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Fred Worth received his B.S. in Mathematics from Evangel College in Springfield, Missouri in 1982. He received his M.S. in Applied Mathematics in 1987 and his Ph.D. in Mathematics in 1991 from the University of Missouri at Rolla. He has been teaching at Henderson State University since August, 1991. Among his professional affiliations is his membership in the Society for American Baseball Research, home to hundreds of baseball geeks.

Birds Breaching Two Worlds in *The Iliad*

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Abstract

The Greeks, like their Asiatic counterparts, frequently assigned natural symbols to their pantheon of gods and goddesses, and one animal in particular dominates the diverse animalistic connections to the pantheon – birds. Naturally, these same relationships between gods and animals can be seen in Greek literature. Specifically, bird imagery abounds in *The Iliad*, usually in connection with the gods' communication with mortals. This appearance of birds with divine/mortal communication parallels how birds traverse the two worlds in nature of sky and land. The ability of birds to pass from one world to another contributes to an otherworldliness that is also descriptive of the Greek pantheon of gods. This appearance of bird imagery in *The Iliad* functions in three specific ways within the text: to transmit future events to mortals through omens, to facilitate direct communication between gods and mortals, and to characterize the passing of mortals into the afterlife. All of these methods demonstrate how the gods through bird-like actions and communication assist men in their daily lives.

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Historically, the natural world has been associated with divinity. The changing of seasons was attributed to divine forces. Fair weather and good harvests could be viewed as divine blessings, while natural disasters could be explained as punishment by the divine for mortal sins. The workings of nature were largely unexplainable, and varying forms of religiosity arose to provide explanations for natural phenomena. As religions became more established, gods and goddesses arose throughout Asiatic religions, and each god acquired natural symbols "represented either in connection with the figures of the divinities, or in place of them" (Frothingham 59). The Greeks, in turn, borrowed this practice of assigning natural symbols to their pantheon of gods and goddesses from Asia (Frothingham 61), and these symbols were frequently animals that could convey

something of the special powers of each god.

Although there are diverse animalistic connections with the Greek gods, Elinor Bevin's examination of ancient sanctuaries reveals that one animal in particular dominated these connections: "In sixty or more sanctuaries . . . over 1000 bird-representations came to light . . . According to the available evidence, birds of all or any kind were found in far greater numbers . . ." (163). Evidently, the perceived connection between birds and gods was significant for the Greeks; this connection may best be fleshed out through an examination of Greek literature.

In Homer's *The Iliad*, bird imagery abounds in connection with the divine, normally when contact exists between the divine and mortal realms. The use of birds to convey messages to earth from lofty Olympus is natural, as birds evidently traverse the worlds of air and land. Bird imagery functions in three specific ways within the text: (1) to transmit future events to mortals through omens, (2) to facilitate direct communication between gods and mortals, and (3) to characterize the passing of mortals into the afterlife. All of these methods demonstrate how the gods assist men in their daily lives.

Birds are apt symbols of divinity, as they are otherworldly; they are creatures of the air and their migratory movements foreshadow the change of seasons. In *The Iliad*, birds provide noteworthy omens to the men below. For example, Odysseus relates a sign of a snake devouring a sparrow and eight of her children, "so for years as many as this shall we fight in this place and in the tenth year we shall take the city of the wide ways" (84-85). Here, the divinely sent omen gives the Achaians the knowledge that, despite nine years of fighting, they will ultimately prevail over the Trojans in the tenth year. The death of each bird stands for one unsuccessful year of battle. The snake, however, is a traditional symbol of rebirth, stemming from its sloughing of skin. So, the snake's triumph over the sparrows foreshadows the Achaians' ultimate triumph in the following, or tenth, year. This divinely given sign rekindles the Achaians' morale as the gods had communicated favor toward them in battle.

When Zeus later sends his eagle in answer to Agamemnon's prayer to save the ships from the Trojans, the link between birds and gods as messengers becomes clearer:

> He spoke thus, and as he wept the father took pity on him and bent his head, that the people should stay alive, and not perish. Straightway he sent down the most lordly of birds, an eagle, with a fawn, the young of the running deer, caught in its talons, who cast down the fawn beside Zeus' splendid altar . . . They, when they saw the bird and knew it was Zeus who sent it, remembered once again their war craft, and turned on the Trojans. (188-189)

Although Zeus appears to send the fawn to earth, the focus of the omen is on the eagle and its strength. The "lordly" eagle of Zeus gives the Achaians fortitude against the Trojans. Not surprisingly, the eagle is traditionally associated with Zeus. As Apostoles notes, "They say that the eagle was born at the time of the birth of Zeus and that in the battle against the Giants it flew by his side. Consequently, when the birds were divided among the Gods, Zeus chose the eagle" (qtd. in Mylonas 203). The eagle is Zeus's companion and helper, so the eagle's appearance to the Achaians is comparable to the appearance of Zeus himself to show mercy and favor.

This intimate relationship between Zeus and the eagle in augury is seen again in a warning to the Trojans. Before Hektor leads the Trojans across the ditch in order to set fire to the Achaian ships, Zeus sends an eagle flying to the left with a serpent in its talons. The serpent bites the eagle, and the eagle drops his prey (263). In augury, birds flying to the left is bad luck, while flying to the right is good luck. One way of interpreting the bird sign can be to view the eagle flying on the left as the Trojans, carrying the snake that embodies the rebirth of their victory against the Achaians. Yet, since the eagle is on the left and drops that victory, it foreshadows the change in the tide of the war. This is how Poulydamas appears to interpret the sign to Hektor, saying that the eagle "let it drop suddenly before winging home, and could not finish carrying it back to give to his children" (264). Poulydamas, however, does not explain the significance of the bite; therefore, this interpretation may not be satisfactory. Yet, there is an alternate interpretation of the eagle representing Zeus and the serpent standing for the Trojans. The Trojans have been experiencing a type of rebirth through their victories after Achilles's retreat from the battle, and these victories have been enabled by Zeus despite his ultimate promise to Hera that the Achaians will prevail. Zeus carries the Trojans in the same way that the eagle carries the serpent. Hektor ignores the bird sign, refusing to trust Zeus's omen. This refusal to heed the omen, which is foreseen by the gods, is the serpent's bite that spurs Zeus to abandon the Trojan cause. Both interpretations show that bird imagery plays a crucial role in divining the future; however, the second interpretation conflates Zeus with the eagle, which is consistent with Greek tradition.

Another bird omen in *The Iliad* further demonstrates how the eagle is viewed, not just as the messenger of Zeus, but as his representation on earth for direct communication with mortals. Priam looks to Zeus for a favorable omen before attempting to retrieve Hektor's body from Achilles, and then looks to the sky. Zeus sends, flying to the right, an eagle "as big as is the build of a door to a towering chamber in the house of a rich man" to communicate to Priam that Hektor's body can be safely recovered. Although birds have become smaller in modern times just as men have become larger, the sheer size of the eagle described in the door image is godly and befits the reputation of the king of gods. Also, the door is symbolic of a passageway between two worlds just as the communication between Zeus and Priam passes between two worlds through the eagle. Emily Katz says:

> The passage reflects the ancient conception of birds as creatures in direct contact with the divine realm. Birds' ability to fly and their speed of flight contrast with the poverty of human physical abilities and suggest a link to that which is unknown. Ancient religious traditions saw in the paradoxical combination of freedom of movement with a certain regularity of behavior, the possibility that birds might be messengers from gods to men. (280-281)

Katz reinforces how the perceived connection between gods and men through birds is not merely symbolic; birds with superhuman powers and feet in both realms were conduits for messages from the divine.

When the gods physically enter the mortal realm, it is often in bird form. For example, Apollo came to aid Hektor "in the likeness of a rapid hawk, the dove's murderer and swiftest of all things flying" (315). Apollo then harnesses the power of the

wind to move his words to inspire Hektor; he "breathed huge strength into the shepherd of the people" (316). Then, Hektor moves forward with his archers and makes significant headway toward the ships. So, Apollo transforms into a hawk to bridge the divine and mortal realm and continues to use the wind to meet his mark in a similar fashion to a hawk. His words are like breath, and the feathered arrows of archers speeding through the air bring death to many Achaians. The omen and its execution are bird-like in nature. As Apollo is the god of both prophecy and archery, the bird imagery here is not surprising.

Yet, there are other instances where the gods engaging in direct communication with man possess the swiftness of birds and are described in bird-like fashion. Iris, Zeus's favored messenger, is described as "Iris of the golden wings with a message" and "swift Iris" (170) when she carries a message from Zeus to Hektor. In order to prove the power of the gods to the two Aiases, Poseidon "burst into winged flight himself, like a hawk with quick wings" (273). He circles the sky before "calling out to [the Achaians] in winged words" to rally them back into the fighting.

This epithet of "winged words" is common throughout *The Iliad*. J.A.K. Thompson says that the epithet has roots in archery, "contending that the feathers attached to the missile [like words] are an asset in directing it straight to the mark" (qtd. in Suhr 170). Yet, Suhr explains the familiar epithet in simpler terms: "Onians cites a number of examples of birds on the wing appearing as manifestations of breath and thought, including the dove as the embodiment of the Holy Spirit, a later development of the Aristotelian pneuma" (170). These two explanations for the epithet do not exclude each other, however. The "winged words" are swift, divine in origin, and reach the intended target. There is another notable connection between wings and archery found in descriptions of the Ornithes Areos, birds that protected Ares' shrine in the Black Sea by shooting arrows from their wings (Atsma "Theoi Project"). Yet, the link between the "winged words" epithet and archery is especially clear within *The Iliad* when Athene is sent by Zeus to rekindle the war between the Trojans and Achaians. Zeus first speaks in "winged words" to Athene who, in turn, speaks in "winged words" to Pandaros. She convinces Pandaros to "send a flying arrow against Menelaos" (115). When Pandaros follows Athene's command and shoots the arrow, the description is cloaked in bird imagery: "the bow groaned, and the string sang high, and the arrow, sharp-pointed, leapt away, furious, to fly through the throng before it" (116). In this scene, the "winged words" of Zeus eventually find their execution through archery, validating Thompson's claim that the epithet is related to archery. Yet, Suhr's estimation that the epithet is sound-related also finds validation in the groaning and singing of the bow. Although Pandaros physically shoots the arrow, the feathered arrow flying toward Menelaos is actually a message from the gods that the war is not over.

Regardless of the origin, this likening of divine speech and characteristics to birds indicates that the gods belong to a different, loftier realm than men, while also belonging to the natural world. Poseidon even notes how "earth and high Olympus are common to all" (314) the gods, clarifying their ability to traverse both worlds. Although men sometimes speak with "winged words" or are accompanied by bird imagery, this occurs when they are being compared to the divine. This can be seen when Achilleus puts on his divinely crafted armor: "And brilliant Achilleus tried himself in his armor, to see if it fitted close, and how his glorious limbs ran within it, and the armor became as wings and

upheld the shepherd of the people" (402). Here, the winged armor demonstrates a helpful connection between the divine and mortal (although Achilleus is part god).

Yet, not all bird imagery in *The Iliad* demonstrates a connection between the living world of men and gods; birds are also connected to death. This connection between birds and death has a long history: "Numerous myths have linked birds to the journeys undertaken by human souls after death. Sometimes a bird acts as a guide in the afterlife . . . The Greeks and Celts thought that the dead could reappear as birds. The Sumerians of the ancient Near East believed that the dead existed as birds in the underworld" ("Myth Encyclopedia"). Carrion birds, especially, indicate the time when men pass into another realm of the divine – the Underworld. Yet, images of vultures are not good omens as such an appearance indicates that the body will be destroyed, preventing proper burial and hindering the soul's smooth passage into death. For example, Odysseus dooms Sokos to death as he says, "the tearing birds will get you, with their wings close-beating about you" (246). These words inspire terror at the prospect of death, as Odysseus is communicating that Sokos's soul will suffer in the underworld.

Such bird imagery is especially clear when Patroklos dies. Hektor tells Patroklos, "here the vultures will eat you" (352) in a similar fashion to Odysseus's words to Sokos. However, the bird imagery continues to appear in Patroklos's death, showing more complexity to the bird-death connection. When Patroklos dies, "the end of death closed in around him, and the soul fluttering free of his limbs went down into Death's house" (353). These lines show how the transfer of the "fluttering" soul from the body to the underworld is bird-like, reminiscent of how mythology links birds to journeys in death or to guides in death. Immediately prior to Patroklos's soul softly flying into death, there is evidence of divine communication. Dietrich notes: "In Greek belief the dead, and even those on the point of death, possessed similar special vision which was presumably derived from direct communication. Thus the dying Patroclus could forecast Hector's own death or that of his friend Achilles" (53). So, Patroklos receives the divine gift of prophecy while his description is attended by bird imagery. The same situation occurs when Hektor dies; he prophesizes Achilleus's death at the hands of his brother, Paris. Then, his soul also flutters out of his body and down to the underworld (444-45).

The ways in which bird imagery is used within the text to portray an active connection between the divine and mortal realms suggests that the gods played diverse roles for men in *The Iliad* and in Greek culture. By providing omens through birds, directly communicating in the form of birds or with bird-like attributes, and using birds to transition into death, the gods give assistance to men. Lucinda Coventry suggests that this assistance reinforces their divinity and otherness: "In the very giving of aid, however, the gods reveal their distance from men . . . the divine world is contrasted with human suffering even while the gods' actions show concern for that suffering" (178). The use of birds in characterizing this divine assistance to men aptly shows this distance and otherness while reframing this assistance to something natural and understandable. Birds provide the bridge between the divine and earthly.

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Biographical Sketch

Élan Potter is currently a graduate student in the MLA program at Henderson State University with plans to pursue a Ph.D. in English in the future. Professionally, she has significant experience in teaching English as a Second Language and currently works to assess the speaking and writing proficiency of English language learners for the international agency, Educational Testing Services. She has also had fiction and poetry published in such venues as *Eclectica Magazine* and *The Local Writers' Workshop Anthology,* an organization for which she once served as administrator. Her academic interests include an obsession with the Greco-Roman era, its literature, and animalistic transformations.

Raisin' the Dead

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Abstract:

Having taught Advanced Human Growth and Development for the past eight years, the students' paper and presentation is entitled "The Hero's Journey;" which seeks to capture the defining moments and experiences within their lives which helped to produce the teacher and counselor persona. Each semester, the students have asked me to write my "Hero's Journey." Several years ago, I wrote a series of essays which seek to chronicle the archetypes and teachings of childhood and adolescence. The latest contribution (Summer, 2009) is presented in its entirety.

The text of the essay:

Last Thursday afternoon, Buford, my thirteen pound silver-point tabby, started chattering (like only a cat can do) and moving from window to window to watch the show going on outside. When I stopped long enough to see what or who she was talking to, I witnessed a true miracle of nature.