was warned by all-seeing Helios, has forged an invisible and unbreakable net that falls over the lovers and binds them tight. The god of smithy then invites the other gods to come and look:

‘Father Zeus, and you other blessed gods that are forever, come hither that you may see a matter laughable and unendurable, how Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, scorns me for being lame and loves hateful Ares because he is handsome and strong of limb, whereas I was born misshapen. [...] [Y]ou shall see where these two have come up into my bed and sleep together in love, while I am filled with grief at the sight. [...] ‘ [T]he gods, the givers of good things, stood in the gateway; and unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods as they saw the craft of wise Hephaestus (*Odyssey* VIII, 306-327).¹⁸

The ironic audience, here, is more present than ever: it is the group of gods around Hephaestus’ bed, onlookers who entertain themselves from their safe, superior position by watching the helplessness and shame of others. Homer of course focalizes not through the eyes of the unhappy victims, but through this divine audience: the ironic smile of the reader or listener is theirs.

But let us now look at the precise context in which this story is embedded. The tale is sung by the Phaeacian singer Demodocus, and in his audience we find Odysseus, on his way back from Troy to Ithaca. For the first time in his eventful, many years journey home he has some real hope of actually getting there with the help of the friendly Phaeacians. Homer does not tell this story here randomly: there are obvious parallels to be drawn between Odysseus’ situation and that of Hephaestus. First of

¹⁷ Translation by A.T. Murray, Loeb Classical Library.

¹⁸ Translation by A.T. Murray, Loeb Classical Library.

all, Odysseus also has reason to fear for the conjugal fidelity of his wife since he has been away from home for twenty years now. As we know, suitors are indeed planning to take his place on his throne and in his bed at that very moment. Both, moreover, are famous for their cunning: Hephaestus is called *poluphronos* (ingenious, inventive) (*Odyssey* VIII, 297), a word that of course immediately recalls the typical epitheton of Odysseus, *polutropos*. The adjective *poluphronos* itself is only used eight times in the *Odyssey*, and every single time for one of them both, Hephaestus or Odysseus. In addition, they are both craftsmen: we know of Odysseus that he has built his own bedroom and has inventively forged his own bed out of the trunk of an old olive tree (*Odyssey* XXIII, 181-205).¹⁹

We can imagine what goes through Odysseus' head while he listens to the singer's story. But we, who listen to Homer, know that his wife Penelope has been as faithful as Aphrodite was fickle. It is no coincidence that the motive of the conjugal bed is stressed. For while Hephaestus can complain that his shameless wife cheats on him in his own bed, for Odysseus the olive tree bed, that links him to the god, will become the symbol of Penelope's loyalty. Once Odysseus finally arrives at Ithaca, Penelope, afraid that he might be an impostor, puts him to the test by suggesting that the bed be removed from his bedroom and put elsewhere. At that point, the collected Odysseus for once loses his grip on himself. Angrily he asks how the bed could have been replaced, as it is literally rooted in the ground. He then tells the story about how he made it, a story known to no stranger. This is the final sign for Penelope to accept that Odysseus is really her long lost husband. Their marriage proves to be as stable and indestructible as the remarkable bed they share.

So for once, the comparison between god and man works out in favour of the mortal.

'[T]he marriage of the Ithacan couple is of such a nature as to make the gods themselves envious. "The gods imposed these woes on us," explains Penelope in XXIII: 210-212, "because they were jealous of our living together to enjoy our youth and reach the threshold of old age." For the relationship of Odysseus and Penelope, uniquely stable amongst mortals, is equally rare among the gods as well. Aphrodite, the fairest of the Olympian goddesses, and Hephaestus, shrewd patron of intelligence and craft, do not live in such secure happiness with one another. Their marriage is flimsy as the invisible net which catches the wife in an adulterous embrace' (Newton 1987: 19).

So we, mortals, who listen to the story of Ares and Aphrodite, have the rare pleasure not only to experience the feeling of literally looking down upon such powerful divinities, but also the hope that we can do better than them.

The gods are a thinking concept. Just as man can borrow their distant perspective, they can take over man's helplessness. There is an extreme satisfaction in this, of course. For without openly revolting (this would only be terrifying and would destroy the god's effectiveness as representative of the absolutism of reality), man can have a taste of what it is like to switch roles. This, of course, can only be done with extreme

¹⁹ The parallel has been noticed and discussed by several authors. For a survey, see Newton 1987 and Brown 1989.

caution and subtlety. This irony is never in contradiction with the divine power; ultimately, the ironic tone of myth is recognition of the gods' superiority. Yet, their supreme position is only useful and bearable to the imagination of man when it is balanced by a parodic tone. But never is the irony implying that the gods should or could be more dignified. Homer's irony is General Irony, the irony that simply acknowledges that a 'serious' look at life is just not an option: for reality is far too complex, ambiguous and paradoxical to approach it in a straightforward manner. Life is too complex to fit the dichotomy of play and sincerity, of reality and fiction, since we can only come to a concept of reality through fiction, through myth.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show how the theories of Hans Blumenberg, in particular his notion of the 'parodic' function of myth, can help us to conceptualise the function of Homer's ambiguous portrayal of the gods, and thus make the Homeric epics more accessible. In my discussion of the three 'scandalous' Olympian scenes, I hope to have demonstrated how this parody or irony serves to mitigate the discrepancy between the helplessness of humans and the omnipotence of the gods. Every time, the situation of the Olympians stood in direct relation to the situation of the mortal heroes. And every time, the focalisation of the text allowed for a turning of the tables, putting the reader / listener in a position where they could view the comical mishaps of the gods.

This kind of reasoning, of course, is by nature speculative and can claim no more than to offer a working hypothesis. But it was never my intention to give some ultimate, fully underpinned interpretation of this ambiguity in the Homeric presentation of the gods. To do this is practically impossible. Rather, my aim was to supply for a conceptual line of thinking that allowed the present-day reader of Homer to step out of a certain modern mindset, that is constructed around a set of dichotomies that probably were not Homer's, and to become aware of the possibility of looking at these texts in a different way. Truth and falsity, fact and fiction, play and sincerity, are all oppositions that are central to our thinking so we can never fully abandon them. Neither is it possible to make a real reconstruction of how these semantic fields functioned and related in the Homeric mind. Nevertheless, it can be illuminating to simply assume that they worked differently then, and to seek how it might have been different. As the case of Calhoun shows, such an approach can elucidate some apparently problematic features of these texts.

But, more importantly, it can show us that mythology itself was the means by which these dichotomies were developed in the first place. This is the insight that Blumenberg advances, that our logical categories were built on the fundamental division and structuring of the world that was brought about by myth. This, to me, seems the great advantage of the Blumenbergian theory. It not only has some interesting points to make about the mythical functioning of the Homeric epics, but it also allows

us to relate these findings to the mythical aspect of our thinking until this day. This also brings along a great challenge, for it implies that the tools and concepts we use to describe myths are themselves in a way mythical. Or as Coupe puts it: ‘reading myth is also mythic reading’ (Coupe 1997: 151). This is by no means an excuse for defeatism; it only asks for a broader, more challenging interpretation of what ‘comparative mythology’ means. Not only should we be prepared to compare the myths we call ‘myths’ with each other, we should also dare to compare ‘myths’ with the myths we live with, the myths we use in our everyday speech and thinking. This will probably require a more or less ambiguous attitude. We should take our own categories serious and put them into perspective at the same time, consider them true and false at the same time. But Homer shows us that that is not always feasible. Sometimes, we have to take a will-o’-the-wisp as the guiding light.

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