

THE ACHILLES OF PROCLUS*

ABSTRACT

In Essay Six of his Commentary on Plato's Republic, the Platonist Proclus offers a defence of the poetry of Homer and attempts to harmonize the Homeric epics, as inspired texts, with the philosophy of Plato as he interprets it. The tendency of late antique Platonists to turn to allegorical reading is well known, but in this instance Proclus interprets Achilles by other means. In particular, he is careful to place Achilles' actions relative to what he sees as the correct position in the scale of virtues (at the level of the political virtues). In some further remarkable passages Proclus sees Achilles' ritual activities as a kind of prefiguration of the theurgic practices embraced by the Platonic school of Proclus' era.

Keywords: Proclus; Homer; Achilles; Neoplatonism; allegory; scale of virtues

In Essay Six of his *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, the Platonist Proclus offers a defence of the poetry of Homer and attempts to harmonize the Homeric epics, as inspired texts, with the philosophy of Plato as he interprets it. In the process he develops an interpretation of the character of Achilles which responds in the first instance to Socrates' objections to Homer in the *Republic*,¹ but goes beyond this immediate goal to develop a reading of the hero as an exemplar of civic or political virtue and even, in one remarkable passage, as a quasi-theurgist. There are several good reasons why readers of Homer, as well as readers of late antique philosophy, should take an interest in what Proclus has to say in this essay. Proclus' discussion offers a rare insight into the reception of Homer by an intelligent and informed reader of the fifth century C.E. His analysis of Achilles in particular illustrates the range of hermeneutic approaches at his disposal; though the sophistication of late antique Platonic allegory is now fairly well and widely understood, this is not the only tool in the Proclan toolbox.² In his discussion of Achilles, Proclus does not make use of allegorical reading, though he

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¹ *Pl. Resp.* 3.376c–398b.

² On Neoplatonic allegory in relation to Proclus, see A.D.R. Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th and 6th Essays of Proclus' Commentary on the Republic* (Göttingen, 1980); R. Lamberton (ed. and transl.), *Porphyry on the Cave of the Nymphs* (Barrytown, 1983) and R. Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian. Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1986); O. Kuusima, *Proclus' Defence of Homer* (Helsinki, 1996); P.T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts* (Princeton, 2004); R. Pichler, *Allegorese und Ethik bei Proklos. Untersuchungen zur Kommentar zu Platons Politeia* (Berlin, 2005). On Proclus' interpretative activity in this essay more broadly, see D. Baltzly, J. Finamore and G. Miles (edd. and transl.), *Proclus: Commentary on Plato's Republic. Volume I. Essays 1–6* (Cambridge, 2018), 163–78. For general introductions to Proclus' philosophy, see R. Chlup, *Proclus: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2012) and P. d'Hoine and M. Martijn (edd.), *All From One. A Guide to Proclus* (Oxford, 2017).

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does read Achilles' character and actions within the terms of his own philosophical system, as well we might expect.³ Of particular importance is the late antique Platonic scale of virtues, which he employs to describe the kind of virtue which he sees Achilles as exemplifying, and to define what can and cannot reasonably be expected of such an individual.

The absence of allegorical reading from the discussion of Achilles is not accidental but based on the principles of Proclus' reading: allegory is appropriate for interpreting the myths concerning the gods, but is not to be applied to those concerning human heroes.⁴ This is not invariably the case in Neoplatonic reading: Porphyry, whose practice was far less formalized than that of Proclus, had said that Achilles and Hector were more fit for allegorizing than Christ and Satan, though apparently in a polemical anti-Christian context.⁵ For Proclus, the type of interpretation employed should follow the type of poetry to be interpreted. In Essay Six he sets out a tripartite division of poetry, dividing it into inspired, epistemic and mimetic (177.7–192.3). Having established this division, he argues that Homeric epic exemplifies all three types, but especially the first and highest (192.4–196.13).⁶ What matters in this complex picture for understanding Proclus' reading of Achilles is that he treats these parts of the Homeric epics as mimetic poetry.⁷ This categorization and the heroic rather than divine subject matter mean that Proclus reads these passages on a literal level, with a particular concern with Achilles' ethics. This ethical concern, it may be added, is especially urgent given the immediate purpose of Proclus' discussion, responding to the objections raised by the Socrates of the *Republic*.

Proclus inherits and works within a long critical tradition, visible to us primarily through the Homeric scholia. In his allegories, we can often see that there has been an increasing refinement and transposition of older readings into specifically Neoplatonic structures of thought. This was well underway in the readings of Syrianus, Proclus' teacher, and continued by Proclus himself.⁸ The ethics of Achilles had been a problem for philosophers since Plato, whose questions are the prompt to Proclus' discussion. In the intervening centuries the Stoics, for example, had devised other responses: Chrysippus appears to have seen Achilles' treatment of Priam in terms of Stoic therapeutics, though Achilles himself, unsurprisingly, was far from being a Stoic sage.⁹ The responses which Proclus himself gives to these old questions

³ A.D.R. Sheppard, 'Literary theory and aesthetics', in P. d'Hoine and M. Martijn (edd.), *All From One. A Guide to Proclus* (Oxford, 2017), 276–89, at 278 rightly remarks that Proclus' 'activity as a literary critic deserves more recognition and better understanding than it has usually received'. The reading by Pichler (n. 2), 251 of Proclus' interpretation of the sacrifice of Trojan youths as allegory seems mistaken; see further my discussion of this passage below.

⁴ See Baltzly, Finamore and Miles (n. 2), 167–8.

⁵ P. Sellew, 'Achilles or Christ? Porphyry and Didymus in debate over allegorical interpretation', *HThR* 82 (1989), 79–100. On Porphyry as interpreter more generally, see A.P. Johnson, *Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre: The Limits of Hellenism* (Cambridge, 2013).

⁶ For fuller discussion of the meaning of this division, see Baltzly, Finamore and Miles (n. 2), 112–26 (on some apparent contradictions in Proclus' division of types of poetry), 163–78. All references in this article to Proclus are to the first volume (in Kroll's edition) of his *Commentary on Plato's Republic* unless otherwise stated.

⁷ See the explicit uses of μίμησις in relation to Homeric poetry at 145.29, 153.20.

⁸ Sheppard (n. 2), especially 81, 85.

⁹ On Chrysippus' interpretation of Achilles, see H. Cullyer, 'Chrysippus on Achilles: the evidence of Galen *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* 4.6–7', *CQ* 58 (2008), 537–46. For the preservation of ancient literary criticism in the scholia to the *Iliad*, see N.J. Richardson, 'Literary criticism in the exegetical scholia to the *Iliad*: a sketch', *CQ* 30 (1980), 265–87.

possess considerable subtlety, owing in large part to the gradations of the ethical and, in some cases, ontological systems at his disposal.

1. ACHILLES: EXEMPLAR OF POLITICAL VIRTUE

Proclus' reading of Achilles is not, as will already be clear, made for its own sake. It is, rather, part of this broader defence of Homer and reconciliation of Homer and Plato. In large part, Proclus defends Achilles' actions by reference to what might reasonably be expected of an active man engaged in warfare in the remote heroic age. This, for instance, is the approach that he takes to defending Achilles against Socrates' accusation of greed. Socrates' criticism had been that reading or hearing about the greedy heroes of Homer will increase our own avarice (143.18–146.5, responding to Pl. *Resp.* 390e4). In his customary way, Proclus first states the problem as clearly, and forcefully, as he can:¹⁰ why did Phoenix advise Achilles to accept Agamemnon's gifts, and why did Achilles accept the ransom for Hector's body from Priam, if not out of greed (143.18–31)? They did not, he says, do this out of avarice or in the belief that money was the definition of happiness (εὐδαιμονία). In the case of the ransom from Priam, there was a custom of this sort, of receiving ransom for the bodies of the enemy. This was, moreover, a strategic consideration, to destroy the wealth of the opponent (144.1–14). 'All of these and similar actions', Proclus states, 'had a rational justification for those heroes when they were carried out by them, because they acted under pressure of external circumstances and acted in accordance with customs different to ours' (144.15–17).¹¹

Proclus argues that Achilles' words to Agamemnon demonstrate that he does not desire the money for its own sake, when he addresses his leader as 'Honoured Atreides, greediest of all men' (*Il.* 1.122). Achilles himself tells us that he takes home but little of what he has won in war (1.167–8). He initially refuses the gifts of Agamemnon, accepting them only when the time is right to accept his apology, not out of any interest in the gifts themselves. The idea that a different standard of behaviour and different customs prevailed in the heroic age is also employed to defend Achilles' dragging of Hector. This, Proclus says on Callimachus' authority, was an ancient Thessalian custom, to drag murderers around the tombs of their victims (150.11–151.23).¹² The idea that Achilles' violent actions follow a Thessalian custom may go further back to Aristotle's *Homeric Questions*.¹³ All of this behaviour is, Proclus concludes, appropriate for a warrior of the heroic age, though it would be inappropriate for those raised under the lawgiver, that is, as Guardians of Plato's ideal city (145.28–146.5).

¹⁰ This format of argument (posing a question, then proposing one or more answers) goes back to Aristotle: R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship from the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford, 1968), 69. Closer in time to Proclus, this was also the format of Porphyry's *Homeric Zetemata*. In that text the difficulty is stated before readers are told how 'one must answer' (ῥητέον).

¹¹ Translations of Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic* are from Baltzly, Finamore and Miles (n. 2).

¹² Callim. fr. 588 Pfeiffer. Proclus draws on Callimachus primarily for details of religion and custom and as a writer of hymns, despite not agreeing with his views of Plato's judgement of poetry: Baltzly, Finamore and Miles (n. 2), 265 n. 286.

¹³ Lamberton (n. 2 [1986]), 216 n. 21; Pfeiffer (n. 10), 69.

Taking a somewhat different tack, Proclus had acquitted Achilles a little earlier of acting as a model of lack of self-control (130.1–131.4). The problem, on this occasion, is his outspokenness towards Agamemnon in the quarrel of *Iliad* Book 1, which appears to fly in the face of Socrates' statement that the highest form of self-control is respect towards those in power (129.8–10, citing Pl. *Resp.* 3.389d). Proclus quotes the memorable line from Achilles' speech (*Il.* 1.225): 'you who are soaked with wine, and have the eyes of a dog' (οἰνοβαρέες, κυνὸς ὄμματ' ἔχων—leaving out 'the heart of a deer').¹⁴ Proclus' response relies again on appropriateness to circumstances: Achilles' words would indeed be outrageous if he were addressing the Guardians, who hold power and deserve respect because of their education and virtue, but Agamemnon deserves no such respect (130.10–14):

the poet, by contrast, does not concede that Agamemnon is superior in virtue to all of his subjects, nor does he allow him to be counted among those who do good to others, but rather among those who receive benefit, especially from the expertise of Achilles in generalship.

Here too, Proclus argues by reference to reasonable expectations. Achilles is not a philosopher, who might be expected to restrain his anger, nor is he speaking to someone deserving of respect. The 'pro-Achilles' line which Proclus takes necessitates for him a negative view of Agamemnon. Generalizing his point, Proclus asserts rather aphoristically that 'virtue is on all occasions an honourable thing, but the instruments of virtue are not' (ἡ γὰρ ἀρετὴ πανταχοῦ τίμιον, ἀλλ' οὐ τὰ ὄργανα τῆς ἀρετῆς, 130.21–2). The virtue of Achilles, in other words, should command universal respect, but mere wealth and power (although these can be useful as instruments with which to act virtuously) do not.

What then is this virtue of Achilles for Proclus? The answer to this requires a brief excursus into the nature of the virtues in late antique Platonism. The development begins, as often, with a problem in the interpretation of Plato: the political account of the virtues given in the *Republic* is not easily squared with the different understanding of virtue in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates famously speaks of philosophy as a practice of death, in which the philosopher works to separate the soul from the body as much as is possible during life. The kernel of the Neoplatonic solution is already present in Plotinus (*Enn.* 1.2), who argued that the two texts concern different levels of virtue: the *Republic* discusses 'political' or 'civic' virtue (πολιτικὴ), while the *Phaedo* is concerned with 'cathartic' or 'purificatory' virtue (καθαρτικὴ). The next decisive step after Plotinus' discussion was a systematization of those ideas by Porphyry in his *Sententiae* (32). The differentiation of types or levels of virtues established by Plotinus and Porphyry was extended into the canonical scale of virtues by Iamblichus, whose successors employ it with some variations.¹⁵ In the developed system the same four virtues (courage, wisdom, self-control and justice) are found at each level, but what they entail

¹⁴ The Venetus B scholia on line 1.225, by contrast, attempt to defend Agamemnon from Achilles' criticisms.

¹⁵ L. Brisson, 'The doctrine of the degrees of virtue in the Neoplatonists: an analysis of Porphyry's *Sentences* 32, its antecedents and its heritage', in H. Tarrant and D. Baltzly (edd.), *Reading Plato in Antiquity* (London, 2006), 89–106; D. Baltzly, 'The human life', in P. d'Hoine and M. Martijn (edd.), *All From One. A Guide to Proclus* (Oxford, 2017), 258–75; id., 'The virtues and "becoming like god": Alcinous to Proclus', *OSAPh* 26 (2004), 297–322; R. van den Berg, "'Becoming like god" according to Proclus' interpretations of the *Timaeus*, the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the *Chaldaean Oracles*', *BICS* 46 (2003), 189–202; H.D. Saffrey, A.-P. Segonds and C. Luna (edd. and transl.), *Proclus ou sur le bonheur* (Paris, 2001), XLI–C.

differs. Courage, for instance, at the level of the political virtues is recognizably similar to the quality which we would identify by that name, but at the level of the cathartic virtues is concerned rather with the courage which accepts the separation of body and soul. The central part of the development of the philosopher is the ascent through these virtues through self-discipline, study of Plato and of other important texts under the instruction of a master, and theurgy. What one ultimately aims for in this progression is the goal of Platonic ethics as defined in the *Theaetetus*: 'likeness to god as far as possible' (176b).

It is also necessary to clarify at this point what Proclus means by the two levels of virtues which will primarily be of concern in the following discussion, the political and the theurgic. We have a discussion of the nature of the political virtues in the seventh essay of the *Commentary on Plato's Republic*: these virtues, for Proclus, emerge by the fact of the soul's embodiment. They are the virtues of the soul as the ruler of the body.¹⁶ The place and nature of theurgy, and consequently the theurgic virtues, remain problematic in contemporary scholarship on Neoplatonism. We do not know the extent to which the 'higher' theurgy utilized ritual along with what appears to have been a primarily contemplative approach. The nature of the rituals carried out at any stage of the theurgic ascent is, moreover, unclear. It is more feasible, given the surviving evidence, to reconstruct aspects of the theory of theurgy than to form any clear idea of what one did in theurgic ritual, much less what the experience of the theurgist actually was. What can be said with more confidence is that the theurgic virtues were placed at or near the top of the Iamblichean scale of virtues which Proclus had inherited,¹⁷ beyond the cathartic virtues (which were concerned with the separation of body and soul and the purification of the soul), and the contemplative virtues exercised by purified soul independently of the body.

In defending Achilles, as we have seen, Proclus is in general keen to stress what should be expected of a person of his nature and character engaged in warfare. While defending the heroes' tendency to lament, Proclus reasonably states that they are not philosophers practising the cathartic virtues, but are at a lower stage of virtue and actively engaged in warfare (124.5–14). He implicitly places them, in other words, at the level of the political virtues, the level immediately below the cathartic virtues. This implies that they are not aiming at ἀπάθεια (the absence of emotion) but at μετριοπάθεια (moderation of emotion), the more limited goal at this level on the scale of virtues. Even after death this is the case for Achilles, who famously rebukes Odysseus for his praise of death in the *Odyssey* (11.476–91). This is not, Proclus clarifies, like the attachment of souls who have indulged the appetites of the oyster-like body while they were alive, but, because Achilles was supreme in the active life (τὸν ἐν πράξει βίον, 120.3) and possessed practical virtue (πρακτικὴν ἀρετήν, 120.10–11), he retains a desire for the bodily instrument by which he exercised that virtue. Proclus' Achilles is not then merely one who should be understood as operating at the level below the cathartic virtues, but as one who exemplified outstanding virtue, albeit at these lower levels up to and including the political.

Yet on other occasions Proclus seems to consider Achilles to possess higher virtues than these. Answering Socrates' charge that the heroes show impiety or disregard of the

¹⁶ D.G. MacIsaac, 'The soul and the virtues in Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic of Plato*, *Philosophie Antique* 9 (2009), 115–43. On the often underestimated importance of the political virtues in Neoplatonism more generally, see D. O'Meara, *Platonopolis* (Oxford, 2003).

¹⁷ See Baltzly (n. 15 [2017]), 264–5.

divine, Proclus first takes examples from Achilles' behaviour of the type of offence that Socrates has in mind (146.8–17):

How could this not characterize someone who would dare to say to Apollo such things as:

You harmed me, far-shooter, most destructive of all the gods [*Il.* 22.15].

And one, moreover, who fights against the river Xanthus, although it is a god, and who offers his hair not to the Spercheius but to Patroclus when he is dead [*Il.* 23.141–51]?

Proclus argues not merely for an Achilles who pays appropriate respect to the gods, but for an Achilles who 'is unshakably correct in his attitude to matters divine' (146.18–19). His words to Apollo are not, for Proclus, to the highest form of the god (which would indeed be a gross instance of impiety) but to a lowly and divided form of Apollo, the guardian daemon of Hector himself. Achilles' battle against the Xanthus is similarly justified: he fought not against a god but either against the manifest water or some local, and so relatively minor, power (148.27–9). This justification is possible for Proclus because of a different hierarchy, this time theological rather than ethical. For Proclus, deities exist on all levels of reality (somewhat as the virtues do in the scale of virtues), but how they can be expressed or manifest at these various levels differs.¹⁸ The guardian daemon of Hector is one form of Apollo, but not a very elevated one. He exists, rather, at an extreme level of division (the higher levels of gods being less divided), and is concerned with exercising providence over Hector personally. This personal providence, in Proclus' understanding of events, is eventually overridden by the providence which governs the cosmos as a whole. Achilles, moreover, knows that this minor Apollo protects one who has done him harm by killing Patroclus. Proclus' choice of language here, furthermore, indicates that Achilles is an instrument of the providence of the whole, bringing about a correction (*κατόρθωσις*, 148.6) by killing Hector.

This theory of the various levels at which gods manifest themselves also allows Proclus to make sense of the different ways in which divine interventions are described by Homer. Proclus combines his own theological understanding with the details of the *Iliad* to argue for an Achilles favoured with the best kind of divine epiphany. At 113.20–114.29, Proclus offers an interpretation of the apparent transformations which the gods undertake, the third that he proposes, but the only one related to our reading of Achilles. He suggests here that 'the same thing goes forth through different classes and settles itself even among the final ones, multiplying itself numerically and descending into lower orders' (113.24–6). In the case of daemonic manifestations, Proclus argues, the Homeric poems ascribe a particular form (for example Athena as Mentor, Hermes as a seagull, or Apollo as a hawk, 113.28–30).¹⁹ By contrast, when Homer relates a divine epiphany, he does not ascribe a particular form to the deity. The example which Proclus cites is Athena's restraint of Achilles in his rage at Agamemnon in *Iliad* Book 1. Intermediate between these two possibilities, Proclus proposes that angelic epiphanies are ascribed a form, like daemonic ones, but that these are general rather than specific forms, as befits the greater level of generality at

¹⁸ The fullest account of Proclus' theological system is his *Platonic Theology* of which there is no recent English translation. See H.D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink, *Theologie Platonicienne* (Paris, 1968–97); also L. Brisson, 'Proclus' theology', in P. d'Hoine and M. Martijn (edd.), *All From One. A Guide to Proclus* (Oxford, 2017), 207–22.

¹⁹ Proclus refers to *Od.* 2.268, *Od.* 5.51 and *Il.* 15.237 respectively.

which these beings exist. Once more, the chosen recipient of these apparitions is Achilles, to whom the gods appear 'like men'. As Proclus quotes (*Il.* 21.284–5),

Poseidon and Athena quickly
came and stood near him, like in their form to men.

Achilles, then, is not only an exemplar of the civic or political stage of virtue; he is also especially favoured by the gods both in the higher levels of divine epiphany which he experiences and, as Proclus remarks on the authority of Syrianus, more generally in being cared for by Zeus (115.29–116.1). In a general sense, this is a perfectly reasonable reading of the *Iliad*. The semi-divine Achilles certainly is a special individual and the misfortunes of the Achaeans do arise because Thetis is able to intervene on his behalf. The epiphanies which Proclus cites do happen to Achilles in large part because of who he is, though Proclus' categorization of the different levels of such epiphanies relates rather to his own late antique Platonic theology than to the Homeric poems themselves. In passages like these, and indeed in Proclus' reading of Achilles in general, the picture that emerges is not one of wilful distortion or high-flown allegory but one of an interpretation which pays close attention to the epics themselves, while seeing them within the terms of an elaborate theological and ethical system. It is in the interpretative possibilities of these systems, which Proclus realizes in his readings, that the *Commentary on Plato's Republic* has something new to offer in the history of Homeric reception. The idea of levels of virtues allows an appreciation of achievement at these various levels as well as taking account of reasonable limitations. The gradation of the Neoplatonic cosmos (in this instance especially its ethical and divine gradations) allows Proclus a differentiated sense of what is appropriate at different levels.²⁰

Despite Achilles' special character and divine favour, Proclus is on other occasions keen to stress his limitations. Much as Achilles' attachment after death to the body which had been the instrument of his greatness while alive indicates, for Proclus, his location in the scale of virtues at the political level, so too his partial understanding of the apparition of Patroclus places him at this rank. In his discussion of Homeric views of the afterlife, in which he argues for their compatibility with Platonic views as he understands them, Proclus states that Achilles is mistaken about the nature of survival of bodily death: Homer shows us an Achilles who can be sure from the apparition of his friend's ghost that an εἶδωλον survives the death of the body, but who does not have sufficient evidence or knowledge to be sure of the survival of the reasoning part of the soul (121.3–7). This passage is not concerned primarily with Achilles, but rather Proclus uses this scene involving him as part of his development of arguments concerning Homeric views on the nature of the soul and its survival of death. None the less, the apparent limitation on Achilles' knowledge here is compatible with his exemplary status at the level of political virtue. The next level of virtue above this, the level of the cathartic virtues, is concerned with separation of the soul from the body as far as that is possible while one is alive, of reverting the soul upon itself. At that level, one certainly would expect an understanding of the soul's nature and posthumous fate. That is not, however, the level at which Proclus generally considers Achilles to operate.

²⁰ By contrast, the Stoic belief that there are no distinct levels of virtue compels a Stoic reader to take a different view: Cullyer (n. 9), 544.

In this passage at least Proclus seems keen to keep Achilles at the lower political level of virtue and to deny him knowledge of the immortality of the rational part of the soul. As we shall see shortly, Achilles seems at other times to have a higher level of achievement. In the present instance, however, part at least of the explanation is once more the needs of the moment: Proclus is defending the view that Homer already has a Platonic understanding of the nature of the soul, so he cannot at this point allow Achilles' view to be Homer's own. He needs, in other words, an Achilles who expresses only a limited perspective in the passage that he cites.

2. ACHILLES THE RITUALIST, ACHILLES THE THEURGIST

Proclus makes intriguing remarks about Achilles' ritual actions, understanding these by reference to theurgy. This religio-philosophical system, of great importance to late antique Platonists, remains controversial. We possess only fragments of the *Chaldaean Oracles*,²¹ the foundational text for the practice. It remains uncertain how far into the theurgic process physical ritual continued, and whether the higher reaches of theurgic work were a purely contemplative matter.²² In the passage on Achilles' piety discussed above, Proclus remarks (147.2–6):

It is clear evidence of Achilles' reverence towards divinity and of his knowledge of the symbols (συνθήματα) belonging to each of the beings honoured that he purifies the φύαλη and sets it apart, dedicated to Zeus alone, and that he stands in the centre of the enclosure to call upon the one who reaches to all places from the centre of the cosmos.

In part, this piety of Achilles sits comfortably enough with the understanding of his character as operating at the level of the political virtues. The purification of a vessel and its reservation for ritual use are not specifically theurgic but rather what one might call ritual best practice. None the less, the description of the vessel as a σύνθημα suggests that Achilles has a specifically theurgic understanding of the object and its correct ritual use.

In the same discussion, Proclus mentions, as evidence of the intense piety of Achilles, that he is seen soothing his anger 'by singing' or 'by incantation' (ἐπάδων

²¹ See the editions of R. Majercik, *The Chaldaean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Dillon Marsh, 2013²) and E. des Places, *Oracles Chaldaïques* (Paris, 1996³), now with the exegesis of N. Spanu, *Proclus and the Chaldean Oracles: A Study on Proclean Exegesis, with a Translation and Commentary of Proclus' Treatise on Chaldean Philosophy* (Abingdon and New York, 2020) and G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA, 1995).

²² On this issue, see C. Helmig and A.L.C. Vargas, 'Ascent of the soul and grades of freedom. Neoplatonic theurgy between ritual and philosophy', in P. d'Hoine and G. Van Riel (edd.), *Fate, Providence and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Leuven, 2014), 253–66, replying to A.D.R. Sheppard, 'Proclus' attitude to theurgy', *CQ* 76 (1982), 212–24. On theurgy more generally, see Majercik (n. 21); I. Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity: The Invention of a Ritual Tradition* (Göttingen, 2013); C. Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism. Oracles of the Gods* (Abingdon and New York, 2014); J. Finamore, 'Proclus on ritual practice in Neoplatonic religious philosophy', in A. Kijewska (ed.), *Being or Good? Metamorphoses of Neoplatonism* (Lublin, 2004), 127–37; R. van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns. Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Leiden, 2001); C. Van Liefferinge, *La Théurgie: Des Oracles Chaldaïques à Proclus* (Liège, 1999); H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (new edn by M. Tardieu) (Paris, 1978³); des Places (n. 21); Shaw (n. 21); A.J. Festugière, 'Contemplation philosophique et art théurgique chez Proclus', in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Studi di storia religiosa della tarda antichità* (Messina, 1968), 7–18.

τῷ θυμῷ, 146.23). This refers to the Embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* Book 9, where the hero is the only person seen to play music or to sing in the poem. Proclus' wording is important: though this verb can mean simply 'sing' as well as 'make an incantation', its usages in the works of late antique Platonists, from Plotinus onwards, always denote the latter.²³ It is likely, as Armstrong already observed, that the decisive factor influencing this usage is the appearance of ἐπωδή as a metaphor 'for salutary philosophical exhortation in *Charmides* 156–7'.²⁴ The same verb is used by Iamblichus of Pythagoras' employment of music as therapy for the soul (Iambl. *VP* 25.114). Achilles, in other words, appears to be using music here in a way befitting a philosopher, harmonizing his own soul by the use of musical harmony. Though this does not in itself ascribe to him a specific higher position in the scale of virtues, it does suggest an understanding higher than one might expect of one at the level of the political virtues, however exemplary at that stage.

The other details, however, are specific to theurgy as practised by late antique Platonists. Achilles, as noted above, is said to know the συνθήματα of the gods, that is, the ritually efficacious symbols which they have scattered into the physical world, which the theurgist employs in ritual. The detail of speaking from the centre of the enclosure 'to call upon the one who reaches to all places from the centre of the cosmos' is also apparently theurgic, though here the limitations of the evidence prevent certainty.

An even more remarkable theurgic Achilles appears in Proclus' defence of the sacrifice of twelve Trojan prisoners at the pyre of Patroclus (151.24–153.20 commenting on *Il.* 23.175). Proclus' first defence of Achilles' actions is, to say the least, succinct: the sacrifice did honour to Patroclus and was no worse than killing Trojans on the battlefield (151.24–152.6). To this he adds a much longer explanation, 'the more secret contemplation (θεωρία) of our teacher (ὁ καθηγεμῶν)' (152.7–8). This is the title which Proclus employs for his teacher, Syrianus, whose influence pervades this essay as it does Proclus' work in general.²⁵

It must be said that the whole rite (πραγματεία) conducted by Achilles around the pyre imitates (μιμῆται) the rite of immortalization (ἀπαθανάτισμός) of the soul among the theurgists, leading up the soul of Patroclus into the transcendent life.²⁶ Therefore, standing before the pyre he is said to call upon the winds, Boreas and Zephyrus [*Il.* 23.194–5], so that the manifest vehicle (τὸ φανώμενον ὄχημα) might receive its appropriate care through their visible movement, and that which is more divine than this [*sc.* vehicle] might invisibly be purified and return to its own allotted sphere (ληξίς), drawn upwards by the airy and lunar and solar rays, as one of the gods says. And Achilles is said to pour libations on the pyre 'for the whole night':

from a golden crater, taking a double cup,
calling upon the soul of poor Patroclus. [*Il.* 23.219, 221]

The poet is all but proclaiming to us that Achilles' ritual was concerned with the soul of his friend,²⁷ and not with the manifest vehicle alone, and that all of the rites have been conducted symbolically by Achilles.

²³ On the history of the word in these authors, see Baltzly, Finamore and Miles (n. 2), 260 n. 280.

²⁴ A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus Enneads Volume 4* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 268–9 on IV.4.

²⁵ On Proclus' debt to Syrianus, see Sheppard (n. 2), 39–103.

²⁶ On this rite, see Finamore (n. 22), 130–4; Baltzly, Miles and Finamore (n. 2), 173–6; C. Van Liefferinge, 'L'immortalisation par le feu dans la littérature grecque: du récit mythique à la pratique rituelle', *DHA* 26 (2000), 99–119; Lewy (n. 22), 184–5, 207.

²⁷ See on this Pichler (n. 2), 249–53.

While the physical vehicle, the body, is burned away, the ‘more divine’ (that is, non-physical, pneumatic) vehicle of the soul goes to its own sphere. The word chosen here for the ‘sphere’ or ‘abode’ of the soul (λῆξις) is frequent in Proclus and appears also, for instance, of the abode of souls in Hermias’ *Commentary on the Phaedrus*.²⁸ The language of ‘drawing’ and ‘leading up’ the soul also appears in Emperor Julian’s references to this rite.²⁹ The ‘rays’ (ἀύγαί) are a standard term in the Chaldaean purification.³⁰

Much must remain mysterious here despite the best efforts of Lewy and others. The broad outline, however, is clear: Proclus, following Syrianus, sees Achilles’ rite at Patroclus’ pyre as an imitation (μιμείται) of the theurgic ἀπαθανατισμός, which aimed to disperse the lower vehicle of the soul and purify the higher part, then lead it upwards to its own domain. It is in this idea of spiritual ascent that the complementarity of theurgy and philosophy in late antique Platonism is apparent. Proclus’ reading of Homer does not imply that human sacrifice played a part in theurgic ἀπαθανατισμός. What he sees in Achilles’ actions is a rite similar to the one that he obliquely describes, yet also specific to the wartime heroic-age circumstances of Achilles and Patroclus. Its resemblance to theurgic ritual is what most appeals to Proclus, following Syrianus, and the human sacrifice of prisoners, back in the heroic past, is apparently no great fault.

3. CONCLUSION

Can we reconcile Achilles the exemplar of practical political virtue and Achilles the theurgist? Should we? Proclus is, after all, not primarily concerned with interpreting the character of Achilles, but discusses him at length in Essay Six because he is essential to his defence of the Homeric epics as sacred texts, and so to Proclus’ harmonization of Homer and Plato. When developing his image of Achilles the theurgist, Proclus is keen to stress the hero’s divine ancestry and education by Chiron (153.14–20). These aspects of Achilles’ traditional character do not feature explicitly when discussing Achilles the paragon of the political virtues. We might reconcile these two aspects of Proclus’ Achilles, the theurgic and the political, by saying that the political/civic level of Achilles corresponds to his mortal inheritance and his theurgic side with his divine ancestry. This, however, is not a step that Proclus takes, and at no point does he directly consider how to unify the various arguments and remarks he has made about Achilles’ character. What emerges is largely, though not entirely, coherent.

One possible answer would be to state that, although Achilles operates at the level of the political virtues, he could still carry out actions which optimally would be performed by someone operating at the theurgic level. The problem with this, however, is Proclus’ own insistence that Achilles operates only at the level of political virtue and so should be judged only at this level; this was necessary for him in establishing a sense of reasonable expectations for Achilles’ actions. It is not the case that late antique Platonists viewed

²⁸ See Hermias, *In Phdr.* 90.23 (Lucarini & Moreschini = 86.26–7 Couvreur) and of the abode of the gods at *In Phdr.* 29.30.

²⁹ 172a τὰς ἀναγωγὰς ἀκτῖνας ἡλίου, 172c ἔλξει καὶ ἀνάξει; Lewy (n. 22), 186.

³⁰ e.g. *In Remp.* 213.2; Lewy (n. 22), 188–90.

the positions of individuals on the scale of virtues as rigid and unchanging, but on this particular occasion Proclus has made it difficult for himself to hint at higher capabilities in Achilles.

Yet perhaps this is as it must be not only because Proclus is interpreting poetry that is already ancient, but also because this sort of untidiness inevitably emerges when specific individuals are considered within the terms of the elaborate system of late antique Platonic virtue ethics. When Damascius assesses the virtues and defects of the many philosophers and of others who populate his *Life of Isidore/Philosophical History*, it becomes apparent that a human being can excel at the higher contemplative levels while having shortcomings at lower ones. Isidore himself, for instance, is exemplary for Damascius in his apprehension of intelligible reality, but is less strong at the more ordinary level of argument, had only average senses, and gave laughably stingy dinner-parties.³¹ Even in the more schematically arranged *Proclus or On Happiness* by Marinus, which overtly structures its biography/encomium of Proclus around the scale of virtues,³² tensions arise between the chronology of a life, during which the subject presumably developed, and the author's desire to illustrate the perfection of Proclus in each category. It is not simply a matter of demonstrating Proclus' ascent of the ladder. Even the mature Proclus is allowed to have some faults in his relations to others (most notably his tendency to anger: Marinus, *Procl.* 20), and so presumably not entirely perfect at the political level. None the less, his perfections at higher levels of virtue can still be praised. Likewise, in Proclus' own treatment of Achilles, it is only to be expected that a vividly imagined character in a poem, like a flesh-and-blood human being, will be messier and less consistent than any theoretical model. This human quality, coupled with the argumentative strategies required to meet the Socratic objections to Achilles, ensures that inconsistencies emerge. The mode of presentation of Proclus' reading of Achilles, as responses to specific difficulties dispersed through a wider discussion of Homer and Plato, tends to smooth over any tensions simply by the fact of their separation in the discussion.

In some much-quoted lines from his commentary on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, Dodds famously declared it 'one of time's strangest ironies' that the vivid deities of Homer 'should have ended their career on the dusty shelves of this museum of metaphysical abstractions'.³³ What we can see in Essay Six of the *Commentary on Plato's Republic* is an engagement with Homer which is anything but dusty. His thoroughly involved and at times even passionate defence of Homeric epic is not abstract and inhuman, though it does have its share of metaphysical allegory in, for instance, the reading of the union of Zeus and Hera (132.13–133.18), or of the tale

³¹ Fr. 24c Athanassiadi = 51 Zintzen. On the scale of virtues in Damascius' biographical work: D. O'Meara, 'Patterns of perfection in Damascius' *Life of Isidore*', *Phronesis* 51 (2006), 74–90; G. Miles, 'Mythic paradigms and the Platonic life: becoming a Bacchus in Damascius' *Philosophical History*', *JHS* 138 (2018), 55–66. For the text, see P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History* (Athens, 2006); C. Zintzen, *Damascii Vitae Isidori Reliquiae* (Hildesheim, 1967).

³² See Saffrey, Segonds and Luna (n. 15).

³³ E.R. Dodds, *Proclus. The Elements of Theology* (Oxford, 1963²), 260. It would be unfair to quote these sentiments from a work first published in 1933 and reprinted in 1963 were they not an eloquent expression of a still widespread misapprehension of Proclus' system. They are quoted by, for instance, S. Rangos, 'Proclus and Artemis: on the relevance of Neoplatonism to the modern study of ancient religion', *Kernos* 13 (2000), 47–84, at 49–50; E. Butler, *Essays on a Polytheistic Philosophy of Religion* (New York, 2014²), 106–7.

of Ares and Aphrodite (114.1–143.16).³⁴ Proclus' reading is also profoundly engaged with the ethics of Homer not only in the passages concerning Achilles but also, for instance, in his analysis of the episode of Pandarus and the violation of the oaths (100.21–106.10), a section in which Proclus' subtle thinking about the workings of providence, and the nature of human freedom of choice and divine will, come into play. What Proclus, following Syrianus, shows us is one way in which the Homeric epics could be accommodated within a different philosophical and theological world-view. As our earlier sources for the ancient reading of Homer demonstrate, the problems which Proclus confronts were certainly not new. What is new, however, to Proclus' and (so far as we know) to Syrianus' reading is the detailed but flexible philosophical system in which their interpretations were based, which enabled them to accommodate the Homeric epics within their own world-view, incorporating and transforming much from the long tradition of Homeric interpretation.

Though I am not proposing that we should always read Homer as Proclus did, this sixth essay of Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Republic* does offer an intriguing glimpse of the reading of Homer in Late Antiquity and of some of the ways in which a brilliant mind with fundamentally different assumptions from our own about the nature of the Homeric poems, and indeed about poetry in general, saw the Homeric epics. Despite the many centuries between Homer and Proclus, the διόδοχος could still accommodate and indeed celebrate the Homeric picture of gods and human beings. A vital step in finding a place for Homer in his overarching understanding of the Hellenic inheritance was the reconciliation of Homer and Plato, and vital to that was the development of a suitably positive reading of the challenging figure of Achilles within the framework of Proclan Platonism.

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³⁴ On the reading of Zeus and Hera, see Sheppard (n. 2), 62–74; on Aphrodite in Proclus' thought: T. Lankila, 'Aphrodite in Proclus' theology', *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 3 (2009), 21–43.