

Return to Sender: Failed Reciprocities in Ancient Greek Religion

This paper seeks to demonstrate how certain descriptions of religious sacrifice in Archaic Greek poetry call into question the *do ut des* principle of sacrifice as gift exchange described most famously in Marcel Mauss' work, *The Gift*. In particular, Mauss sets out three obligations in gift-exchange, "To Give, To Receive, and To Reciprocate" (Mauss 1990, 8-18). Yet in Homer, Hesiod, and the *Homeric Hymns*, we see that if sacrifice is considered gift exchange, the gods constantly fail to fulfill the obligations of ritual exchange. Hesiod points to the possibility of rejected offerings when he states, "Do not pour a libation of gleaming wine to Zeus after dawn with unwashed hands nor to any of the other gods. For they do not hearken and spit back your prayers" (*Works* 726). Hesiod's comment on the possibility of rejection and "spitting back prayers" plays off the Indo-European formula for "pouring prayers," (Kurke 1989). And while Hesiod accounts for rejected offerings in terms of failures in ritual practice, other divine rejections in Archaic Greek poetry have no such explanation. The most famous occurrence of divine rejection occurs in Book Six of the *Iliad*, where Athena denies the prayers and sacrifices of Theano and the Trojan Women (*Iliad* 6.297-311). However, in the *Iliad*, such failed reciprocity is not merely against the Trojan side, since Zeus himself also rejects the prayers of Achaeans when they are about to set out against the Trojans (*Iliad* 2.400-420). In neither case is there any indication of failure in ritual procedure. What makes Zeus' rejection particularly significant with regard to Mauss' theory of gift exchange is the express mention of the fact that Zeus does indeed *accept* the sacrifices of the Achaeans, even though he refuses to accomplish their prayers (*Iliad* 2.419-420). Unlike traditional gift exchange as described by Mauss, in this instance the Achaeans give and Zeus does accept, while the third and final obligation, to reciprocate, remains unfulfilled by Zeus. Thus, rather than consider the passage as an instance where sacrifice is used to create community among mortals in the Homeric epics, as Seaford argues (Seaford 1994, 42-53), I suggest that the sacrificial scene of Book Two of the *Iliad* and others like it serves the purpose of demonstrating the impossibility of reciprocity between gods and men. This failure of the gods to reciprocate in the context of sacrifice is also expressed by the god Apollo in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. In proclaiming his own prophetic powers to his younger brother Hermes, Apollo asserts his ability to help and harm whom he pleases, stating that, "Whoever trusting in idle talking birds wishes to invoke my prophetic art, beyond my will, and wishes to know more than the everlasting gods, I say that he goes on a fruitless road, but I would still accept his gifts" (*H.H. to Hermes* 546-549). In this sense, Ancient Greek sacrificial ritual does not demonstrate Maussian principles of gift exchange for the sake of commensality between gods and men so much as it problematizes the attempt to create commensality between parties defined by unequal power relations. Just as Achilles asserted that "there are no trustworthy oaths between men and lions" (*Iliad* 22.262), so these passages underscore a belief that there are no binding contracts between men and gods in Ancient Greek religion.

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