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# Homer's Humor: Laughter in The Iliad

Robert H. Bell

Williams College

## Mockery and Mirth

—"if anyone examines more closely the lives of those sober gods in Homer . . . he will find them all full of folly"—Erasmus.<sup>1</sup>

The very subject of humor in Homer's *Iliad* might seem to be a bad joke. "Deep-browed Homer" has long been our laureate of loss, esteemed by Aristotle "in the serious style the poet of poets, standing alone."<sup>2</sup> Though foolishness abounds in the *Iliad*, as Erasmus' *Stultitia* long ago noticed, Homeric follies usually bring suffering and sorrow; tragedy shadows Greeks and Trojans, and shapes readers' perceptions of the *Iliad*. It remains difficult to comprehend (much less enjoy) Homeric comedy. The epic's very lack of humor has been regarded as a virtue: Northrop Frye observes that for the first time in Western literature the misery of one's devastated enemies is *not* seen as comic. Understandably, few critics have stressed the humorous aspects of the *Iliad*, or pursued Pope's hint "That *Homer* was no enemy to mirth may appear from several places of his poem; which so serious as it is, is interspers'd with many gayeties."<sup>3</sup> Four sequences in the *Iliad* illustrate the range

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ROBERT H. BELL is Professor of English at Williams College.

<sup>1</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, tr. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric and Poetics*, tr. W. Rhys Roberts & Ingram Bywater (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 227. The Keatsian phrase is from "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer."

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer*, ed. Steven Shankman (London: Penguin,

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and complexity of Homeric humor: the Olympian squabble at the end of Book I, Thersites' intervention at the Greek war council in Book II, Hera's seduction of Zeus in Book XIV, and the battle of the gods in Book XXI. Why characters in the *Iliad* laugh, and why readers are invited and entitled to laugh, are complicated issues. Quite distinct kinds of humor emerge from and contribute to the epic's predominantly tragic, painfully serious project. In Homer's myriad-minded narrative, it is often but a step from the sublime to the ridiculous—and the reverse.

The first instance of "mirth" comes near the end of *Iliad* 1, when Thetis, mother of Achilles, successfully petitions Zeus to aid her aggrieved son. Hawk-eyed Hera notices and reviles Zeus. Vainly invoking patriarchal authority, exasperated, Zeus abandons polite persuasion and frankly threatens Hera, who withdraws (rather like Achilles), indignant, sullen, and miserable. All Olympus is distressed. Tenderly comforting his mother, Hephaistos reminds Hera that once before he intervened between his quarreling parents and provoked Zeus: "he caught me by the foot and threw me from the magic threshold,/and all day long I dropped helpless, and about sunset/I landed in Lemnos, and there was not much life left in me./After that fall it was the Sintian men who took care of me."<sup>4</sup> He too suffered the wrath of Zeus and survived to tell the tale. A tactful diplomat, Hephaistos models courtesy and counsels acquiescence. "He spoke, and the goddess of the white arms Hera smiled at him,/and smiling she accepted the goblet out of her son's hand" (1.595-596).

To initiate festivities and celebrate reconciliation, he serves drinks. "But among the blessed immortals uncontrollable laughter/went up as they saw Hephaistos bustling about the palace" (1.599-600). Why does Hephaistos excite laughter? What's so funny? Erasmus's *Folly* thinks she knows: Hephaistos "often plays the clown at the banquets of the gods, enlivening their drinking bouts by limping around."<sup>5</sup> Modern commentators generally agree that the gods laugh at the lame blacksmith's infirmity.<sup>6</sup> Such

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1996), 277. Subsequent references identified by parenthetical numerals.

<sup>4</sup> *The Iliad of Homer*, tr. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). References are identified by parenthetical numerals specifying book and line number; this one is 1.590-594.

<sup>5</sup> Erasmus, *Folly*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Willcock says, "Hephaistos was lame and clumsy . . . the sight of him taking round the nectar, instead of the usual attractive wine-bearers," Ganymede and

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humor Hobbes called "sudden glory," the "apprehension of some deformed thing in another," a sense of "eminency" above the infirmity of others, or beyond one's own former vulnerability.<sup>7</sup> The Hobbesian interpretation informs his contemporary John Dryden's version of *The First Book of Homer's Ilias* (1700).<sup>8</sup> Hephaestus (whom Dryden calls Vulcan) is "the Clown" (1.801), "obsequious" (1.771) and blatantly ridiculous: "The Limping Smith, observ'd the saddened Feast;/ And hopping here and there (himself a Jest)" (1.778-779). Identified by his disability, Vulcan is "the lame Architect" (1.812), a slapstick character: "Pitch'd on my Head, at length the Lemian-ground/Receiv'd my batter'd Skull" (1.798-799). It's no surprise that "Loud Fits of Laughter seiz'd the Guests, to see/The limping God so deft at his new Ministry" (1.804-805).

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Evidently, Hobbes's "sudden glory" or "eminency" catalyzes the laughter of the Olympians. But Homer's scene is more equivocal, and makes it much less likely that we share the gods' scoffing laughter. Only *later* is Hephaestus described as lame; indeed, Homer omits what Dryden stresses. Even if Homer's audience knew "the famous crippled smith" from myths and legends where he is often a comic figure, Homer's Hephaestus is neither ridiculous nor grotesque—in marked contrast to Dryden's buffoon. As rendered by Dryden, Homer's richly comic sequence shrinks to sheer farce: Vulcan is "himself a Jest" (1.779); Jove is a hen-pecked husband; Juno a nagging shrew; the gods are "Drunken" (1.810), Jove soon incapable and unconscious. Dryden's Olympus is a burlesque stage.

Translating Homer, Pope moves sharply in the opposite direction from Dryden's slapstick toward solemn grandeur. Here Jove is regal and venerable, Juno "the God's imperious Queen" (1.695). Her complaint is dignified, her demeanor proud. Jove replies with words of power.<sup>9</sup> Pope's Vulcan, "the Architect divine" (1.741),

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Hebe, provoked "the simple-minded and carefree gods to laughter." See Malcolm M. Willcock, *A Companion to the Iliad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 15. Beye concurs: "Hephaistos is crippled and earnest which naturally produces unquenchable laughter among the eternal deities." See Charles Brown Beye, *The Iliad, The Odyssey, and the Epic Tradition* (New York: Gordian Press, 1976), 125.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or, The Matter, Forme & Power of a Common-wealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 37.

<sup>8</sup> John Dryden, *The Poems and Fables of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); all references identified by line numbers.

<sup>9</sup> Gibbon noticed that, "Mr. Pope, without perceiving it, has improved the theology of Homer" (Pope's *Iliad*, 1, 29), with doctrine that sounds more like Pope than Homer.

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speaks like a god, advocating “eternal peace, and constant joy . . . the sacred union of the sky” (1.745-747). When Vulcan recalls his expulsion by ireful Jove, he describes not a pratfall but a magnificent mystery, a glorious fable of descent and recovery. Pope, remembering the gorgeous version of the myth in *Paradise Lost*, is nearly Miltonic: “Once in your cause,” Vulcan tells his mother, “I felt his matchless might,/Hurl’d headlong downward from th’ ethereal height;/Tost all the day in rapid circles round:/Nor ‘till the Sun descended, touch’d the ground./Breathless I fell, in giddy motion lost” (1.760-764). Here Pope captures Homer’s epic humor, gigantic grandeur, the hyperbole witty but not withering.

Dramatizing divine laughter, Pope acknowledges Vulcan’s clumsiness but scrupulously preserves his dignity. “Vulcan with awkward grace his office plies,/And unextinguish’d laughter shakes the skies” (1.770-771). “Awkward grace” prompts not crude derision but gay laughter: “Thus the blest Gods the genial day prolong,/In feasts ambrosial, and celestial song” (1.772-773). This Vulcan, promoting festive laughter, is very nearly “the single artificer of the world,” like the singer in Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Pope’s translation transforms Olympian laughter from Hobbesian derision to Freudian freedom: the quick transition from tension to comfort releases energy, liberated in laughter. Pope’s Vulcan is not an object of abuse but a source of relief, less a bumbling buffoon than an active, conscious agent. “Turning the jest on himself,” as Pope remarks, Vulcan plays the fool and precipitates gaiety: “He knew that a friend to mirth often diverts or stops quarrels, especially when he contrives to submit himself to the laugh, and prevails on the angry to part in good humour, or in a disposition to friendship.”<sup>10</sup> Vulcan strategically deploys humor: he makes himself a figure of fun. Recounting his fall, he willingly becomes the butt and *advocate* of humor, cheering Hera. Then the blacksmith plays another comic role, master of the revels. Serving drinks, he clowns deliberately, spoofing himself—a god!—performing menial duties, and donning the fool’s cap as warriors don arms, for defense against his more dominant tormentors.

Pope’s Vulcan, much more than Dryden’s, is compellingly Homeric, larger-than-life and all-too-human: god in two persons, intrinsic duality. The Olympian blacksmith is hyperbolically split, merely physical and splendidly supernal: disabled but enabled,

*In Pope’s translation, Vulcan, rather than object of derision, purposely deploys humor.*

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<sup>10</sup> Pope’s annotation to *The Iliad of Homer*, 71.

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vulnerable yet invincible. Buffeted, Hephaestos is subject to the laws of gravity; resilient, he bounces back. He *sweats* while he works. He typifies Homer's amphibious gods. He is thus a figure for the hybrid poet—not unlike the blind Homer of legend, or the hunch-backed Pope of history—a liminal creature, crossing borders, flickering between 'states.' Later, forging the shield for Achilles, Hephaestos creates wonders: "limping; and yet his shrunken legs moved lightly beneath him" (18.410). Pope's Vulcan is a divine maker whose "matchless might" reaches "th'etherial height," plunges to bumpy "ground," and reascends. Like the bard of the *Iliad*, the "Divine Architect" sings of fall and recovery. Pope's version of Book 1 ends not with Dryden's drunken debauchery but with stately harmony: "Then to their starry domes the Gods depart,/The shining monuments of *Vulcan's* art:/*Jove* on his couch reclin'd his awful head,/And *Juno* slumber'd on the golden bed" (1.778-781). Pope recognized that humor in the *Iliad* is seriously implicated with the Homeric heroic; often they are mutually constitutive. Pope highlights the reciprocity of sublime and ridiculous.<sup>11</sup>

For better and for worse, the divinities of the *Iliad* display surprisingly comic instincts and attitudes. Energetic and exuberant, they teem with life force or *élan vital*. Life is "play extempore," in Falstaff's phrase, a stage for antics, mockery, and indulgence; they proclaim the sovereignty of fun. Olympian experience is a series of performances, a "fond pageant," as Shakespeare's Puck says. Gods can also be Puckish: mischievous, irresponsible, objectionable, or downright disreputable. Playing with careless abandon, gods are thoughtless and shameless. While they observe clearly, far and wide, they see superficially, without depth; like a child or fool, gods perceive everything as bright, full of possibility. They react with provisional passion, ablaze with enthusiasm—until something new appears. Heartless, egocentric and self-seeking, gods rarely fathom anyone's subjectivity; life is merely a procession, potentially entertaining.

Homer's gods are thus both the source and the object of humorous scrutiny. We see them as they see mortals, as comical figures in an endless spectacle. Gods can't die, and their suffering is inconsequential. Humorously, foolishly, the "deathless gods" re-

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<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously translating *The Iliad* (1715-1720) and composing *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope produced an epic with Homeric mirth and a mock-epic with Homeric sublimity.

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hearse their afflictions and dramatize their resentments. But really, nothing ever matters, life goes on, the carnival continues. They are rarely moved to sympathy or empathy, or to reflection or introspection. Gods stay the same always; they do not age, or change, or develop, nor become kinder or wiser. Like clowns or picaresque heroes, they may fall, but they always rise. They live for nothing but the next stimulation. What they see on earth reflects what they experience on Olympus: a theatrical show, glorious and endless, meaningless and ridiculous. Homer's gods have numerous comic attributes, including vitality, insouciance, protean resourcefulness, resilience, dispensation from pain, immunity from irreparable loss. As Longinus shrewdly noted, Homer made "gods of the men in the Siege of Troy, and men of his gods."<sup>12</sup> Larger than life yet all-too-human, Homer's gods are risible and majestic, sometimes simultaneously. The humor atop Olympus contrasts with a very different form of Homeric comedy in Book II; for Homer's *human* comedy is anything but funny.

*In contrast with Olympian humor, Homer's human comedy is anything but funny.*

### *Homeric-Thersitic*

"But after all, what is the whole subject matter of that revered poem the *Iliad* but 'the broils of foolish kings and the foolish populace'?"—Erasmus.<sup>13</sup>

Human folly at Troy is rampant, starting with the Greek king and commander Agamemnon, who recklessly insults Achilles, refuses to apologize, and suddenly, inexplicably, decides to test the resolve of his army. Declaring the end of the siege, the king is flummoxed when his troops flock eagerly to their ships. The Greek cause appears lost. Suddenly steps forth a remarkable, puzzling figure: "Thersites of the endless speech," who "knew within his head many words, but disorderly;/vain, and without decency, to quarrel with the princes/with any word he thought might be amusing to the Argives" (2.212-215).

Who *is* Thersites? Not even Homer seems to know. The single orator in the *Iliad* unidentified by rank, patronymic, or place of origin, his name suggests "loud-mouth" and "courage," in the

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<sup>12</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, tr. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899), IX.7.

<sup>13</sup> Erasmus, *Folly*, 118.

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sense of boldness, impudence.<sup>14</sup> Reputedly the ugliest man at Troy, he surpasses his glowing, glowering peers for sheer repulsiveness. Since only one other Iliadic character is individuated by appearance,<sup>15</sup> and few ever described physically, the elaborate delineation of an apparently minor, fleeting figure is striking. The bard oddly highlights and seemingly undermines Thersites. Deformed and despised, Thersites seems utterly grotesque. Jaeger characterizes him as “the only really malicious caricature in the whole of Homer . . . the one man whom [Homer] abused.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite conspicuous disqualifications, reviled Thersites seizes the stage and delivers a sixteen-line speech to the entire assembly. Astonishingly, this scorned freak publicly upbraids Agamemnon for greed and lust: you’ve already claimed valuable bronze and the choicest women, “whom we Achaians/give to you first of all whenever we capture some stronghold./Or is it still more gold you will be wanting, that some son/of the Trojans, breakers of horses, brings as ransom out of Ilion.” All this ransom and booty are the spoils “that I, or some other Achaian, capture and bring in?/Is it some young woman to lie with in love and keep her/all to yourself apart from the others? It is not right for/you, their leader, to lead in sorrow the sons of the Achaians” (2.225-234).

After excoriating Agamemnon, and flaunting the principles of rhetoric, Thersites assails his audience (“Achaian girls . . . women, not men”), repudiates their mission, and urges abandonment. Although Thersites’ rabble-rousing is unavailing, it provokes an immediate, decisive reaction from Odysseus, who abuses and scourges Thersites. Everyone “laughed over him happily” (2.270). Entertained and amused, the soldiers forget their incipient mutiny and return to ranks. So much, it seems, for Thersites, basest wretch at Troy. Humiliated, a pathetic, obnoxious creature, he disappears into oblivion. As is right and proper, according to Odysseus, and to most right-thinking people. Reading Homer (in Greek, of course)

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<sup>14</sup> Says W. G. Thalmann, in “Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology in the *Iliad*,” *Transactions of the American Philological Society* 118 (1988), 14. Nagy distinguishes the root *thersi* from the warrior’s *thersos/tharsos*. See Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, revised edition (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 260. See also Peter Jones, *Homer’s Iliad: A Commentary on Three Translations* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2003), 71.

<sup>15</sup> Nireus was “the most beautiful man who came beneath Ilion” (2.673).

<sup>16</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, tr. Gilbert Highet, Vol. I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 17, 41.

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in the nineteenth century, Prime Minister Gladstone found the speech “not a good one.”

Because Thersites is so flamboyantly over the top, he is not always credited for being on the mark. Critics tend to agree with the soldiers and Odysseus. Willcock, stressing Thersites’ disabled, disagreeable appearance, notes that, “Homer’s attitude toward him, and the attitude of Homer’s audience, is shown by the tendentious description.”<sup>17</sup> Kirk, regarding “this outrageous person . . . the worst man in the army,” emphasizes that physical ugliness and moral turpitude “clearly tend to coincide in the heroic scale of values” and that Thersites is “a monstrosity by heroic standards.”<sup>18</sup> Kirk says that the “horribly enraged and resentful” soldiers are “entirely justified in relation to someone already described as Thersites has been.”<sup>19</sup> Martin argues that the speech of Thersites, “quite literally, ‘without meter,’” is “over-determined to look bad by a number of criteria,” including slurring his words. Evidently “just an entertainer,” he “deserves no respect.”<sup>20</sup>

Much like the Hephaestos sequence, another intervention by a disabled figure prompting mocking laughter, this episode is disconcerting, and fruitfully so. Ought we to dismiss Thersites so precipitately? Notwithstanding the soldiers’ contempt, the narrator’s malice, and the PM’s condescension, Thersites’ “words of revilement” are words of power provoking instant reaction from Odysseus. Thersites is no blithering madman or prating malcontent, and Agamemnon’s reckless conduct he himself eventually acknowledges as folly or madness, *até*.<sup>21</sup> Impertinent yet pertinent, speaking truth to power, Thersites is seriously threatening. He says that Agamemnon “dishonoured Achilles, a man much better/than he is.” Thersites sarcastically echoes and ironically lauds Achilles: “there is no gall in Achilles’ heart, and he is forgiving.” Ha! “Otherwise,” he says to Agamemnon, “this were your last outrage” (2.239-242). Thersites locates (one might say) the Achilles heel of

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<sup>17</sup> Willcock, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Stephen Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1985), 139-140.

<sup>19</sup> Kirk, 140.

<sup>20</sup> Richard P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 110-113.

<sup>21</sup> The Greek army is “commanded by General Ineptitude, backed by Major Disaster, Corporal Punishment, and Private Interest” (James C. Nohnberg, “The Iliad,” in *Homer to Brecht: The European Epic and Dramatic Traditions*, eds. Michael Seidel and Edward Mendelson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 17.



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the antagonistic chiefs. Shrewdly, he recognizes the gravity of the king's transgression, and intuits how close Agamemnon was to being killed by the infuriated Achilles.

Laughed at, willing to "say any word he thought might be amusing," Thersites is an unusual yet recognizable comic figure. Aristotle conceives comic types as "worse" than men are, meaning less admirable in appearance, character, and conduct. While "high mimetic" characters like Achilles live for an ideal (glory, say, or *arête*), "low mimetic" figures like Thersites are more fully embodied. Thersites' physical freakishness exposes the sexual and appetitive motives of Agamemnon and Achilles, and for his pains is pummeled and harried. Aristotle's brief remarks *On Rhetoric*, identifying three types of comic characters, bear upon Thersites. He is a buffoon, jesting to amuse others; he is an *eiron*, feigning ideals to mock Agamemnon; he is also an *alazon* or imposter, strutting and blustering to aggrandize himself.

It's possible to regard Thersites as comic relief or as a foil to set off the solemnity of the heroes and their epic mission. In this view, Thersites is a lightning rod, like those Shakespearean commentators who exist, observes Empson pungently, "not at all to parody the heroes but to stop you from doing so: 'If you want to laugh at this sort of thing laugh now and get it over.'"<sup>22</sup> Arguably, Thersites absorbs the destructive capability of purely derisive cynicism. To sustain a potent, viable heroic spirit, one might conclude, Homer inoculates his characters to resist more devastating, potentially fatal, strains of irony.

Though tempting, this model fails to account for the extent of Thersites' disruptive force. Like Shakespeare who develops Thersites into a major character in *Troilus and Cressida*, Homer conjures not a stock buffoon but a truth-teller, a wise fool. Certainly Thersites is foolish and reckless: "disorderly;/vain, and without decency" (2.213-214), he thwarts order, propriety, and decorum. Thersites presumes the fool's remarkable license to speak harsh truths. However abusive and merciless, his invective is inventive and amusing.<sup>23</sup> Thersites is a self-conscious performer, mocking the heroic enterprise and eviscerating his superiors. For which of

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<sup>22</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Penguin, 1966), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Greek *blame poetry* has "a potential for the comic element," as Nagy says, though Thersitic abuse "cannot be equated with comedy" (Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans*, 256).

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course he pays the price.<sup>24</sup> The fool is a scapegoat or pariah; questioning the legitimacy of authority, he risks banishment (or worse) for what is always called impiety or treason. Odysseus castigates Thersites for “playing the fool” (2.258), threatens to cast him out “bare and howling” (2.262), and scourges the fool with Agamemnon’s royal scepter; thus the divine symbol of authority is literally the tool of enforcement.

If we are inclined to preserve authority or decorum, we can enjoy the spectacle and stress the anomaly of Thersites, so weirdly different from our heroes! Yet Thersites, “worst of Greeks,” echoes and recapitulates Achilles, pride of the Greeks; Thersites satirizes what Achilles epitomizes. The parallels are inescapable: at precisely the same moment in Books 1 and 2, a character bursts out to attack the authorities. Vituperative, insulting, intemperate, they are reckless figures, kamikaze pilots, outraged and outrageous. Both assault Agamemnon and deprecate the soldiers. Each is isolated for his transgressions, Achilles in splendor, Thersites in ignominy. Thersites is a disgraceful, ridiculous caricature of the hero’s tragic grandeur, greater stature and complexity. To regard Thersites as a conventional foil makes sense but begs the question: why does Homer make Thersites so eerily like Achilles in several minute particulars?

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A more subversive possibility is that Thersites is Achilles’ second self. In satirizing and parodying the hero, Thersites demonstrates intimate familiarity and implicit affinity with Achilles. Agamemnon tells Achilles that he speaks “abusively” (1.291), that “forever quarreling is dear to your heart” (1.177), while Thersites is known for the “shrill noise of his abuse” (2.223) and his propensity to “quarrel with princes” (2.214). Achilles “dashed to the ground the scepter” (1.245), that emblem of authority used by Odysseus to thrash Thersites. Even more telling is the similarity of their articulation. Both say that Agamemnon hogs the booty and demands the prettiest concubines. Both claim to fight nobly, to deliver captives (1.165-166; 2.231). Each urges the troops to return home, and both remark that it will teach Agamemnon a sorely-needed lesson. Both

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<sup>24</sup> Northrop Frye notes that the rejection of the entertainer can be terrible: “This is particularly true of characters who have been trying to amuse either the actual or the internal audience, and who are the comic counterparts of the tragic hero as artist. The rejection of the entertainer, whether fool, clown, buffoon, or simpleton, can be one of the most terrible ironies known to art.” See Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Folly* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 45.

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Thersites and Achilles “quarrel with the princes” (2.213)—in Greek (though not in Lattimore’s translation) the same phrase is used for both. Thersites repeats Achilles verbatim, 2.240 reprising 1.356.

Such multiple correspondences between Thersites and Achilles are far more elaborate than necessary to contrast epic hero and satiric slanderer. Alarming, the basest wretch too *exactly* parallels the exalted hero, as if Thersites intuitively grasps Achilles’ feelings and speaks on his behalf, closely echoing several sentiments. Not even the exigencies of oral poetry explain why or how Thersites concludes his speech, “Otherwise, son of Atreus, this were your last outrage” (2.242)—a daring, rash threat reiterating Achilles *word for word* (1.232). That last utterance is quite uncanny, since Thersites was not present to hear Achilles.

While Thersites parodies or satirizes Achilles, he is a double or *doppelgänger*, a version of Achilles seen through a glass darkly. With such evocative affinities hero and outcast are a little more than kin. We’ve seen that Thersites’ abuse is hyperbolic, over-the-top, yet apposite, spot on. Both in what he says (he “knew within his head many words,” 2.613) and what he *is*, Thersites doubles meanings. Thersites’ parody humorously degrades the sublime. Homer’s heroic and mock-heroic elements are imbricated. Thersites is a dark shadow of Achilles, sacrificed *instead of* the untouchable hero. As Thalmann aptly suggests, “Perhaps Achilles is a tragic, as Thersites is a comic, scapegoat.”<sup>25</sup>

Disabled like Hephaestus, Thersites is enabled too. Thersites is an avatar of comic energy that disrupts events, complicates issues, eludes closure, and generates inquiry. One particularly slippery Homeric crux suggests a calculated ambiguity of identity. The Greeks, we are told, “were furiously angry with him, their minds resentful” (Lattimore 2.222). Fagles translates it, “furious with him, deeply offended” (2.260). Angry or furious with whom? Pope makes clear that the Greeks were “Vext” at/with Thersites. But in Greek, the pronoun reference is ambiguous; the soldiers could be angry with either Thersites or Agamemnon. Leaf’s massive commentary says “clearly Agamemnon,” that Thersites is “at the moment the accepted spokesman of the mob, who are indignant with Agamemnon.”<sup>26</sup> Surely that meaning is available. “Homer is here conveying the idea of general Achaian support for Achil-

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<sup>25</sup> Thalmann, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Leaf, *The Iliad*, vol. I, second edition (London: Macmillan, 1902), 65.

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leus' stance," articulated by Thersites and supported by ordinary soldiers, says Norman Postlethwaite.<sup>27</sup> If so, the fickle mob experiences fluctuating sympathies, more various and complex attitudes than simple derision.

Typically fools are marginal characters, heedless of social imperatives, challenging hierarchy, flouting norms, turning things topsy-turvy. A mocker and a jester, Thersites is Homer's wise fool and crucial chorus. Repulsive and pathetic, outrageous and ridiculous, his trenchant critique is potent. This isn't merely detrimental to morale; it is seditious and subversive. That Thersites strikes a nerve, and threatens the whole enterprise, is evident in Odysseus' heavy-handed over-kill. It's not just that Odysseus lacks humor or cannot suffer fools gladly. Thersites raises substantive issues that are tellingly ignored by Odysseus and essentially unanswerable. Without really responding to Thersites' argument, Odysseus orates, not very persuasively. After Thersites' sinewy and insinuating language, Odysseus sounds bombastic and flaccid. In Homer's Greek, he crudely threatens to expose Thersites' genitals (2.306-307).<sup>28</sup>

In the inauspicious person of Thersites, Homer endows the disloyal opposition. Many-minded Homer is—I have argued—far more receptive to humor and sympathetic to Thersites than his critics, as Pope recognized: "there is nothing in this Speech but what might have become the mouth of *Nestor* himself, if you except a word or two. And had *Nestor* spoken it, the Army had certainly set sail for *Greece*; but because it was utter'd by a ridiculous Fellow whom they are ashamed to follow, they are not reduc'd, and satisfy'd to continue the Seige."<sup>29</sup> Pope's translation conveys the blazing force of Thersites—the fearless, foolish satirist whose "witty malice" Pope cherishes and emulates in his "own" satires.

*Homer  
far more  
sympathetic to  
Thersites than  
his critics.*

*Thersites* only clamour'd in the throng,  
Loquacious, loud, and turbulent of Tongue:  
Aw'd by no shame, by no respect controul'd,  
In scandal busy, in reproaches bold;  
With witty malice studious to defame,  
Scorn all his joy, and laughter all his aim.  
But chief he glory'd with licentious style

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<sup>27</sup> Norman Postlethwaite, "Thersites in the Iliad," *Greece & Rome* 35:2 (1988), 128.

<sup>28</sup> There is only one other reference to genitals in the *Iliad*. Both Lattimore and Pope cover for Odysseus (and Thersites!): in their translations, genitalia disappear.

<sup>29</sup> Pope's *Iliad of Homer*, 114.

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To lash the great, and monarchs to revile. (2.255-262).

Pope's Thersites is a fluent, compelling orator, scathing and acerbic. No wonder he vexes the Greeks: royal prerogatives and heroic values can't survive attacks this bold and devastating.

'Tis thine whate'er the warrior's breast inflames,  
The golden spoil, and thine the lovely dames.  
With all the wealth our wars and blood bestow,  
Thy tents are crowded, and thy chests o'erflow.  
Thus at full ease in heaps of riches roll'd,  
What grieves the Monarch? Is it thirst of gold? (2.277-282).

At first he seems to endorse the heroic code; gradually Thersites reveals the iron fist beneath the velvet glove. "Whate'er our master craves, submit we must,/Plagu'd with his pride, or punished for his lust" (2.291-292). The damning truth condemns Agamemnon, locked into that couplet rhyming "submit we must" and "punished for his lust."

Thersites is bright and brassy, insufferable and indispensable. He defies constraints and turns things topsy-turvy. Adroit at impersonation, an acute parodist, he marches to his own rhythms. There is a nice comic reversal with a satiric twist: introduced as one who loves to provoke laughter, Thersites leaves to jeering laughter. But this humor ricochets and boomerangs: if the mocker is mocked, so is the audience. Thersitic energies are both centrifugal and centripetal. No wonder Thersites provokes such intense and disparate reactions from commentators: he has multiple purposes and contradictory consequences. Values clash like contending warriors. Homer's technique is dialogic and dialectical. Thersites and Odysseus debate fundamental principles of heroic conduct. Homer suggests that the sublime and the ridiculous are much closer than single-minded Odysseus can afford to believe. The Thersites sequence is a midnight foray from the heroic fields of glory to the shifting terrain of satiric humor, not a comfortable place to stand but a vantage point Homer insists we visit.

### *Mock Heroic, Sublime & Ridiculous*

"What dire Offence from am'rous Causes springs, What mighty  
Contests rise from trivial Things"—Pope.<sup>30</sup>

Hera's seduction of Zeus in Book 14 is humor in a very different

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<sup>30</sup> These are the opening lines of *The Rape of the Lock*.

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key and tempo, an *allegro* movement amid the dominant *adagio*. Though it is the most purely amusing and least problematic instance of Homeric humor in the *Iliad*, providing the mirthful “gayeties” Pope appreciated, it also significantly revises our conception of the gods. Humor paradoxically humanizes and elevates. The last time we saw Hera, consoled by Hephaestos, she was a somewhat farcical and quite pitiable figure, overmastered by Zeus and reluctantly acquiescent. In Book XIV she remains amusing but in no sense a figure of fun; on the contrary, she appears for the first time in the *Iliad* strongly appealing and truly sublime. She becomes, as we might say, humorously and seriously *empowered*.

*Humor paradoxically humanizes and elevates the gods.*

Notwithstanding the jargon, “power dynamics” do seem at issue in this episode, where the Olympian marriage of Hera and Zeus is rendered as domestic comedy: a bullying husband abusing his authority provokes his restive wife’s resistance. Like Thersites, Hera relies on her wits and guile to challenge the powers that be. Striving to “outmaneuver Zeus the mastermind,”<sup>31</sup> she displays the cunning of a trickster and achieves a comic triumph. What fun! It’s no accident that Hera consults “the sweetly laughing” Aphrodite, “the laughter-loving goddess,” to help her become an irresistible comic heroine. Hera gives a fundamentally comic demonstration of “vitality holding its own against the world,” a gesture of “self-preservation and self-assertion.” For Susanne K. Langer, comedy and sex are virtually identical, the primal rhythm that “rises to a breaking point, to mirth and laughter.”<sup>32</sup> Who does not share Hera’s pleasure? If Aphrodite is the goddess of everlasting smiles, Hera is our lady of the perpetual scowls; how rare for the beleaguered, abused wife of Zeus to have fun *and* get her way!

Mock-heroic, perfected by neo-classical writers such as Dryden and Pope, renders ordinary conduct in extraordinary terms, measures the subject on a grand scale, to mock pretensions or aspirations. In *The Rape of the Lock*, for example, Belinda at her mirror is characterized as if she were Achilles arming for battle. The grand scale placing and measuring her silliness is of course Homeric epic. Yet Pope’s vision magnifies as well as diminishes his mock-heroic subject. Much the same could be said for Hera’s epical preparations which, in both ridiculous detail and sublime effect, closely re-

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<sup>31</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, tr. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 1990), 14.196.

<sup>32</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribners, 1953), 331, 346.

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semble Belinda's mock-epic toilette. Hera's preparations are comically hyperbolic, an excessive expenditure of energy. The goddess "cleansed her enticing body/of any blemish" (14.209-210), applies a deep olive rub, kneads her skin, arranges her braids, and dons her wondrous robes. The spectacular results of cosmetic makeover are wonderfully cosmic.

Hera undergoes a remarkable mock-heroic metamorphosis. "[D]azzling in all her rich regalia" (14.230), emanating light, Hera moves with stately bearing and majestic purpose. Armed with Aphrodite's breast-band, guaranteed "irresistible—magic to make the sanest man go mad" (14.261). Hera's fun continues as she enlists the aid of Sleep, a reluctant co-conspirator, who recalls the last time he crossed Zeus on behalf of Hera, and was nearly flung from Olympus. The parallel between Sleep and Hephaestos underscores the metamorphosis of Hera, then coerced and defeated, now powerful and commanding: taking charge, requiting Zeus, she delivers comic justice: Zeus becomes a pawn in Hera's game. So is Sleep, whom the goddess plays easily. What he needs, she says, is a really attractive consort, "one of the younger Graces" (14.323). Thrilled, Sleep suggests Pasithea who has been driving him crazy. In this comic episode, the very prospect of sex jellifies and mollifies males, driven, says Erasmus's *Folly*, "by the part which is so foolish and funny that it cannot even be mentioned without a snicker."<sup>33</sup>

Not even the thunder-bearing father of the gods is exempt from such follies: "And at one glance/the lust came swirling over him, making his heart race" (14.356), just as it did the first time Hera and Zeus "locked and surged in love" (14.358). Thrice reiterated, "locked" associates erotic embraces with entrapment.<sup>34</sup> Hera, relishing the role of coquette, pretends to have important business elsewhere. Casually she mentions "how long they have held back from each other now,/from making love, since anger struck their hearts" (14.367-368). Cunningly she bargains and offers make-up sex.

Cloud-compelling Zeus, comically overwhelmed by 'low' de-

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<sup>33</sup> Erasmus, *Folly*, 18

<sup>34</sup> The image also forges another link to Hephaestos: Hera's bedchamber was built by her son, "the burly crippled Smith" (14.286). In the *Odyssey*, Homer recounts how Hephaestos trapped his adulterous wife Aphrodite and Ares in the web of passion. Displayed *in flagrante delicto*, subjected to "uncontrollable laughter" by her Olympian cohort, Aphrodite is freed and purified by the Graces' ambrosial oil: "an ecstasy—a vision" (Lattimore, *Odyssey* 8, 369, 408). Like Hera, Aphrodite rises from humiliation: she who is debased shall be exalted!

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sires, is reduced to amorous idiocy, like the husband in *commedia delle-arte*. Inevitably the rambunctious desires of someone else (or one's own in retrospect) seem ridiculous. Obviously, ludicrously, Zeus launches a Leperello list of former lovers: not Ixion's wife, not Danae with the marvelous ankles, not Europa, not even Semele, not when I loved Demeter, nor bedded Leto, et al., none excited me as you do now. Erotic enthusiasm, masculine braggadocio, and brazen tactlessness make Zeus a fool for love; from Zeus in *The Iliad* to Leporello in *Don Juan* is but a step. The climax to his epic catalog of conquests is "Not even *you!*" in our salad days (14.392), which in normal circumstances might discourage amorosness by reminding the old wife she is no longer the hot babe of yore.

Zeus reduced  
to amorous  
idiocy.

Nonplussed, Hera deftly forestalls her importunate lover by claiming modesty. We can't just make love here and now—what if the other gods spy us? Hera doesn't need Freud to tell her that the force of libido is greatly enhanced by obstacles to fulfillment, that phenomenon Milton termed "sweet, reluctant, amorous delay."<sup>35</sup> But never fear, Hera reminds her clamorous husband, for "if you're on fire overflowing with passion"—IF!—"there's always your own bedroom" (built by Hephaestus), she reminds him, where "the doors fit snug and tight," as tight as the trap Zeus enters.

Though presumably gods travel quickly, hectic Zeus has a better idea. *Right this very minute* he can envelop them in a golden cloud, for this *really* special occasion. *Mirabile dictu!* In their embrace Hera and Zeus are lyrically associated with all the beauty of nature; teeming with seed, Zeus engenders the earth: "and under them now the holy earth burst with fresh green grass,/crocus and hyacinth, clover soaked with dew, so thick and soft/it lifted their bodies off the hard, packed ground . . ." (14.413-415). In this marriage of heaven and earth, consummation is splendidly seriocomic: "Hera/seduced great Zeus to lose himself in love" (14.428-429). Whatever their motives, they are reunited, revived, and regenerated. The rhythm of sex recapitulates comic patterns, beginning with cacophonous confusion, pressing urgently with vivid, uncertain movement, and culminating in joyous harmony. For a lovely interval, we are far from the killing fields, in a place beyond the power of law courts and church bells, mortal contingencies and moral imperatives. Seduced, as we like it, we share the glorious rapture of ecstatic union.

<sup>35</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV.311.



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Hera's seduction of Zeus is an extended comic sequence exposing the humorous incongruities between divine grandeur and all-too-human imperatives. Here, though, both gods are appealingly foolish, rather than randomly vengeful or terrifyingly indifferent. Homer asks us to admire them with their faults and *because* of their foolishness. Zeus is not coldly humiliated but warmly humanized, not aloofly monumental but amusingly available. Hera's transformation is even more striking: she strides forth newly sympathetic, enabled, and victorious. It's important that Hera never exults, neither laughing triumphantly nor smiling complacently. In light of the next major humorous episode, her dignified equanimity is memorable.

### *Farce and Epic*

"How Tragedy and Comedy embrace;/How Farce and Epic get  
a jumbled race."—Pope, *The Dunciad*.<sup>36</sup>

*Reassuring  
mock-heroic  
humor un-  
usual in the  
Iliad, derisive  
laughter more  
frequent.*

The magnanimous, reassuring humor of Homeric mock-heroic is highly unusual in the *Iliad*. Only rarely do we hear the sympathetic laughter of kind recognition, and always notice exceptions that prove the rule, such as the famous scene in Book VI: when Hector's baby is startled by his father's plumed helmet, Hector laughs affectionately and Andromache smiles through her tears. More characteristic of Iliadic humor is derisive laughter, Hobbesian "sudden glory,"<sup>37</sup> such as the cawing of the soldiers when Thersites is pummeled, or the glee of his colleagues when Ajax is beshitted (23.784). The distress and discomfiture of others are reliable sources of amusement at Troy and atop Olympus. Particularly unsettling is the laughter of Zeus, punctuating the war of the gods. As internecine strife, "disastrous, massive," engulfs Olympus, "Zeus heard the chaos, throned on Olympus heights,/and laughed deep in his own great heart, delighted/to see the gods engaged in all-out conflict" (21.437-444). Why do disaster and chaos amuse Zeus? Homer does not know or will not say. The laughter of Zeus, relishing his own humor, marks a transition to the Theomachy or war of the gods. Though keenly mindful that Homer was "no enemy to mirth," Pope says twice that he is "at a loss . . . how to justify" ei-

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<sup>36</sup> Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 355.

<sup>37</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 37.

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ther Homer's Theomachy or Zeus' laughter.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the combination of horror and horseplay is discombobulating and disturbing. The battle atop Olympus follows an especially savage sequence, the wild, pitiless assault of Achilles, his merciless killing of Lycaon, and his eerie struggle with the River Xanthus. Suddenly we leave the world of woes and ascend to . . . Olympian farce. Here abound vociferous threats, vaunts, and mocks; gratuitous violence; prat-falls and slapstick; and abundant hilarity, gods glorying over their fallen siblings. *The Iliad* 21 would fit comfortably in Pope's *Dunciad*: "How Tragedy and Comedy embrace;/How Farce and Epic get a jumbled race."<sup>39</sup> When ignoble gods strut and stumble, Homeric epic resembles knockabout farce by Aristophanes.

For this episode Homer (like Aristophanes) was stigmatized as irresponsible and impious, subversive and dangerous: "These are the kind of sentiments about the gods which will arouse our anger," says Socrates, "and he who utters them shall be refused a chorus; neither shall we allow teachers to make use of them in the instruction of the young, meaning, as we do, that our guardians, as far as men can be, should be true worshippers of the gods and like them."<sup>40</sup> Though we've long since abandoned the assumption that poetry should teach piety, we continue to find Homer's Olympian farce vexing. For many critics and readers of Homer, it doesn't seem to fit, or befit, epic dignity or tragic solemnity.

Tragedy, and comedy, farce and epic, in a jumbled race, said Pope. In Aristotle's hierarchy tragedy and epic hold pride of place. If comedy is the poor stepsister of literature, farce must be the scorned scullery girl, rarely admitted to the palace of art. The phrase "mere farce" is virtually redundant; farce is often conceived as comedy with the meaning left out. Conventionally, farce depicts a world even more determined and reductive than that of satire, the troublesome perspective strikingly articulated by Thersites. All subtleties seem to be obliterated, along with any distinctions between reasonable and outrageous behavior: everything is magnified to ludicrous proportions. Farce, though not comedy generally, encourages Bergson's "momentary anesthesia of the heart."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pope's annotations to *Iliad* 21, pp. 1000 and 1003. Baffled by the "merry vein" of Olympian glee, Pope strains for implausible allegorical justification

<sup>39</sup> Pope, *Poems*, 355.

<sup>40</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, tr. Benjamin Jowett (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 55.

<sup>41</sup> See Henri Bergson, *De Rire: Essay on Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore:

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We are insulated from empathy and discouraged from reflection. Though farce is cruel, sometimes scabrous, we may be entertained because its characters remain marvelously invulnerable, always rebounding from brutality. We don't dwell on consequence but leap to another indignity. Everything is accelerated, as characters enter and exit at breakneck tempo. The whirligig of events restricts the characters to caricatured action and expression instead of significant individuation or compelling feelings. The pain of farcical figures is illusory and transient, and danger always evaporates. "It is altogether a speculative scene of things," said Charles Lamb, "which has no reference whatever to the world that is."<sup>42</sup>

The problem in Homer's Olympian farce is precisely its "reference . . . to the world that is" *our* world, bursting with sin and sorrow (said Dr. Johnson), to which we come crying hither. Zeus is free to laugh at the farcical spectacle. For the gods, it is all much ado about nothing, or (in Freud's terminology) manifestly non-tendentious. When Ares recounts how Athena's spear tore his "deathless flesh" (21.453), he reminds us that gods might hurt, but not much and not long. Ares is no more vulnerable than Tinker Bell. Ares, however "racked with groans" (21.476), has comic resilience, the bounce-back-ability of a roly-poly.<sup>43</sup> He is no more at risk than Pope's sylphs, sliced in half by scissors: "Fate urged the Sheers, and cut the Sylph in twain,/(But Airy Substance soon unites again)."<sup>44</sup> No funeral, just fun for all. When Athena hurls a huge boulder, "down he crashed and out over seven acres/sprawled the enormous god and his mane dragged in the dust" (21.465). Of course, "Athena laughed aloud,/glorying over him, winging insults" (21.466-67). Athena's loud laughter contributes to the Homeric pattern of abuse, those "words of revilement"<sup>45</sup> variously termed ridicule, derision, scorn, contempt.

Only one god, Apollo, objects to meaningless mayhem and declines to join the fray. But even Apollo's principled withdrawal makes a chilling reference to our world.

"God of the earthquake—you'd think me hardly sane

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Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>42</sup> Charles Lamb, "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," in *The Works of Charles Lamb* (Philadelphia: Parry and McMillan, 1859), 417.

<sup>43</sup> My parents gave me a roly-poly when I was five, to discourage me from punching my kid brother.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, Canto 3.

<sup>45</sup> Lattimore's phrase, often repeated, especially in Book XXI.

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if I fought with you for the sake of wretched mortals . . .  
like leaves, no sooner flourishing, full of the sun's fire,  
feeding on earth's gifts, than they waste away and die.  
Stop. Call off this skirmish of ours at once—  
Let these mortals fight themselves to death." (21.527-532)

Conspicuously missing from the single decent god is any compassion for mortals, some sympathetic acknowledgement of human travail. Nothing like Andromache, smiling through her tears. Instead, Apollo abruptly shifts to the divine concerns, so far from human pain, and blithely dismisses pity: "Let these mortals fight themselves to death." Apollo's insouciance is more upsetting than the laughter of Zeus. Homer's gods, when they are not cruelly "amusing themselves with men" (VII.61), are adamantly oblivious to human suffering. One waits vainly for mercy dropping as the gentle rain from heaven. Gods don't care; they scarcely notice the "searing grief" (21.603) of mortals. The indifference of Apollo, like the laughter of Zeus, indicates that the gods enjoy infinite "anesthesia of the heart."

The Olympian farce ends as it began, with the laughter of Zeus, amusement one might perceive as less ominous. Artemis, humiliated and distressed, comes like "a young girl,/sobbing" (21.579-580) to Daddy, who hugs her, gives "a long low laugh" (21.582), and asks gently "who of the sons of heaven so unfeeling, cruel" (21.584) could treat her so? The fact that it could be any of them, except perhaps Apollo, is not comforting. It reminds us that we have no such consolation, not in this poem, not in this life. "But is there any comfort to be found?" asks Yeats in a Homeric meditation. "Man loves, and loves what vanishes./What more is there to say?"<sup>46</sup> Capable of solicitude only toward his daughter, Father Zeus is impervious to care for mortals. If Zeus laughs at rampant absurdity, he wastes no pity on our plight. The great laughter of the father of the gods, like the humor of Homer, is resonant and perplexing. Divine laughter is emblematic and, ostensibly, privileged; it is bound to disturb and confound, for it measures the god's detachment from the action and his distance from us. A comic perspective depends on separation from the spectacle rather than participation in or identification with the action.

Farce invades epic. Comedy counterpoints tragedy. Homer's

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<sup>46</sup> William Butler Yeats, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

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*Homer's gods*  
jocoserious.

bifocal perspective encompasses apparently competing possibilities. Humor and horror collaborate, depicting life as terrifying in its essence, ridiculous in its manifestations, mysterious in its absurdity. There is an unmistakably ludicrous quality to the Homeric sublime. Instead of being merely humorous *or* deadly serious, Homer's gods are (to borrow a Joycean coinage) *jocoserious*.<sup>47</sup> The jarring incongruity of high tragedy and low comedy violates protocols of decorum, and disturbed commentators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who were devoted to decorum. Modern and contemporary readers are more likely to regard Homer's epic seriousness and antic humor as compelling and cross-pollinating; we are more inclined to notice and appreciate that comic and cosmic are, as Nabokov observes, separated by a single sibilant. Slight turns of the prism bring into focus tragic, epic, humorous, satiric, or comic elements, always incipient, now and then evident, sometimes latent, intimately related, and strangely mixed: "the glory, jest, and riddle of the world,"<sup>48</sup> a mystery partly shadowed and partly illuminated by Homeric humor.

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<sup>47</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text* (New York: Random House, 1984), 553. See Robert H. Bell, *Jocoserious Joyce: The Fate of Folly in Ulysses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>48</sup> As Pope characterizes man in *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, Line 18.