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Euripidean Tragedy and Theology*

[17] From Aristophanes to modern times, the role and presentation of the gods in Euripidean tragedy have been the topic of intense discussion and disagreement. The questions related to this discussion are literary, cultural, and religious, and they include, among others, the following. What is the relationship of the framing divine prologue and epilogue to the dramatic scenes within the frame? To what degree are they integrated into the play and to what degree are they openly marked as distinct from the other scenes? What effect do they have on the audience's interpretation of the actions, behavior, and decisions of the human characters between the frames, and on the audience's assessment of the order or disorder, or morality or amorality, of the represented tragic world? Does tragedy's representation of the gods owe so much to a poetic tradition that it is scarcely applicable to the study of Greek religion, or is tragedy so embedded in the Athenian democracy that its representation of religion should be brought into conformity with what

* A portion of this essay was presented at the Università di Roma "La Sapienza" in October 2001 through the courtesy of L. E. Rossi, to whom I am also grateful for the invitation to present a more finished form for publication. My initial work on this topic was carried out in 1996-97 as part of work toward a book to be entitled *The Art of Euripides*. I returned to it in 2001, taking advantage of several important discussions that have appeared in the interim as well as of the oral version of Henk Versnel's 1999 Sather Classical Lectures at Berkeley (*Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings of Greek Theology*). The important discussion of Wildberg 2002 (with a chapter on doxography) is not yet available to me, but there is a foretaste of his approach in Wildberg 2000.

one might call “official public piety”? How shocking or transgressive were tragic characters’ expressions of criticism, doubt, or intellectually sophisticated reformulations concerning the gods?

The purpose of this essay is to touch upon a few aspects of the problem that seem most important for a just appreciation of Euripidean tragedy. The discussion is divided into four parts. First, I present several preliminary propositions or working hypotheses about theology and tragedy in order to indicate the complexity and difficulty of the topic and the unlikelihood of arriving at a single, simple, and self-consistent formulation of a solution. [18] Secondly, I consider the dialectic of despair and hope or faith within the human characters of the plays, which often varies sharply from character to character and from one situation to another within a single play. This dialectic is significant because it militates against a direct reading of one theological stance as that which is promoted by a play or by Euripides’ output in general. Thirdly, I explore the process of inference by which an audience detects or declines to detect the unseen hand of the gods in what occurs or is reported within the drama. Inferences of this kind make an important difference in how far we regard the action of the plays as psychologically or naturalistically understandable and in how just or unjust, moral or amoral, the universe created by the plays may have seemed to the ancient audience. Finally, a few related conclusions or questions are presented.

I

The first among the preliminary propositions is that our discussion is about Euripidean tragedy and its presentation of the theological views of human beings who are characters or choruses in the plays. It is not about the beliefs or attitudes of the historical individual Euripides, which are unattainable.¹ To be sure, audiences and scholars who think carefully about what is said and shown on stage will often feel entitled to make inferences about the author who wrote the words and shaped the action, but at best this involves a construction of the implied author of the individual work.² It is dangerous, especially in the case of a versatile author like Euripides and a dynamic and variable genre like Attic tragedy,³ to assume that the construction arrived at from viewing and studying one work will necessarily be valid for another work.⁴ When we try to generalize about the tendencies or mannerisms of Euripides, we are speaking metaphorically of a constructed literary personality based on what we conceive to be similar features in the implied authors of various individual works. In regard to theological questions, some

¹ Cf. Allan 2000, p. 236; Schmidt 1964, pp. 220-223; Wildberg 2000, p. 238.

² For the application to drama of the notion of “implied” or “ideal” author considered distinct from “the actual author in his socio-literary role as the producer of the work” see Pfister 1988, pp. 3-4.

³ Mastronarde 1999-2000.

⁴ Booth 1983, p. 71 (I owe this reference to Luigi Battezzato).

critics in the past have constructed their Euripides as an atheist⁵ and others have argued against this characterization, but the questions involved are better discussed in different terms, such as what is the signifi-[19]cance of atheistic-sounding statements made by characters in tragedy, both within their dramatic context and within the context of the audience and culture viewing the plays.

Second, a good deal of traditional scholarship on Euripides has been concerned with the question whether he “believed” in the traditional myths or in the myths he was staging. “Belief” or “non-belief” is the wrong category to apply.⁶ Greek stories about their gods and heroes formed a vast network of variants, a network that was dynamic and creative throughout the archaic and classical period (and later as well). It is the expected role of the Greek poet to reinterpret and extrapolate these stories to suit the occasion, the audience, or a political, ethical, or aesthetic interest. This is as true of Homer, Hesiod, Stesichorus, and Pindar as it is of the Attic tragedians. In the competitive context of Greek poetic performances, each new version seeks to persuade its audience of its capacity to be integrated into the larger system of stories, and its “truth” is mainly a matter of how illuminating and apposite it is in the context in which it is told. All tragedians will have innovated in smaller or larger aspects of the plots they created.

⁵ This process of course has its origins in Aristophanes, but Old Comedy is no more reliable as a source for biographical detail about the persons it mocks than it is for the diplomatic exchanges preceding the outbreak of war or the intellectual interests of the historical Socrates.

⁶ Buxton 1994, pp. 155-165; Veyne 1988, which presents an argument that is in some ways difficult and obscure, but also has various *obiter dicta* that I find persuasive—on this topic esp. at pp. 17-18, 83.

Euripides' long career of dramatic production demonstrates that for him the mythological mode was a flexible and enduring arena in which to move and entertain his audience while stimulating them to thought about important cultural and ethical issues.

Third, in any discussion of “theology” in the archaic and classical Greek context, we must remain aware of the imperfect fit of this concept to much of Greek religion.⁷ Greek religion is not a religion with an authoritative book or a priestly class with the right to supervise doctrine. It is more fully realized in social practice than in individual thought or belief.⁸ The everyday experience of religion for most Greeks lay in a recurring routine of dedications, sacrifices, libations, and prayers intended to acknowledge divine power and to appeal for divine good will, whether for a specifically articulated favor or implicitly for a general continuation of prosperity. This activity involves an implicit “theology”: that the gods are powerful both for good and for ill, that they may grant or withhold favor, and that reciprocity may be hoped for but not compelled or guaranteed.⁹ Detailed conjectures on the [20] powers and nature of divinity tend to be found in

⁷ Cf. Gould 1985, Easterling 1985.

⁸ For a recent warning against overplaying the ritual vs. belief dichotomy, however, see Harrison 2000, pp. 18-23.

⁹ On reciprocity see e.g. Yunis 1988, Pulleyn 1997. It is essential to recognize that statements of confidence in the existence of reciprocity between gods and men coexist with the (often-submerged?) awareness that the gods act as they please and may or may not actually engage in reciprocal behavior in some particular circumstance (Gould 1985). Pulleyn 1997 occasionally argues that some aspect of the system of Greek prayer would not have “worked” if people were not confident of reciprocity, but this logic ignores the capacity of human beings to hold contradictory beliefs (see below).

specific intellectual contexts, but are not normally part of ritual action,¹⁰ and there is no widespread indoctrination of explicit propositions about divinity. A small class of intellectuals, beginning with Xenophanes and Heraclitus, make striking pronouncements about the right way to think about divinity, and such discussion proliferates in the sophistic movement of the late fifth century. But the archaic and classical poets, through hymns and narratives, already give indirect testimony to less formal, speculative theological thinking, often emphasizing the wonder and mystery of divine interactions with humans¹¹ and the inaccessibility of the “mind of Zeus” to human penetration.¹² This kind of speculation is much more at home in poetry than in the relations to divinity embodied in ritual practice, even though there too the potential arbitrariness of the gods is carefully acknowledged in the use in prayer of conditionals such as “if it is pleasing to you.”

¹⁰ Even in most initiations and mystery cults, the key for the celebrants lies in special experiences and revelation rather than in some particular doctrines.

¹¹ Awe and wonder: *Hymn. Cer.* 281-283, *Hymn. Apol.* 404, 415-417, *Hymn. Ven.* 90-91, *Hymn. Bacch.* (7) 34.

¹² On the importance of unknowability as a central category in Greek religion, see e.g. Sourvinou-Inwood 1997. Among the ancient texts one may cite Hes. fr. 303 M.-W., Sol. fr. 17 W², Aesch. *Suppl.* 87-90, Ag. 160 (with the note of Fraenkel 1950, p. 99 f.); for Euripidean reflections of the idea see Kannicht 1969, p. 204 f., and Lee 1976 on *Tro.* 884-8. See also Harrison 2000, p. 191 n. 31.

Fourth, in many systems of human belief, there is a large capacity for compartmentalization of beliefs and for toleration of inconsistencies.¹³ Thus, in traditional Greek religion one can maintain both that the gods uphold justice and that the gods give both success and suffering (and that suffering is given in larger proportion and is not necessarily justified). The opening of the *Odyssey* provides a strong claim that by their own bad choices men are responsible for the troubles they encounter, but it would be a mistake to interpret all interactions between men and gods in this epic in the light of this claim. Solon's famous *Hymn to the Muses* combines in one sequential argument both an endorsement of the justice of Zeus's dispensation and a powerful evocation of humanity's subjection to *ἐπιείκεια*, cataloguing the inability of humans, regardless of their specific skills and the morality of their behavior, to control the end of their actions.¹⁴ Thus, when we compare religious beliefs expressed in tragedy with a reconstruction of the beliefs of the [21] audience, we must acknowledge that the latter did not form a self-consistent and fixed system. And we must also recognize that the beliefs about divinity that one could espouse in a public assembly or courtroom were a limited selection among the possible beliefs people might espouse in contexts of greater privacy or intimacy or in the hypothetical worlds of poetic fictions.¹⁵

In addition to the cautions necessitated by the preceding points, it is not easy to define precisely the relation between the poetic representation of the Greek gods and the

¹³ See esp. Versnel 1990, pp. 1-35, on cognitive dissonance and inconsistent beliefs; Veyne 1988, esp. pp. 21-22, 54-57; Buxton 1994, pp. 155-165; Gould 1985.

¹⁴ This example is also cited by Versnel 1990, p. 25.

¹⁵ See esp. Parker 1997, who shows that public oratory presents not the norm of Athenian religious belief, but a censored form of speech, with a compulsory optimism.

gods of everyday Greek cult. The gods of drama are presented in a festival context that is clearly demarcated from routine life, a festival in which we must also remember the juxtaposition of tragedy, satyr-play, and comedy, each with its somewhat different depictions of divine action and character.¹⁶ The audience of the Dionysia was clearly expected to entertain a multiplicity of worldviews within the festival, and there was no straightforward correspondence between what they saw and the way they carried on their lives once the festival was over. Moreover, at some level of analysis, the gods in epic and tragedy are a “literary device” that serves the needs of the narrative and the creation of meaning out of a series of events, and as a “literary device” (and in drama an iconographic and presentational device) their contribution can be appreciated even by those who no longer believe in the traditional gods in the same way or by many even later recipients, such as ourselves, brought up in a monotheistic culture.¹⁷

¹⁶ Not to mention the myths and prayers that may have been present in the 20 choral dithyrambs performed at the same festival. As far as Old Comedy is concerned, the generic license for reversal or the carnivalesque is strong enough that it seems to me a mistake even to pose the question of irreligious scepticism, impiety, or blasphemy (as, for example, is often done in connection with the overthrow of Zeus in Aristophanes’ *Birds*: Dunbar 1995, pp. 12-14).

¹⁷ For various views on the conventionality of the divine apparatus of epic and myth and the possibility of keeping the literary evidence separate from other evidence for “Greek religion,” see (for conventionality or separation) Bröcker 1980, Mikalson 1991, (against, or qualifying) Parker 1997, Sourvinou-Inwood 1997. On Euripidean theology (or theologies) as descendants of the Homeric, see Kullmann 1987, Basta Donzelli 1987, Knox 1991. For interpretation of the gods in tragedy as a poetic technique see e.g.

But even so the gods in tragedy are not *only* a literary device, despite the important distinctions between the gods in traditional and artistic narratives and the gods of cult, a few of which can be mentioned here. The gods of tragedy are closely akin to the gods of epic, who are panhellenic, transcending the separate communities of the Greeks. Most everyday cult practice, in contrast, is extremely localized, with different calendars, aetiologies, ritual requirements, and epithets. To be sure, because of the concrete localization of the plays' geography, tragedy often includes or alludes to localized [22] aspects—Athenian, Theban, Taurian, or whatever is appropriate. Nevertheless, the panhellenic aspect remains strong. Athena of *Eumenides* is founder and protector of democratic Athens, but also the Iliadic ally of Agamemnon, reconfiguring the traditional ties between her divine family and the royal family of Argos. In *Ant.* 1115-1154 Dionysus is summoned to give aid as a native son of Thebes, but the god's attachments to Italy, Delphi, and Eleusis are also evoked. The Taurian Artemis of *Iphigenia in Tauris* is also the Artemis who acted at Aulis, the sister of Delphic Apollo, and the Artemis(es) of Attic cult. The god you see on stage is mysteriously both the same and not the same as the god you worship in a completely different local context.¹⁸

Also significant is the temporal displacement of the gods as represented in poetry. Although the Greeks counted a continuum of generations back to mythic times, and communities or families claimed descent from heroes, they did, I believe, have a more or

Schmidt 1964 and Rosenmeyer 1982. On the general problem of depictions of gods in ancient literature see also Feeney 1991 and 1998.

¹⁸ Versnel's Sather Lectures (above) were illuminating on this subject. See also Sourvinou-Inwood 1997.

less clear sense of separation from the heroic world.¹⁹ The heroic world was a time of more intimate, frequent, and open interaction between gods and mortals. The heroes were the product of a mingling of the two species, a mingling imagined to have ended at a certain point in history. In that earlier period it was possible for gods to attend a human wedding, for humans to visit the gods or to be educated by an immortal being, for exceptionally-endowed humans to compete with gods in strength and skill and to threaten to compete in honor. In some stories, the gods themselves were still establishing their respective prerogatives as the reign of Zeus was being consolidated. In the post-heroic world, by contrast, all interactions are more distant, the human beings are weaker and less able than the heroic generations, and the major gods have been stabilized into a complex community. The gods of myth and poetry are involved in stories of disorder and emerging order,²⁰ whereas present-day religious practice is aimed at maintaining an achieved order or equilibrium. Tragedy's preference for this distancing effect of heroic subject matter has, of course, distinct advantages in allowing the transfer of the antinomies and strife of contemporary society and politics to a safe remove, a locus

¹⁹ In some respects, nevertheless, it is proper not to overemphasize the difference between mythic stories and later historiography: Brillante 1990. See also Harrison 2000, pp. 196-207, for an argument against too sharp a distinction between *spatium mythicum* and *spatium historicum* in Herodotus.

²⁰ Aetiologies and cult-foundations, often featured at the end of a tragedy, esp. in Euripides, function as references to the more stable present and help the audience bridge the gap between mythical time and contemporary life.

where troubling questions can be posed and the harsh consequences of crisis can be, ostensibly, confined to others.²¹

23] Furthermore, through incorporation in narrative, the gods acquire a fuller anthropomorphic psychological personality and a more transparent role in causation than they have in ordinary life. Literary and theatrical gods are also put into relationships of competition, dispute, and alliance with each other in a way that does not commonly arise in cult. The difference of the god-laden literary world is most striking in the matter of causality. Along with the other simplifications and reductions that literary narrative exercises in comparison with real life, Greek heroic narratives usually make causation fuller and more transparent,²² sometimes even more understandable. In everyday life, in some portion of an agent's deliberations and actions, there will be a basic assumption of autonomous personal agency and no thought of supernatural intervention. Individuals will of course have differed in the proportion of their actions recognized to be autonomous in this way, from a very high proportion for the scientifically minded to a very low proportion for the superstitious.²³ Even when the pious or superstitious do think

²¹ The approach to tragedy as a medium for Athenian self-definition through representation of the other is one of the most fruitful developments of recent decades, but there is still much room for debate on exactly how the self/other dichotomy works and in what ways it is shown to collapse. See e.g. Vernant 1981, Zeitlin 1996, Goldhill 1986, Hall 1989, Hall 1997, Croally 1994, Griffith 1995, Pelling 1997.

²² Cf. Parker 1997, pp. 158-159, on transparency and opacity of the role of the divine.

²³ Parker 1996, pp. 278-279, notes that the pejorative use of *δεισιδαίμων* is a new development of the fourth century, to which also belongs Theophrastus' portrait of the superstitious man (*Char.* 16). Nevertheless, there were certainly already in the fifth

of what divine forces are involved in their successes and disappointments, there is a good deal of uncertainty. Before the event, one may appeal to a specific divinity, perhaps make a vow to that god. In the event of success, that particular divinity may be thanked or presented with the promised votive offering. But in the event of failure, malevolence is often attributed not to a named individual force, but to τὸ θεῖον, “the divine” in general, or to τύχη, “fortune.”²⁴ Only in the most severe crises do individuals and communities seek, from oracles or prophets, definition of the source of malevolence so that it may be appeased. The world of epic and tragedy, in contrast, is much more thoroughly penetrated by divine forces, both anonymous and named.²⁵ It is a world of concentrated and drastic forces, where [24] causes of events are more fully accessible and particular deities more

century different levels of belief about the frequency or the existence of divine intervention (notes 51-52 below).

²⁴ Τύχη is of course as often the dispensation of the gods or of fate as it is a pure chance that cannot be attributed to an origin. For the gods and τύχη in Herodotus, see Harrison 2000, pp. 99-100, 169-170, and *passim*, and also his chapter 2 for divine φθόνος. Parker 1997, p. 155, makes the important point that the sort of resentment or blame that may be expressed in literary representations has no natural outlet in public discourse, except in the funeral oration, where the need not to blame the glorious dead justifies the mention of malignant or unkind anonymous supernatural powers.

²⁵ Padel 1992 and 1995 study the language of mental invasion and demonstrate important distinctions between ancient and modern notions of psychology. Nevertheless, I would emphasize that the hypothesis of supernatural invasion is also to be correlated with a rhetorical strategy: it is appealed to to deal with the extreme and the uncanny, not the ordinary. Thus, tragedy, as a locus of the extreme and uncanny, does not provide a simple reflection of the range of Greek beliefs about the mind and personality.

readily identifiable. In epic the narrator can tell the audience of the particular god who intervenes at a given moment, while the characters affected are normally unable to put a name to the power that intruded. The tragic chorus sometimes has the same sort of authority as the epic narrator in identifying supernatural causes,²⁶ and even the characters of tragedy sometimes rise to an abnormal confidence in recognizing a divine antagonist.²⁷ But such is the nature of dramatic presentation that those involved in the action normally know less than the audience that observes them. This discrepancy in awareness can be heightened when, as often in Euripides, a divine character is actually put on stage in a prologue heard by the audience but of course unknown to the human characters.

Lastly, whereas a philosophical or monotheistic theology may concentrate on the nature of god *per se*, it is important to remember that in archaic and classical Greece literary gods are part of a system of contrast with human beings. The role of gods in stories is sometimes designed less to establish theological principles or assert divine justice than to provide the contrast that defines the limitations of the human condition. The contrast of knowledge and ignorance is fundamental to many tragedies. Efficacy of action is another divine privilege, and the contrast with humans is reflected visually by the use of the upper level (skene-roof) for most divine appearances and by the special form of locomotion provided by the theater crane.²⁸ The Homeric contrast of the ease of the gods with the desperate plight of the humans is carried over into tragedy in the

²⁶ With the important qualification that the chorus is not always correct: Mastronarde 1998.

²⁷ E.g., Oedipus in Soph. *OT* 1329-1330 (Apollo), Phaedra in Eur. *Hipp.* 337-347, 401, 725-727 (Aphrodite).

²⁸ Mastronarde 1990.

highlighting of the gods' lack of humane pity (as in Athena in *Ajax* or Aphrodite in *Hippolytus*) or their inaccessibility to the kinds of sympathy, tolerance, and forgiveness available to humans (as in Dionysus at the end of *Bacchae*).

As several scholars have recently argued, the theological component of tragedy and other serious Greek literature is still to be regarded, despite the differences just reviewed, as a legitimate concern within the study of Greek religion and not as material that can be neatly bracketed off from other kinds of evidence.²⁹ Herodotus' claim about the role of Homer and Hesiod in Greek religious history (2.53), for example, and the objections raised by intellectual critics against the theological implications of Homer, Hesiod, and tragedy [25] guarantee that the Greeks themselves did not accept any clear separation. But the system of Greek religion is complex and not susceptible to a fully rational and self-consistent account, nor should we expect that ancient Greeks were constantly conscious of the inconsistencies that scholarly study is able to identify. As the realm of both more transparent causation and more speculative and questioning attitudes, literary representations of the gods have the potential to make explicit some of the problems and contradictions.

II

When we turn to plays of Euripides themselves, instead of looking for a single authorial stance regarding the nature of divinity or even for a self-consistent construction deducible from each single play, we do better to focus attention on the human characters,

²⁹ See again Gould 1985, Parker 1997, Sourvinou-Inwood 1997, Allan 2000, pp. 237-238.

who are often engaged in a dynamic process, struggling to make sense of their world and their experiences, propounding shifting views about the gods.³⁰ In several plays, a dialectic of hope and despair provides a major source of dramatic tension and shaping: for instance, *Trojan Women*, notorious among critics for its loose structure, acquires one kind of coherence through the dialectical sequence of reactions of Hecuba, Cassandra, and Andromache to repeated blows of misfortune and through the debate they implicitly and explicitly carry on to evaluate their situations, a debate which the inconclusive ἀγών between Helen and Hecuba continues. Criticisms of the gods, in particular, must always be evaluated in their particular context, with attention to who is speaking and in what circumstances and with comparison to other statements in the same play and the final resolution of the action.³¹ Attention to these details establishes that the complaints and opinions of human characters are often relativized or subjected to irony either at once because of the superior knowledge of the audience or over the course of the play because

³⁰ For a brief application of this approach to some plays see Mastronarde 1986. The struggle to understand within the world of the play is often matched in the audience's own dynamic process of interpreting characters' natures and motivations and of weighing alternative causations. Although the audience usually has in some ways a privileged position in assessing dramatic events, there are many tragedies, and not only by Euripides, that defer or defeat a final synthesis.

³¹ In the form of prayers in particular there is a literary tradition of critical and challenging specimens: Dale 1963, Labarbe 1980, Heath 1987, p. 51, Mastronarde 1994, p. 166, Pulleyn 1997, pp. 196-207, Harrison 2000, p. 109 n. 23.

of the turn of events. Yet there remains a serious question whether the religion of tragedy can be fully normalized and assimilated to traditional piety.³²

[26] We may begin with a case in which the complaints and doubts of the characters are clearly recognized by the audience as based in large part on misapprehensions: *Iphigenia in Tauris*.³³ In this play, Orestes opens his expository *rhesis* in the second scene of the prologue wondering whether Apollo has “again” led him into a trap by his oracular instruction (77). Subjectively, this fear is justified by Orestes’ long experience of wandering and intermittent madness. But objectively, the audience has just been introduced to Orestes’ lost sister Iphigenia and can now interpret the last detail of her dream (53-55) to indicate that the siblings will soon meet. The audience is likely therefore to feel the force of the story-pattern of recognition-plots: given the survival of Iphigenia herself, and since the tradition does not clearly establish that a kin-murder is to be expected as the ultimate fate of Orestes, they will expect the recognition to lead to some positive result. In addition, Orestes himself refers to the Athenian destination of the statue he has been instructed to carry away (90-91): whether or not the audience can yet fully understand the allusion, which is later explained clearly in the epilogue speech of Athena, this reference to Attic cult of Artemis probably provides another hint to the audience that the mission will succeed and that Orestes’ fears will not be realized. In

³² The tendency toward a relatively complete normalization is to be seen in Spira 1960, Burnett 1971, Heath 1987, pp. 45-64, Lefkowitz 1989, Mikalson 1989 (on which see Pulleyn 1997, pp. 206-207, and n. 59 below), Kovacs 1993, Gregory 1999 (Part III of this essay engages with the last two).

³³ The following paragraphs expand on a much briefer treatment in Mastronarde 1986. See now the excellent presentation in Cropp 2000, pp. 31-43.

parallel with Orestes' ignorance runs the mistaken interpretation of her dream by Iphigenia. The audience can make much more sense than she of the details of the dream, since they recognize the allusion to the deaths of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in the collapse of the house, and the lonely survival of Orestes in the remaining column (46-52). Thus the audience is able to doubt her view that Orestes is already dead even before he comes on stage two minutes later to disprove it. In the following *parodos* Iphigenia performs a lament for Orestes that the audience knows is unnecessary (143-235). A few scenes later she bids farewell to the dream as false when she learns that Orestes is still alive (569). This dismissal, the audience can recognize, is as unfounded as her previous interpretation: it is Iphigenia's reading, not the dream itself, that has been disproved. The parallel between the misapprehensions of the two siblings is made clear by Orestes' following comment that "the so-called wise gods" (*σοφοί*, "wise," naturally alludes to Apollo) are no more truthful than dreams (570-571), in veiled reference to his own unjustified (he thinks) trust in his Delphic instruction.³⁴ In Iphigenia's absence, Orestes

³⁴ Diggle 1981, p. 266, expressed suspicion of lines 570-575 but left them in his text with only the mark of corruption in the second half of 573. In the recent editions of Kovacs 1999 and Cropp 2000 lines 572-575 are deleted on the suggestion of Cropp. Despite Cropp's reservations about the relevance of "seers" to Orestes' situation, the relevance of 572-573a to the theme of the play and the veiled language of 575 (*ὄλωλεν ὡς ὄλωλε τοῖσιν εἰδόσιν*), which allows Orestes to speak clearly to the audience but conceal his identity from Iphigenia, suggest that these lines were intended for this passage and not incorporated from a different context. One may perhaps argue that after the sharp criticism of divinities, the universalizing pairing of *κάν τοῖς βροτείοις* (573) suggests to Orestes the accommodation of assigning the fault to human spokespersons of the gods

can speak more openly, and at 711-715 he asserts that [27] he has been deceived and that Apollo has sent him far off to be rid of him. Pylades' reply in defense of the oracle and of hope not only supports the oracle against Orestes' hesitation (in other words, speaking on Apollo's behalf, as Pylades did also in *Choephoroi*), but verbalizes the audience's position at this moment, as it eagerly awaits the change of fortune (*μεταβολή*) that the recognition, so long and suspensefully postponed, will bring. Finally, after the recognition, Orestes himself can voice confidence in the confluence of human effort and divine causation: "I believe our project is a concern to divine fortune as well as to ourselves; and if a man is eagerly engaged, the divine, most likely, exerts its strength the more" (909-911 *τῇ τύχῃ δ' οἶμαι μέλειν / τοῦδε ξὺν ἡμῖν ἦν δέ τις πρόθυμος ἦ, / σθένειν τὸ θεῖον μᾶλλον εἰκότως ἔχει*). Thereafter the former victims of misapprehension become the manipulators of appearance in duping the Taurian king.

Yet there is no clear sailing for trust in the beneficence of the gods, even in a play of happy outcome like *IT*. Human confusion is not simply a result of human weakness, but of entanglements and conundrums in the universe they must live in. Iphigenia's references to Artemis' attitude toward the Taurian cult of human sacrifice provide one indication. In the prologue the goddess is said to "delight in" (35 *ἡδεται*) the custom, but Iphigenia herself implies that the rite is not "fine" (36 *καλόν*) and refrains from any more forthright epithet out of fear of the goddess (37). At the end of the first episode, after reviewing the deceit and betrayal at Aulis, she arrives at a crisis of belief (380-391). First she reproaches the "oversubtle distinctions" (380 *σοφίσματα*) made by a goddess who

rather than gods themselves (*μάντεων πεισθεῖς λόγοις* 574); for such accommodation cf. Soph. *OT* 497-503 (chorus) and 707-709, 723-725 (Jocasta).

requires ritual purity in other respects but herself “delights in” (384 ἡδεται) human sacrifice. Then, finding this inconsistency intolerable, she rejects the notion that Artemis could be so “morally insensitive” (386 ἀμαθίαν) and declares the story of divine cannibalism within the history of her own family to be “unbelievable” (388 ἄπιστα). Finally, she ascribes the desire for human sacrifice entirely to the Taurians and declares her belief that no god is ever evil (391 κακόν). It is important to note how this speech grows out of heightened despair and resentment and to observe that during the course of the play Iphigenia’s views shift with the circumstances known to her. In the case of Iphigenia’s views of Artemis, there is the further double irony that at Aulis the goddess both demanded human sacrifice of Agamemnon (and as far as he and the Greeks were concerned, they performed it for her) and prevented human sacrifice by carrying Iphigenia away to the Taurians—where, however, she has been forced to participate in human sacrifice! Her now being among the Taurians, to whom she tries to confine the scandal of human sacrifice in order to exonerate the goddess, cannot in fact be divorced from Artemis’ agency. Moreover, the ritual prescribed by Athena for the new cult at Halai likewise acknowledges that Artemis is still owed the honor of a symbolic substitution for human sacrifice (1458-1461, ending θεά θ’ ὅπως τιμὰς ἔχῃ). Iphigenia herself later fears that the goddess may resist the theft of the statue ordered by Apollo and prays to her that she will accept the move with good will (995, 1082-88). And when the escape is threatened she appeals to Artemis, asking for forgiveness of the theft and understanding for her loyalty to her brother Orestes (1398-1402), again in fear that the goddess may wish to stay among the Taurians and continue to delight in human

sacrifice.³⁵ In the whole [28] scheme of the play, Iphigenia's purified view of the gods (385-391) cannot be taken as a privileged opinion. It is rather a reflection of the moral idealism in which Iphigenia takes refuge at a particular moment of pain and doubt. Despite the details in the play that tend to focalize the bloodthirsty aspect of Artemis as Taurian and unGreek, this aspect is not merely a projection of barbarian belief: the goddess Artemis is in need of rescue from herself by her brother and of the civilizing influence of Athena and Athens.

A second sign of the difficulty of the universe in which the humans of this play operate is provided by the Delphi Ode (1234-1283). Apart from any other associative relevance of the details of this amusing narrative of the child Apollo's quick action to secure the role (and wealth) of his oracle against a potential threat,³⁶ this mythic narrative provides an aetiology of the distinction in reliability between Apollo's oracle and dream-prophecy. By Zeus' dispensation, truth is withdrawn from dreams and honor fully restored to the Delphic oracle. This outcome corresponds to the fact that in the play Orestes' doubts of Apollo's instructions are shown ultimately to be unfounded, while Iphigenia is misled by her dream.³⁷ Part of the human confusion represented in the play is

³⁵Note that Thoas too assumes Artemis' interest in the recapture of the fugitives (1425-1426 *σὺν δὲ τῇ θεῶι / σπεύδοντες ἄνδρας δυσσεβείς θηράσετε*). Although the messenger speculates that Poseidon is stopping the escape, he finishes his speech with the words "[Iphigenia] is found/caught betraying the goddess" (1419).

³⁶See now Cropp 2000, pp. 247-248.

³⁷Strictly speaking, we must note that Iphigenia's dream is in fact, like all dreams in tragedy, veridical, containing a symbolism easily interpreted aright by the audience

thus structured into Zeus' dispensation, that is, it is an inescapable part of what humans must cope with.

Thirdly, the near failure of the escape (because of a strong sea swell at the mouth of the harbor: 1394-1419) may be viewed as evidence that even with the favor of the gods (or of *some* gods) human efforts are not assured of success. The theological or cosmological implication of the need for intervention by Athena is that humans are embedded in a world containing multiple forces whose agreement or conflict cannot be relied on or predicted by any means available to humans. An audience may wonder whether Taurian Artemis is indeed hostile to the theft/escape, as Iphigenia feared, or whether the messenger is right to detect the opposition of a separate (and up to this point unrelated) agent, Poseidon (1414-1415). Some critics suggest that no such theological inference should be drawn, because the *deus ex machina* is a convention. On this view, the wave is needed to motivate the arrival of Athena rather than Athena's being needed to undo the threat of the wave.³⁸ Yet it is proper to insist that Euripides made this particular

(immediately perceiving that Orestes is the one *surviving* member after the catastrophe at Argos, and later seeing that Iphigenia does indeed perform some ritual preliminaries for a sacrifice that is not completed in the dream or in reality). The problem is that dreams need more interpretation from humans, and such interpretation more easily goes wrong. In addition, it is possible that in "took away truthfulness" (1279) Euripides alludes to the notion of the two gates of dreams (*Od.* 19.560-67), according to which some dreams may be true, but humans have no way to determine which these are.

³⁸ On this approach to the *deus ex machina* as so conventional as to be almost unrelated to the play, see Schmidt 1964, who argues against it but still emphasizes the discontinuity of play and epilogue and denies "theological" relevance. Note the remark of Wildberg 2000,

[29] choice to motivate Athena's intervention. The messenger-speech begins with the assumption that pursuit is perfectly feasible, without any hint of the adverse sea swell: the messenger advises the king to hear the whole story and then consider carefully what pursuit will best succeed (1322-1324), and the king agrees that the journey ahead of the fugitives is long enough to allow his forces to catch up to them (1325-1326). Thus Euripides could well have introduced Athena and her stopping-action without the adverse wave and without the messenger's speculation about divine hostility, but elected to include these details. Accordingly, a more than minimalist or conventional reading is justified.

The other plays of recognition and rescue often grouped with *IT*, namely *Helen* and *Ion*, can be viewed in a similar light.

We may consider briefly only *Ion* here. The complaints and criticisms of Ion and Creusa are indeed relativized in the audience's mind by the ignorance that afflicts both characters.³⁹ It is unjustified to read the play, as has often been done, as intended mainly as an attack on Apollo; but it is equally questionable to believe that the benevolence and protection of the god are triumphantly asserted.⁴⁰ The rebelliousness of the humans derails Apollo's present plan to care for his son's future and threatens in turn the lives of Ion and Creusa. This wayward action arises from the intolerable emotional burden placed

p. 245: "From the point of view of the historian of religion *ex machina* epiphanies are, I believe, singularly barren."

³⁹ For these criticisms, strengthened by frequent repetition and by the agreement of three separate speakers (Ion, Creusa, and the old servant), see *Ion* 252-54, 358 & 355, 365, 367, 370, 384-85, 426, 436-51, 880, 885, 895, 952, 960, 972.

⁴⁰ This latter view is promoted by Spira 1960 and Burnett 1971.

on Creusa by the development of events.⁴¹ Apollo's neglect of this burden, his indifference to or ignorance of the human dimensions of his plan, reenacts the neglect of the past—the rescue and nurture of the baby in a way that leaves the mother pained for years by the fear that the infant is dead through her fault. Even though based on misapprehensions, these sufferings are subjectively real to the humans and are lent a decided dramatic weight by their prominence in the fabric of speech and song. There is a tragic gap between the “kindness” and “concern” of the gods and the life lived by those who are favored. Even when the recognition is complete, Ion's lingering intellectual and religious discomfort lead him to want to confront Apollo with a direct question (1546-1548). Again there is the option to treat this impulse as simply a plot-device to motivate Athena's arrival, but as in the case of *IT* such a minimalist interpretation is inadequate. Ion's attempt must be given more weight because it continues the pattern of challenging [30] human behavior. The proposed confrontation is parallel to Creusa's earlier attempt to approach the oracle (332-346) and to Ion's speech of “admonition” to Apollo (436-451). While saving Apollo from the embarrassment of reproach, Athena herself acknowledges that reproach would not be an unexpected reaction for the humans (1558). Only after a long exposition of future glories does Athena urge upon Creusa the judgment that “Apollo accomplished all things for the good” (1595), which sounds like the extremely favorable assessment of an advocate. In response, Ion has the tact to assert his

⁴¹ The chorus' empathy with Creusa over the god's apparent abandonment of her interest, in contrast to her husband's acquisition of a son, is the major factor leading to the revelation of the secret they have been ordered to keep, and this disobedience prompts the revelations made by Creusa and the plotting of the old servant and Creusa.

belief in his paternity and to claim that the truth was not doubtful even before (1608). But Creusa carefully maintains a distinction between past and present attitudes (1609-1613, esp. οὐκ αἰνοῦσα πρίν, ... οὐ πὸ τ' ἡμέλησε, ... δυσμενῆ πάροιθεν ὄντα), a distinction that implicitly rejects Athena's attempted amelioration of the past. The goddess' judgment is oversimplified, adequate perhaps for the gods in their remote and carefree existence, but inadequate to the much different experience of human life.

This kind of analysis of the shifting and competing perspectives of human characters regarding the gods can be applied to plays of other types. Two extreme examples are *Heracles*, where faith in justice and order is first doubted, then apparently triumphs, and then is cruelly crushed, and *Orestes*, with its extraordinary rescue of humans whose own schemes have run amok. Here it will suffice to consider the latter only.⁴²

In *Orestes* there are some despairing and critical comments similar to those found in plays like *IT* and *Heracles*, but *Orestes* differs in that there is no dynamic of falling and rising hope or trust, but instead a stark contrast between the bulk of the play and the divine epilogue, making this play the most extreme test case for theories aimed at explaining the Euripidean *deus ex machina*. Without being literally a suppliant-drama, *Orestes* nevertheless opens with the children of Agamemnon besieged like suppliants and awaiting help from a more powerful ally. Electra's prologue places all hope in Menelaus, and Orestes first hails the news of his arrival and later supplicates Menelaus for salvation. Apollo, on the other hand, is strongly criticized, through the first quarter of the play, for ordering matricide, and there is little sign of faith in his protection. In a single reference

⁴² Some relevant observations on *Heracles* are presented briefly in Mastronarde 1986.

in the prologue Electra treats as self-evident the injustice of Apollo's command ("What need to speak at length of Apollo's injustice?" 28), and in the parodos repeats this verdict (163-165: "Loxias, unjust, voiced unjust oracles ..."); she has despaired of any help from the gods (266-267). Orestes reproaches Apollo for inciting him to matricide (285-287),⁴³ and responds to Menelaus' puzzlement at [31] Apollo's failure to help by alluding to the slowness of divinity to act (420). Menelaus judges Apollo to be "culpably ignorant" (417 ἀμαθέστερος, "more ignorant <than one ought to be>") of propriety and justice. Reference of the crime to Apollo's higher authority is mentioned repeatedly (76 ἀναφέρουσα, 414-416 ἀναφορά, cf. 276, 591-599), and the claim is persuasive to Helen but not persuasive to Tyndareus, and then is not appealed to further (notably, not even in the Argive assembly). The only countervailing sign for the audience that Apollo's support may be present despite the doubt of the human characters is the fact that Orestes' fit of madness ends soon after he somehow applies Apollo's instruction to him for warding off the Furies.⁴⁴

⁴³ The construction of 286 is doubtful and the latter half of the line is marked as corrupt by Diggle 1994, p. 207: see Di Benedetto 1965, p. 62, and Willink 1986, p. 133. But the sense intended is clear and agreed upon both by critics who emend and by those who defend the text.

⁴⁴ The effect of this "success" depends somewhat on how Orestes' use of the bow, the gift of Apollo, is staged. If there is a real bow lying on stage near his bed, then perhaps when no one responds to his command ("give me the bow" 268; Electra, I assume, withdraws and covers herself after 267, and in any case has no reason to give a real weapon to a madman), he picks it up himself and fires an arrow: the present participle ἐξορμωμένος = "launching forth" (274) seems to require that the arrow actually be shot, not merely

After line 599, for over a thousand lines up to Apollo's epiphany, there is only one brief reference to Apollo, at the end of the messenger's speech, and this simply underlines the god's apparent absence: "nor did Phoebus who sits at the Pythian tripod <help you>, but he ruined you" (955-956). Orestes, Electra, and Pylades make no further reference to him, either for criticism or prayer, as if they are sure they have been completely abandoned to their own resources. Their desperate arguments and schemes blur distinctions in ethical and social categories such as noble/ignoble, free/slave, wise/fool, brave/cowardly, sane/insane, just/unjust. Left on their own, they virtually re-enact the crime for which two of them have just been condemned to death, under the delusion that this time they will receive the praise and thanks that the previous murder failed to garner, and the sequence of surprises culminates in the crazy cat-and-mouse

aimed threateningly (as is more usual and practical in the theater, at least to judge from Ion's threats with his bow in the prologue of *Ion*; in Sophocles' *Niobe* Artemis fires arrows from the skene-roof, but aims down behind the skene at the imagined interior of the palace, and there is no proof that she fires at the daughter who appears on stage, if that is what is happening in fr. 442 Radt). This staging implies an efficacious gift from Apollo, and Burnett 1971 makes much of the later mute presence of this unused prop. I find it more probable that no bow is present (see most recently Medda 2001, pp. 90-2), in which case Orestes addresses his command to an imaginary person and wields an imaginary bow, so that the reality of Apollo's aid is called into question by the madness of Orestes.

dialogue of Orestes and Menelaus, in which Orestes gives a final order for murder and suicide just as his uncle seems to have capitulated.⁴⁵

One view of this ending is that an audience is to conclude that the dangers faced by the trio of comrades are their own fault, the result of lack of faith in the promised support of the god: the *deus* then reveals how foolish and weak these mortals are and how wise and beneficent the gods. This interpretation captures an important aspect of the unparalleled black humor or absurdity of the plot of *Orestes*, but it is too generous to the credit of the Olympians. There is no divine [32] prologue or oracle to point from the beginning to the eventual rescue by the god: the only assistance Apollo apparently gave in advance was the instruction on how to ward off the Furies, and there is no indication that Orestes had any hint of an ultimate resolution of his problem. Nor are there prayers to Apollo or criticisms on the count of abandonment that could be shown incorrect by his epiphany. From the point of view of Orestes and his friends, there is only the experience of unexplained delay. Apollo's speech does not address either the question of his delay in action or the justification of the matricide. There is, for instance, no appeal to Zeus' will or fate as requiring this unfortunate action, an explanation used by other epilogue gods to console victims or to deflect questioning or resistance (*Andr.* 1268-1269, *El.* 1301, *IT* 1438, *Hel.* 1646, 1660-1661, *Bacch.* 1349). Instead, along with the dispositions for the futures of the characters, the god alludes to two additional stories that emphasize the power (rather than the justice) of the Olympians: the aetiology from the Epic Cycle

⁴⁵ Various transpositions and deletions have been proposed in *Or.* 1576-1624 to make the sequence of dialogue more regular and the final action of Orestes somehow rational, but in my view the irrationality was intended by the playwright.

according to which the destruction of the Trojan War was part of a plan to reduce the heavy population of humans (1639-1642); and the death of Neoptolemus at Delphi (1654-1657). It is also striking that Orestes welcomes Apollo's rescue by admitting his previous fear that he might have mistaken the voice of a demon (*ἀλάστωρ*) for that of the oracular god (1668-1669). The effect of this allusion to Euripides' own *El.* 979 ("Could it be that an *ἀλάστωρ* spoke the oracle, taking the form of the god?") is perhaps to reinforce the theme of Apollo's injustice, so strong in that play and in the first part of this one, and remind us again that Apollo has not addressed it.

The forced quality of Apollo's intervention in *Orestes* is also revealed by the rapid shift in Orestes from holding a sword at Hermione's neck—for apparently he holds it there throughout Apollo's *rhesis* and removes it only at 1671—to consenting to marry the girl. Equally jarring is the formulaic wish for prosperity contained in Menelaus' betrothal of his daughter to Orestes. The nobility of Menelaus was called into question earlier by his moral shallowness (371-373), by his sophistic traits of speech and argument, and by his abandonment of his besieged kin. The nobility of Orestes was similarly undercut by the plot against Helen and Hermione and the dialogue with the Phrygian, which shows how little distinction there is between free and noble-born Orestes and the abject non-Greek and non-male slave. Consequently, there seems to be justification for believing that a large part of the audience cannot have heard as other than satirical or absurd Menelaus' words "Being noble yourself and marrying the daughter of a noble man, may you prosper" (1676-1677).

Critics have correctly observed in other plays, such as *Hippolytus*, *Ion*, and *Bacchae*, some dissonance between the epilogue god's point of view and that of the

human characters or of the audience. A common approach is to deny, in various degrees, the relevance of the epilogue to the audience's experience of the play. I would prefer to say that while prologues and epilogues are indeed through various techniques marked off as framing elements in the overall structure of Euripidean plays, they should nevertheless not be treated as separable and wholly conventional. Rather, just as the audience is challenged to interpret the other dissonances and discordant voices within the body of a play, they are [33] similarly presented in a divine epilogue with one more perspective, a perspective that is in some way authoritative and yet simultaneously subject to the same scrutiny and sense of difficulty or *aporia* as other features. Thus in most cases, in my view, the audience ought not to react to the *deus* with disbelief or a feeling that the epilogue does not fit the world of the play.⁴⁶ The *deus ex machina* scene of *Orestes*,

⁴⁶ Schmidt 1964 very effectively highlights dissonances between epilogue and preceding scenes and concludes that there is regularly a decided and intended disconnect between the ending and the preceding action in terms of causation, motivation, and moral complexity. I prefer to see the relationship as more varied from play to play and more problematic and open-ended. To take a particular example of dissonance, I interpret the superficially pious or orthodox statements made by epilogue gods (such as *Hipp.* 1339-1341 [Artemis on the gods' treatment of the pious and the wicked], *Helen* 1678-1679 [Castor on the fate of the noble and of the countless rabble]) as an index of the gulf between the nature of the gods and the condition of mortals: the power, the ease, and the immortality of the Olympians render them unsuited to the appreciation of the complexity of the human condition that is of major interest to tragedy, as it was to Homer. But this gulf exists within a single represented world rather than being a demonstration of a gap

however, goes far beyond any other example. The contrast between the actions, whether completed or intended, and the dispensations delivered by the god are too great. The autonomy of the human agents seems to be undercut to a degree not found in any other extant play.⁴⁷ Either the intervention has here become a relic of the tragic form, one that cannot bear the weight placed upon it in this extraordinarily deviant plot. Or the solution itself must be regarded as absurd, as blackly humorous as the plot it concludes. In either case, the god's presence fails to assert comforting order and cannot overcome the social and ethical decay portrayed in the mortal world of the play. We may conclude, therefore, that *Orestes* features a *reductio ad absurdum* of rescuing divine intervention, but this does not entail that interventions in other plays must be so strongly doubted or depreciated. It is unhelpful to insist that every *deus ex machina* must have the same moral standing or that every play must look at the divine role in events in the same way.

III

In reaction to the excesses and anachronisms of some interpretations of Euripides that emphasize an ironic stance toward gods and supernatural causation, a number of critics have argued, often with justice, for a more orthodox or traditional view of the gods

between the world represented in most of the play and the world evoked by the divine epilogue. On the Euripidean epilogue, see also Dunn 1996.

⁴⁷One could argue that the closest parallel is the case of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, where one solution of the plot grows out of the characters of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus and an opposite solution is commanded by Heracles.

in Euripidean drama.⁴⁸ On the one hand, this involves taking seriously the support that the gods appear to give to characters who exact punishment for violations of key institutions [34] of morality, such as oaths, asylum, and the sanctity of marriage. On the other, it may extend to arguing for the kindness or providence of the divine or to finding a comfortable balancing of deserts at the conclusion of each play, a balancing that confirms the justice of the universe. We are thus again confronted with the problem of how far the “theology” of Euripidean drama can be normalized, that is, shown to match what is taken to be a standard view of Greek piety. In this section, in order to evaluate in one limited area the strengths and weaknesses of such approaches, I shall discuss the process by which audience members construct the presence or participation of an unseen god in an event seen or narrated on the tragic stage.

There is in fact a spectrum of possibilities regarding such inferences of divine participation. At one extreme of this spectrum, the playwright may give very clear guidance. A god who appears on stage in the prologue has great authority for the audience, setting the conditions for their reception of the following action. Ajax’s destruction of the flocks is explained by Athena in Sophocles’ play: she intervened to divert his violence to victims other than the ones he intended. The case of Aphrodite in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* is partly comparable. Despite the claim of some modern critics that the divine prologue and epilogue of this play are separable and that the action between these conventional frames may be understood in terms of a purely human psychology and social factors, the presence of Aphrodite’s speech cannot fail to condition the audience’s reception of what follows. Hippolytus’ first scene is a re-enactment of the very insult of

⁴⁸ See n. 32 above.

which the goddess has complained and thus confirms the story-pattern of punishment by an insulted divinity. The chorus' speculations about the origin of Phaedra's disease are poignant in their mistakenness, and because the audience has heard Aphrodite's explanation, they can recognize several suggestions as mirror-images of the truth, again evoking divine causation or intervention. Nor is it just a coincidence that the nurse echoes the goddess' claims; and that the choral songs also point to the compulsive, demonic forces of Eros and Aphrodite at work in the lives of men. An interpretation that insists on completely humanizing the events of *Hippolytus* dismisses not only the prologue and epilogue, but significant elements of the play that lies between them.⁴⁹

Of similar authority are at least some statements of seers in tragedy, such as Cassandra's in *Agamemnon* or Teiresias' in *Antigone*. Somewhat farther down the scale of certainty is the anonymous exhorting voice, a motif of several messenger speeches (*Andr.* 1147, *IT* 1385, *Bacch.* 1078-1079, *Soph. OC* 1623). Anonymity here is part of the mystery of divine intervention for those experiencing the narrated event, but it is often clear enough to the [35] audience which god is to be assumed to be speaking: the messenger in *Bacchae* in fact adds "to make a guess, it was Dionysus"; the voice in Apollo's temple in *Andromache* is easily assumed to be Apollo himself (and the messenger and Peleus hold him co-responsible), and Apollo is also a logical guess for the audience of *IT*.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For a similar argument see e.g. Heath 1987, pp. 52-54.

⁵⁰ Luigi Battezzato points out to me that the case of *IT* has the unusual feature that the voice uses the first-person plural ("we have the objects for which we sailed into the

But in other circumstances the process of inference of divine intervention is less secure. We may note first that outside of tragedy there is evidence of disagreement about recognition of specific divine causation or intervention in both Herodotus⁵¹ and Thucydides.⁵² Similarly, internally to the world of tragedy we can see that different observers adopt different interpretations. In the first scenes of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, Eteocles and the chorus have sharply conflicting views on the question whether the gods will intervene in the crisis to protect the city and also differ about what kinds of appeals to them are suitable. In Sophocles' *Antigone* Creon angrily rejects the chorus' notion that the undetected burial of Polyneices' corpse may be "god-driven" (*Ant.* 278-279), and at this point in the play it is not self-evident that the chorus' view is preferable. Only later, as the action proceeds, is another hint of divine intervention provided in the description of the second burial, and the divine element is thereafter made even more plausible by Teiresias' revelation of the gods' anger. For Euripidean examples we may

inhospitable sea-passage within the Symplegades"), thus making the additional, retrospective point that Apollo has been with Orestes throughout his journey.

⁵¹ E.g. 6.75.3 and 6.84 on different views of the cause of Cleomenes' death: see Harrison 2000, pp. 25-26, 106.

⁵² E.g. the contrast between the attitudes of the Athenians and the Melians in Thuc. 5.104-105, and the non-unanimous reaction to the eclipse at Syracuse, 7.50.4. Thucydides also observes the *ex post facto* nature of inferences about divine phenomena: the Lacedaemonians ascribed their "misfortune" in the Archidamian War to their own *παρανόμημα*, that is, concluded that the gods worked against them because of their violation of the truce (7.18.2-3); the choice of wording of an oracle depends on the circumstances in which people are trying to assert its relevance (2.54.2-3).

look to *Medea* 1171-1175, where the messenger tells of an old woman who at first incorrectly thinks that the princess has been possessed by Pan or another god, when in fact she is showing the first signs of the operation of Medea's poison, and to *IT* 264-280, where in the first messenger speech one countryman thinks Orestes and Pylades may be gods letting themselves be visible to mortals and a second one, described as *θεοσεβής*, prays to them, but other witnesses disagree. Since this range of attitudes is attested both outside literary fiction and internally in the dramatic world, it is reasonable to believe that within the external audience of tragedy as well there will have been different levels of inclination or confidence in making [36] inferences about a divine hand working in the background both in life and in stories. To take the example of *Ion*, the oracle given to Xouthos and the coincidence of Ion's presence at the moment Xouthos leaves the temple are easily viewed as events stage-managed by Apollo, since Hermes has told us of Apollo's intention to arrange this. But what of the ill-omened words of an anonymous slave (1187-1189), which prevent Ion from drinking the poison at the celebration of his supposed recognition, and the presence of the thirsty birds (1196-1200), which reveals the presence of poison, or the timely entrance of the priestess (1320-1323), which diverts Ion from violence toward his unrecognized mother? The priestess herself credits Apollo for her decision long ago to save the basket in which the baby was found (1346-1347) and she asserts that the god now wants Ion to have the means to seek his mother (1352-1353). It is not a big step to infer that her arrival is likewise Apollo's will, and in the overall context of the action it is reasonable for an external observer to conclude that Ion's escape from the poison drink is owed to divine protection rather than sheer

chance.⁵³ Thus, this much of the case in favor of Apollo's providence seems plausible, though it cannot be insisted that this had to be a universal interpretation among a diverse audience. Furthermore, as argued earlier,⁵⁴ Athena's later claim that "Apollo accomplished all things for the good" (1595) can still be regarded, in its context, as open to qualification or doubt.

It is not necessary to review in detail a large number of comparable examples,⁵⁵ but a few plays present problems that deserve more attention here. Since so many of Euripides' plays feature gods as characters at the margins of the dramatic action, either in the prologue or in a *deus ex machina* epilogue, the plays in which no gods are seen, such as *Hecuba* and *Medea*, stand out. Of these two, the power of the gods seems more apparent in *Medea* than in *Hecuba*, although both plays leave the intervention or operation of the gods to be inferred by those members of the audience who wish to detect it. Of special interest here are, first, the prominence of the clues within a play that might stimulate or allow an audience to make such inferences and, second, the kinds of intervention that are more or less easily inferred. I would suggest that *events* should be

⁵³ This conclusion is helped by a kind of neat reciprocity between Ion and the birds: in the prologue he threatened birds to make them flee, but did not actually shoot his bow at them, refraining from violence out of reverence for their role in carrying divine messages; here the birds die in his stead, thus conveying a message that can be seen as a divine warning. On the tendency to ascribe divine causation to an event that seems particularly appropriate and so meaningful, compare Aristotle's remarks on the statue of Mityls in *Poet.* 1452a6-10, and cf. Harrison 2000, p. 236, on Herodotus.

⁵⁴ Above p. 30 [= pp. 22-23 of this postprint].

⁵⁵ See the appendix for a listing with brief comments.

distinguished in most cases [37] from *decisions* made by major characters. That is, to take an example from outside Euripides, in *Agamemnon* the safe and rapid arrival of Agamemnon home despite the storm that afflicted and scattered the Greek fleet may properly be seen as a divinely arranged contribution to the complex set of causes that lead to his death: the messenger himself sees a divine hand in the event (Ag. 661-666), but the audience is in a position to appreciate the ominous rather than the salvific meaning of the intervention. But when an audience asks itself why Agamemnon is quickly defeated by his wife's persuasion and consents to walk on the precious fabrics (931-944), divine befuddlement of his wits—*ἄτη*—should not be the most prominent or the only explanation that occurs to most viewers.⁵⁶ Or, in the case of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, events such as the saving of the baby on Cithaeron, his meeting with his father, the plague, and the timing of the death of Polybus can all be justly inferred to be stage-managed by the gods or fate, but the decisions he takes during the course of the play to pursue the truth about Laius' death and then about himself need and invite no inference of divine intervention.

Here we may consider in detail the case of *Medea*.⁵⁷ Zeus in particular and the gods in general have oversight over oaths and the treatment of *ξένοι*, and Jason's suffering may be seen as the destruction that is expected to befall a breaker of oaths, since it is a standard formula that the perjurer risks destruction of himself and his

⁵⁶ For the range of causes, symbols, and characterizing traits that come together in the crucial act of treading on the precious fabrics, see Taplin 1978, pp. 78-83; Griffith 1995, pp. 84-85; Sailor-Stroup 1999.

⁵⁷ The following paragraphs are also incorporated in the Introduction in Mastronarde 2002.

posterity. The early and frequent invocations of Zeus, Themis, and Dike by Medea and her sympathizers (148, 157, 160, 169-170, 208-209, 332, 516, 764, 1352) support such a reading of Jason's suffering. Apart from this, the references to Medea's descent from the sun-god Helios and the invocations of Helios (406, 746, 752, 764, 954) emphasize that god's twofold interest: he is, on the one hand, Medea's progenitor and, on the other, a witness of human action in general and of adherence to or violation of oaths in particular.⁵⁸ The repeated naming of Helios earlier in the play prepares for two features of the final scenes. First, the chorus prays to Helios in 1251-1260, asking him to avert the killing of his great-grandchildren, and this prayer is not answered.⁵⁹ Second, he provides

⁵⁸ On this function of Helios see Garvie 1986, p. 322.

⁵⁹ The dramatic point of unanswered prayers or unfulfilled wishes (for avoidance of trouble or harm) uttered by characters or choruses in tragedy is to heighten the pathos of disaster, to underline the inability of humans to predict the future and detect the pattern of fate before it is too late, and to indicate how the gods' purposes often escape human interpretation. At the same time, however, such literary purposes are not incompatible with everyday assumptions about the nature of prayer to the gods: humans cannot be certain in advance whether a prayer will be fulfilled, and gods are under no compulsion to grant what is requested. Mikalson 1989 is an attempt to explain unanswered prayers in tragedy through a variety of special conditions so that the gods' failure to agree to a prayed request may not appear to challenge the basis of civic religion. Although there are many useful observations in Mikalson's treatment, I believe the premise of his study is too simple (p. 81: "persistent suggestion or representation of the inefficacy of either [scil. sacrifice or prayer] would be a profound attack on the core of contemporary religion") and that the Iliadic model (which allows unanswered prayers) is not distinct from the representations in tragedy. Mikalson's definitions exclude or explain away many cases

the [38] winged chariot to Medea at the end (1320-1322), which is a surprise to the audience and seems a spontaneous intervention, since there is no report of any prayer or request for this aid on Medea's part. The chariot on the crane allows Medea herself to take the position and perform some of the normal functions of the *deus ex machina*.⁶⁰ These features of the end of the play reveal clearly that the gods are in some sense on Medea's side in her struggle for recognition and revenge.

It is also consonant with Greek religious thought to see the working of the gods, and not blind, random chance, in the arrival of Aegeus at just the moment Medea's plot needs him. Traditional criticism of the so-called Aegeus-episode has been preoccupied with the judgment of Aristotle in *Poet.* 1461b19-21: "censure directed at both improbability (*ἀλογία*) and depravity of character (*μοχθηρία*) is correct whenever, despite a total lack of necessity to do so, a poet uses the irrational (*τῷ ἀλόγῳ*), as Euripides uses Aegeus, or bad character (*τῇ πονηρία*), as that of Menelaus in <Euripides'> *Orestes*." Aristotle's preference is for the connection of scenes and events by "probability or necessity," and thus many plot-devices or patterns in Euripides that

(by setting aside optative wishes that have no specific invocation, and by considering "the gods" as an abstraction, by classifying some gods separately as non-Athenian or non-recipients of cult), but these cases deserve to be taken as part of the implicit theology of tragedy, and that theology should be considered a legitimate part of Greek religion. In the particular case of the prayer to Helios in *Medea*, I do not accept Mikalson's marginalization of Helios as exotic and non-Athenian and lacking in cult; I would view his assistance as an extension and particularization of other divine support suggested by the play and not as in contrast to it.

⁶⁰ See Cunningham 1954, Mastronarde 1990.

depend on surprise or on parataxis of parallel or contrasting scenes are frowned on by critics of an Aristotelian bent, but more appreciated by critics who recognize the legitimacy of a variety of dramatic forms.⁶¹ We cannot be sure exactly what Aristotle had in mind in his example of the irrational (it is even possible that he was referring not to *Medea* but to Euripides' *Aegeus*). If he meant that Aegeus' entrance is unnecessary because Medea's escape is later assured by other means, the criticism is ill-founded, since the audience has no notion at this point in the play that Helios will provide a flying chariot, and Euripides is in general downplaying the special powers of Medea. More likely, Aristotle had in mind the lack of motivation of Aegeus' entry. Not only is there no preparation whatever for the entrance of Aegeus in particular, but Aegeus' journey is not intrinsically related either to Corinth or to Medea (it is only at her prompting that he shares with her his uncertainty about the oracle), and he departs with his ignorance uncured (although with more hope about a cure for his childlessness). Euripides has [39] apparently exaggerated the absence of human motivation for Aegeus' convenient arrival. Since the plot of *Medea* is otherwise concentrated and single, Aegeus' arrival stands out sharply.⁶² Nevertheless, it was open to the original audience to regard Aegeus' arrival not as a matter of blind luck, but as a contrivance of the gods in answer to Medea's pressing needs—a view that Aristotle would have been loath to countenance. Both here in *Medea* and in the equally convenient and unprepared arrival of the Corinthian messenger in

⁶¹ See Pfister 1988, pp. 239-245.

⁶² Contrast the situation in plays of looser construction, for instance the arrival of Orestes in *Andromache*, the appearance of Evadne in *Supplices*, or the arrival of Pylades in *Orestes*.

Sophocles' *Oedipus*, either one can see the god-like manipulation of time and event by the poet to produce a tragic plot, or one can see the divine intervention that makes the world of the play more organized and transparent than the world of everyday life. The preference for viewing *Medea* as a case of the former and *Oedipus* as a case of the latter reflects a bias toward an organized and somehow “just” world-view (which critics allege is present in Sophocles) and against a chaotic and amoral one—a bias that not everyone need share.

Once it is conceded that the frequent references to the gods and the opportune events in the play point to a theological background that explains the disaster that befalls Jason, the question arises whether we should also interpret Medea's own downfall as a punishment brought upon her by the gods, as Kovacs has recently suggested.⁶³ Jason refers near the end of the play to an avenging demon (*ἀλάστωρ*) that pursued Medea from Colchis and brought suffering to him (1333-1335). This demon was evoked by Medea's slaying of her own brother on the family hearth (which has been mentioned once earlier in the play at 167 and glancingly alluded to in 257). This is a retrospective analysis by an interested party, so it is unclear how cogent it is to be felt to be, and in any case Jason is applying it to explain his own misfortune, not Medea's. Medea herself laments at a crucial point that “the gods and I have contrived” the situation that demands the death of her children (1013-1014). Kovacs has suggested that when Medea plans her scheme of getting at Jason through the children and when she overcomes her own objections to it she may be understood to be mentally under the influence of the gods, who are bringing about her punishment at the same time as Jason's. Two objections may

⁶³ Kovacs 1993.

be made to such an inference. First, the tragedians normally explicitly reveal to the audience when a character is suffering a mental invasion that is controlling his or her perceptions and behavior: so with Ajax in Sophocles' play, Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and Pentheus in *Bacchae*. Such an indication is lacking in *Medea* at the time when she is making her decisions. The situation is different later when the violent event is occurring: the chorus, shocked and repelled by what Medea is doing, suggests that she embodies an Erinys (1260) and describes her as mentally deranged by wrath (1265-1266), and this is a typical reaction of a witness who prefers not to believe that such violence arises from normal humanity. Second, tragedy frequently displays a dovetailing of a character's inclination and desire with the purposes of [40] the god, and this dovetailing involves a rich double motivation rather than one that is reducible simply to divine influence or delusion (*ἄτη*): so with the Aeschylean Eteocles' decision to fight his brother, and Agamemnon's decision to tread on the fabrics at Clytemnestra's persuasion. In the case of *Medea*, the two sides of the causation are succinctly expressed in 1013-1014, but this does not detract from the impression of freedom and voluntariness in *Medea*'s previous or continuing development of her plan, or from the intrinsic quality of the *θυμός* appealed to in her great monologue and of the *χόλος* cited by the chorus in 1265-1266. *Medea*'s citation of the gods in 1013-1014 may in fact be interpreted in part as a rhetorical ploy by which *Medea* steels herself for the deed, just as in the *Iliad* Agamemnon's retrospective analysis of his *ἄτη* is a face-saving explanation that does not remove his obligation to make amends for his error. Accordingly, there is hardly a strong sense at the end of the play that *Medea* is being punished *by the gods and for her actions in Colchis*: she has the gods' complicity, and she is on her way to enjoy years of safety

and prosperity in Athens.⁶⁴ Perhaps some members of the Greek audience may have seen a comfortable moral balance in the ending by ascribing Medea's choices to a divine scheme to make her pay for her past, but the structure of the play, the relative prominence of its various themes, the emotional trajectory of sympathy and revulsion seem to me to invite a less comforting response.

The possible inferences of divine action in *Hecuba* present somewhat different problems.

This is a play which has struck many as presenting a harsh world, where the supernatural is evident mainly in the visible pitiful ghost of Polydorus and the reported terrifying ghost of Achilles. A number of critics have concentrated attention on the character of Hecuba herself and concluded that she suffers moral degradation over the course of the play, a degradation symbolized by the prediction at the end that she will be transformed into a dog before drowning and being memorialized by the topographical landmark called Dog's Sign or Dog's Tomb, Cynossema. Several critics have responded with the argument that this moralizing approach is at least in part anachronistic and that Hecuba's revenge, terrible as it may be, is an act of just retribution.⁶⁵ Judith Mossman's recent book *Wild Justice* is fairly successful in negotiating a middle way between extremes. The point of interest for the present essay is what an audience is to make of the reported detail that immediately after the sacrifice of Polyxena the fleet is unable to

⁶⁴ Theseus has not yet been conceived at the time of the play, and the Athenian audience will have been familiar with the story that Medea left Athens when the ephebe Theseus came to the city and made himself known to his father.

⁶⁵ Esp. Kovacs 1987, Burnett 1998, and to a lesser extent Gregory 1999.

depart because of the absence of winds. In her recent commentary, Justina Gregory, acknowledging a debt to David Kovacs, suggests that the [41] absence of wind is a sign of the gods' displeasure at the human sacrifice offered to Achilles, which she argues was the free choice of the Greek leaders and not specifically demanded by the ghost of Achilles—a very doubtful interpretation.⁶⁶ She further suggests that the gods' approval of the revenge exacted by Hecuba may be read by an audience from the fact that favorable winds begin to blow just after Polymestor is punished. Clearly, the sacrifice of the virgin Polyxena at the beginning of the voyage home from Troy is structurally parallel to the sacrifice of the virgin Iphigenia at the beginning of the voyage from Aulis to Troy. The adverse winds played an essential role in the narratives of the earlier event. So one might expect Euripides to strengthen the parallelism by referring to winds that reinforce

⁶⁶ The demand is first mentioned by Polydorus in 40-41, and Polydorus as a supernatural prologue figure should be taken as an authoritative source for audience knowledge, not as a source that is subject to doubt on the ground that he can offer only his own viewpoint and interpretation as one among others (as Gregory argues). Moreover, when the chorus gives its description of Achilles' demand in 113-115 ("leaving my tomb ἀγέραστον"; cf. 41 τύμβωι φίλον πρόσφαγμα καὶ γέρας λαβεῖν), this is most naturally taken as an abbreviation of the fuller details just given by Polydorus (it is a common technique for tragedians not to repeat unnecessarily details that an audience has recently heard), not as a divergent version of the event. That is, an audience does not infer, as Gregory's argument requires, that the chorus has given the entire speech of Achilles and that all he demanded was a γέρας, not specifically the human sacrifice of Polyxena. Instead, they assume that the γέρας is precisely the human sacrifice they have heard of, and because they make this assumption they can then understand the immediately following reference to the disagreement over whether to sacrifice the girl at his tomb.

Achilles' demand. Yet there is in fact no reference to winds in Hecuba until line 898, after the discovery of Polydorus' body and the appeal of Hecuba to Agamemnon. The allusions to the demand of the ghost of Achilles establish only that the ghost's appearance and speech caused the Greek fleet to stop its journey (37-39, 111-115). The interval between stopping and decision (this is the third dawn: 32) seems to be mentioned to enhance the *pathos* of the pitiful abandonment of Polydorus' corpse, described as washed back and forth in the waves of the shore. The interval is also exploited later when Polymestor insincerely explains why he did not come to visit Hecuba earlier: he was inland in the mountains when the Greek fleet arrived and has only now returned to his coastal home (962-967). But no reference is made to the passage of time when the deliberation of the Greeks is described by the chorus (116ff.): some audience-members may choose to supplement the narrative by assuming that the uncertainty of the Greeks concerning Achilles' demand made them hesitate to act at once, but it is safer to say that the text is not even asking the audience to think about the interval in connection with the sacrifice. The motif of the wind arises later because an interval is needed for Hecuba's revenge. If one is to make a theological inference from this detail, it should not be a retrospective one concerning the human sacrifice, but a prospective one concerning revenge on Polymestor for the atrocity he committed: the gods are giving Hecuba the time she needs to punish him, and the winds are favorable once the vengeance is completed.⁶⁷ But such an infer-[42]ence should be considered optional rather than compelling, since the motif of the wind is so sparse within the texture of the play.

⁶⁷ 898-901 ἔσται τάδ' οὕτω· καὶ γὰρ εἰ μὲν ἦν στρατῶι / πλοῦς, οὐκ ἂν εἶχον τήνδε σοι
δοῦναι χάριν· / νῦν δ', οὐ γὰρ ἴησ' οὐρίους πνοὰς θεός, / μένειν ἀνάγκη πλοῦν

It is perhaps useful to compare the references to wind in *Trojan Women*. Poseidon says in the prologue that the Greeks await a favorable wind for home as they are loading their ships with booty (19-20). But after he agrees with Athena to help her attack the fleet, he tells her to get her weapons and await the departure of the fleet (93-94). Soon thereafter it is clear that the chorus and Hecuba expect to depart almost immediately since Greek sailors are moving toward their ships (159-160, 167, cf. 180-181).⁶⁸ Cassandra is so eager for the destruction awaiting her enemy that she says “you can’t be too quick to watch out for the breeze with your sails” (456). And later, although Menelaus refers to “leisure” allowing him to indulge Hecuba’s request for an ἀγών λόγων, it is clear that some Greek ships are already leaving (1123-1127, 1148, 1155). It would not be convincing to make any inferences about the gods from these references to the winds and to the act of departure: they are simply plausible background for the stage-action. So perhaps are the less prominent references in *Hecuba*.

IV

In conclusion, a few ancillary observations may be offered.

First, the previous discussion has tried to show that it is far from easy to adopt a piously optimistic view of the gods in Euripides, a view whereby they uphold justice in a

ὀρῶντας ἡσύχους; 1289-90, almost the last words of the play, motivating departure from the stage: καὶ γὰρ πνοὰς / πρὸς οἶκον ἤδη τάσδε πομπίμους ὀρῶ.

⁶⁸ The references to oars (160 κωπήρης, 181 κώπας) suggest the standard procedure of rowing away from the shore and then raising a mast and sails and need not be read as hints that the Greeks will row out against an opposing wind.

fully comprehensible way and act consistently for human good. But this does not entail that the portrayal of the gods is not in most respects traditional. Despite the fact that in many contexts (esp. public, ceremonial, and patriotic ones) the Greeks would not want to have said so explicitly, it is inherent in the polytheistic system that the gods have divided interests and loyalties, and this is emphasized or illustrated in Homeric epic and the *Oresteia* as well as in Euripidean plays like *Hippolytus*, *Andromache*, *Heracles*, and even *Helen* and *IT*. There are just and beneficent interventions, but there are also interventions of another kind. If in *Heraclidae*, for instance, one chooses to detect some kind of divine favor and justice both in the opportune arrival of Hyllus with his army to join the Athenians against Eurystheus and in the magical rejuvenation of the loyal Iolaus, one must also concede that the divine is responsible for the demand for human sacrifice, since it is made by a consensus of prophetic sources and there can be no question of importing into this text, without any textual clue, the motif of [43] doubt of oracles or the distinction between divine prophecy and prophecy offered by human interpreters. The chorus' reaction to the news is significant: 425-426 "Are we to believe, then, that when this city is eager to assist the strangers in their need, god does not permit it?" (ἀλλ' ἢ πρόθυμον οὔσαν οὐκ ἔα θεὸς / ξένοις ἀρήγειν τήνδε χρήζουσιν πόλιν;). Human sacrifice was not a reality for the Greeks of Euripides' time, but the motif recurs in his work because it allows contemplation of extreme situations of devotion and reciprocity. Whereas in *Phoenissae* Menoikeus pays off a past infringement in order to make the city's future safe, Heracles' daughter seems to be involved in a prospective exchange, her life for future protection. This exchange lays bare the terrifying and ultimately incomprehensible power of divinity: there is reciprocity between gods and men, but the conditions of the

exchange are not within human control, as the most pious interpretation of human-divine interaction might claim.

Second, what are we to make of the prominence of criticism of the gods in some Euripidean plays and the incorporation of speculations about their nature that have a sophistic tinge? In a good recent discussion of the mostly unsound evidence for prosecution or persecution of intellectuals for unconventional religious opinions, Robert Wallace concludes that “the Athenians only really got exercised about intellectual speculation when this activity was conducted in public and affected the polis.”⁶⁹ After citing Plato’s long career carried out in safety from public scrutiny, he continues: “Impious talk or even impious actions, in themselves, seem generally not to have been thought especially dangerous to the city,⁷⁰ or else Euripides’ plays would not have been performed.” This singling out of Euripides is, I would argue, not as obvious as Wallace assumes it to be. What Euripides’ plays imply about the gods is largely traditional, and the point is rather that the Athenians were able to confront in tragedy aspects of their beliefs that they did not acknowledge in some other public contexts. Furthermore, the doubts about the behavior of gods are not entirely endorsed by the plays taken as

⁶⁹ Wallace 1994, pp. 143-144.

⁷⁰ Cf. Parker 1996, pp. 207-214, esp. 210 (on individuals with unorthodox opinions living unmolested in Athens) “But in such cases we are dealing not with principled tolerance but with a failure to live up to intolerant principles. Fortunately such failures seem to have been very regular.”

wholes,⁷¹ so there are ways to reduce somewhat the scandal or [44] shock of Euripidean theology (but not eliminate it, as some critics have wished).⁷² Euripides stands out, however, because his characters are more analytical and articulate and inclined toward a thorough rationalism, that is to say, more reflective of the intellectual ferment of his age.⁷³ This characteristic, however, is at least in part an extension of a traditional

⁷¹ This argument is deployed by Leftkowitz 1989. On the vexed problem of “atheism” in pagan antiquity see Winiarczyk 1992 with his refs to earlier works. Unfortunately, two of the primary subjects of the discussion of “atheism” in tragedy do not permit satisfactory conclusions. Euripides’ *Bellerophon* is known only in limited fragments, and I do not find any of the proffered reconstructions of the plot very convincing (see most recently Collard 1995, pp. 98-120; Jouan and Van Looy 2000, pp. 1-35). The authorship of the famous *Sisyphus* fragment is disputed. I incline to accept Critias’s paternity: see Winiarczyk 1987; Davies 1989; Obbink 1996, pp. 353-355, and, whoever is the author, the speech occurred within a drama in which gods were present and in which Sisyphus may ultimately have been foiled by them (see the interesting speculations of Pöhlmann 1995).

⁷² See again Parker 1997.

⁷³ The discussion of particular unorthodox or speculative statements about divinity in Euripides belongs in the context of a discussion of the interplay of rhetoric and characterization and the effects of argumentation and content with a modern-sounding scientific or sophistic tinge. Here it may simply be noted that whereas comic parody concentrates on the shock-value or immorality of some statements, in the tragedies themselves scientific and sophistic features are present both in sympathetic and in unsympathetic characters, and such details were apparently to be received by the

prerogative of high-style poetry: the poet's display of *σοφία* lies not only in his technical expertise with words and meter or in his representation of moral values and social wisdom, but also in his appropriation of specialized knowledge, whether it be geographical (as in *Agamemnon* or *Prometheus*) or medical (as in *Eumenides*) or anthropological/sophistic. But this appropriation and representation is not an endorsement of any particular speculation. Rather, Euripides' works dramatize crises of interpretation, faith, and intelligibility.

Finally, in the cases of convenient coincidences (as in *Ion*) and the matching of divine designs to human habits and decisions (as in *Hippolytus*), the dovetailing of events and causes is not simply a necessary device of effective storytelling, but a source of *θαῦμα*, an important motif of mythological narrative that is also an expression of religious experience. One might in fact say that the gods of traditional Greek religion are much less interesting, and much less worthy of awe, if they act in ways that are fully and perfectly understandable.

Appendix

A checklist of possible actions of *unseen* gods within plays of Euripides (including possible inferences of divine intervention from crucial coincidences)

1. Alcestis: a. Heracles arrives just after death of Alcestis and enjoys *ξενία* of Admetus; Heracles is on a journey commanded by Eurystheus (65-67, 479-506). Comment: there is

audience in different ways in different contexts and not reflexively branded as suspect or immoral.

an open choice for the audience to detect either a happy coinci-[45]dence or the beneficence of “the gods” (creating a situation in which Admetus’ extreme devotion to *ξενία* can be displayed and rewarded). Apollo predicts Heracles’ arrival, but it would be odd to say that he in particular causes it.

2. Medea: **a.** Aegeus arrives at precisely the moment of need, in transit from Delphi to Trozen, not intending to consult Medea (666-687); **b.** Medea contrives a plan from which she too suffers (1013-1014); **c.** Helios supplies flying chariot (1320-1322). Comment: **b** is different in nature and more doubtful than **a** and **c** (discussed in section III).

3. Heraclidae: **a.** oracle demands human sacrifice to ensure success against Eurystheus and Argives (407-409 + 402; note comment of chorus 425-426 *ἀλλ’ ἦ πρόθυμον οὐσαν οὐκ ἔαι θεὸς / ξένοις ἀρήγειν τήνδε χρήζουσιν πόλιν;*); **b.** arrival of Hyllus and his army in time to fight beside the Athenian army (637-641, 659-671); **c.** rejuvenation of Iolaus. Comment: see remarks in section IV. Note also Iolaus’ confidence in Zeus, Alcmena’s more reserved stance in 717-719: (Io.) *καὶ Ζηνὶ τῶν σῶν, οἶδ’ ἐγώ, μέλει πόνων.* / (Al.) *φεῦ· / Ζεὺς ἐξ ἐμοῦ μὲν οὐκ ἀκούσεται κακῶς· / εἰ δ’ ἐστὶν ὅσιος αὐτὸς οἶδεν εἰς ἐμέ.*

4. Hippolytus: **a.** Aphrodite (who before the play already implanted love for Hippolytus in Phaedra) says she “will reveal the matter to Theseus” (42); **b.** Poseidon (under compulsion of his promise) answers Theseus’ prayer and sends bull from sea against Hippolytus (44-46, 887-890, 1169-1170). Comment: **b** is clear, but **a** has been discussed in terms of *suggestio falsi* in prologue speeches. Is the statement actually false, or only misleading in the expectation it produces? The first (distorted) revelation to Theseus comes from Phaedra, who is a tool and perhaps in some way an embodiment or epiphany

of Aphrodite.⁷⁴ The final revelation to Theseus is spoken by Artemis, so this detail may be another sign of the similarity of the two goddesses despite their opposition.

5. Andromache: **a.** rescue of Andromache: she refers to Thetis 246-260 (258 σὺ δ' οὖν κάταιθε· θεοὶ γὰρ εἴσονται τάδε; 260 σφάζ', αἱμάτων θεᾶς βωμόν, ἧ μέτεισί σε, echoed by chorus 492-493 ἔτι σε, πότνια, μετατροπὰ τῶνδ' ἔπεισιν ἔργων) and also at 565-567 (βωμοῦ Θέτιδος . . . ἀποσπάσαντες); **b.** arrival of Orestes at opportune moment to take Hermione away (881ff.); **c.** Apollo assists in murder of Neoptolemus through voice from inmost shrine (1147-1149). Comment: there is a clear division among divine powers matching the division between Atreid line and Peleus/Andromache, so **a** and **c** have the appearance of balancing interventions (but Thetis herself as *dea ex machina* does not claim explicitly to have helped). As to **b**, it is revealed that he has been lying in wait for his opportunity, so that his intervention is not in fact a coincidence (959-963).

6. Hecuba: **a.** servant seeking water for Polyxena's funeral instead finds corpse of Polydorus (as promised to Polydorus by the gods below: 47-50); **b.** lack of favorable winds makes time for Hecuba's revenge (898-901; winds return 1289-1290). Comment: see discussion of **b** in section III.

[46] **7. Supplices:** **a** military success of Theseus and Athenians (?). Comment: in the first discussion between Theseus and Adrastus, they suggest divergent views of the gods' interest in the matter of the Argive corpses; but after the intervention of Aethra, Theseus implies or states that the gods are on his side against the Thebans (301-302, 348, 594-

⁷⁴ Cf. Wildberg 2000. The nurse too is crucial to the plot and is a kind of advocate for Aphrodite, but should not be identified too simply with her (as is done by DeForest 1989).

597) or that burial is a law of the gods (559, 563). Yet the battle itself is very closely fought and the messenger makes no allusion to gods or a divine voice or the like.

8. Electra: none.

9. Heracles: **a.** arrival of Heracles at the last moment to save his family: answers to earlier complaints that Zeus does not care (212, 339-347, 498-501, 655-672; cf. 48, 170-171, 521-522), and thereafter chorus celebrates care of the gods for justice (757-759, 772-780); **b.** Athena halts Heracles' fury before he can kill Amphitryon (904-909, 1001-1008). Comment: there is a remarkable juxtaposition of a standard saving action in **a** with the visible intervention of Iris and Lyssa that cannot be explained as just, despite the efforts of many scholars to rationalize or justify the disaster that befalls Heracles.

10. Troades: **a.** lack of favorable wind (?): cf. 19-20, 159-160, 167, 180-181, 456, 911, 1123-1127, 1148, 1155. Comment: see discussion in section III.

11. IT: **a.** Iphigenia's dream (true for audience, misunderstood by Iphigenia); **b.** attack of madness, leading to capture and thus to recognition and completion of the mission; **c.** adverse waves block escape. Comment: see discussion in section II.

12. Ion: **a.** oracle to Xuthus (Apollo schemes through false oracle); **b.** presence of Ion as first person seen by Xuthus, fitting oracle; **c.** ill-omened speech interrupts libations, preventing delivery of poison; **d.** birds' death reveals the presence of poison; **e.** timely intervention of priestess interrupts Ion's vengeance against Creusa. Comment: see discussion in section III.

13. Helen: **a.** long wandering of Menelaus and shipwreck close to Helen's location; **b.** departure of the *εἰδωλον* and its revelation of Helen's innocence; **c.** divided intentions of the gods (scales are tipped by Theonoe's decision): repeated prayers indicate that the

issue is in suspense (1024-1027 Aphrodite and Hera, 1093-1106 Hera and Aphrodite, 1441-1450 Zeus, 1584-1587 Poseidon and Nereids); **d.** favorable breeze carries ship away after Greeks kill or oust the Egyptian crew. Comment: in contrast to *IT*, the role of the gods seems more remote and passive, and the humans left more to their own devices, except for framing allusions to τὸ πεπρωμένον (36-41, 56-59, 612-614, 1646, 1650-1653).

14. Phoenissae: **a.** fulfillment of Oedipus' curse upon his sons (after the delay of the first battle) with a matching of human decisions and desires with divine plan; **b.** demand for human sacrifice and Theban success in battle (Mastronarde 1994, p. 545 f.). Comment: the divine role in past events (narrated by characters and chorus) looms larger than the interventions in the play itself.

15. Orestes: **a.** fit of madness; **b.** disappearance of Helen. Comment: on the striking absence of the gods and the isolation and frustration of the human agents, see discussion in section II.

16. Bacchae: **a.** freeing of maenads imprisoned by Pentheus; **b.** magical events on mountain (report of first messenger about maenads at peace and in battle); **c.** voice of Dionysus and earthquake and fire in palace; **d.** magical events on mountain [47] (report of second messenger about death of Pentheus). Comment: an unusual play in this regard since Dionysus appears in prologue, epilogue, and in disguise within the action, and proclaims his identity in a voice heard during the palace miracle.

17. IA: **a.** revelation of oracle to the whole army (518, 524-531, 1348) (?). Comment: this seems to be a completely human action, whether a viewer infers that it is Calchas or

Odysseus or even Agamemnon himself who lets the secret out at the proper time to frustrate the resistance of Clytemnestra and Achilles.

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