THE DISGUISES OF THE GODS IN THE Iliad

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This paper explores the passages in the Iliad in which the gods transform themselves into the likenesses of men and other creatures. I consider to what extent Homer distinguishes between a "likeness" which a divinity assumes, and that divinity's "true" appearance and nature. In general I take issue with those scholars who lay great emphasis on the Homeric anthropomorphism of the gods. I argue rather that many passages point to the utter alienation of divine from mortal in appearance and nature; because of this alienation, the gods need to take on human form to soften the differences when they pass into the mortal realm. Though my paper makes analogies with the Odyssey at several points, I believe that the religious concepts of the Iliad vary sufficiently from the Odyssey (in particular, there is much less emphasis in the Iliad on disguises used to deceive) to merit consideration in a separate study.

It must be confessed at the outset that the distinction between simile (he was like night, they were like bees) and transformation into another shape (she likened herself to an old woman) is often not as clear in Homer as his translators might seem to imply. The identical verb, ἰόω, can be used by Homer with either meaning in mind; and there is a similar vagueness about related words such as ὧς, ἵκελος, ὀξ. Aware of the ambiguity of his own language, the poet will sometimes (though not with any consistency) attempt to clarify his meaning by specifying the point of comparison. In one of the best-known Homeric similes, for example, the Myrmidons are like (κλῆτε) wasps, 16.259. Since this verb can refer to physical resemblance (cf. 3.158, 11.613), for all that we can tell at first, the Myrmidons may actually in this passage resemble wasps, may have taken on their appearance. To avoid this impression, the poet enlightens us: he meant the comparison to refer to their "anger and spirit," 266-267. Consider a much shorter example where Idomeneus is likened to a boar—not in appearance but in ἀλοχή, his prowess in battle (4.253, expanded at 17.281-282).
Clearly "likeness" can touch on any quality which strikes the poet's fancy, and, where the qualifier is not added, a passage which refers to likeness can be open to a wide range of possible interpretations by the reader.3 3

In the many passages where gods are said to be like mortals, it seems most natural to understand the reference to be to some sort of physical transformation;4 but even here the god's behavior may be more the point at issue, as at 5.604, "and now Ares stands beside him like (ἐνωχός) a mortal man" (cf. 13.357). Does Homer merely suggest that in some general way, for a god to come down from Olympus and stands beside mortals is to behave like, "be like" a man? Or has Ares actually changed, in some undefined way, from an immortal appearance to a mortal one?

When natural phenomena are involved, the concept may be even more imprecise. In 1.47 Apollo moves "like night" (cf. Heracles in Od. 11.606). What, then, is the point of reference; is it the invisibility of Apollo, or the slow, steady pace at which he moves, or his hostility and threatening mood, or all of these? Then again, the gods often resemble birds. In 7.59-61 Apollo and Athene sit in a tree like (ἐνωχότες) vultures. Have they really taken on vulture form, or are they merely like predators, insofar as one or the other will profit, depending on which champion falls? In another variation, a non-human creature is momentarily humanized. The river Scamander "resembles a man" (ἀνερή εἰσάμενος) when he protests to Achilles from beneath his waves, 21.213; yet he still behaves much like a river when he subsequently wells up and floods his banks. Perhaps the resemblance is rather in the human speech which he needs to use if he is to register his protest, in the manner of the horse Xanthos in 19.404.

In 4.73 is a striking example of divine transformation which tugs us in several directions at once over the issue of its literalness. Athena darts from Olympus to earth "such as (ὁλον) a shooting star" thrown by Zeus; and analogy, apparently, but it begins to sound more like a transformation a few lines later when Homer introduces the participle ἐφώτα: Athena was "in the likeness" of such a star. When she lands (in the form of a star?) the Greeks and Trojans are filled with wonder. Such a scene, like Achilles' encounter with Scamander, passes back and forth between simile