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'IMPIETY' AND 'ATHEISM' IN EURIPIDES' DRAMAS

In the surviving plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles the gods appear to men only rarely. In the *Eumenides* Apollo and Athena intervene to bring acquittal to Orestes. In Sophocles' *Philoctetes* Heracles appears *ex machina* to ensure that the hero returns to Troy, and we learn from a messenger how the gods have summoned the aged Oedipus to a hero's tomb. In Sophocles' *Ajax* Athena drives Ajax mad and taunts him cruelly. *Prometheus Bound* (assuming that it is by Aeschylus) might seem to be an exception, since all but one of its characters are gods. But nonetheless the intervention of the gods in the life of the one human character, Io, brings pain and trouble as well as promise of benefit. Io has been driven mad because she has refused to obey the dreams that tell her to go to the meadow where Zeus wants to have intercourse with her. The god does not make his request in person, and it is only in the course of her wanderings that Io learns how Zeus will bring a gentle end to her sufferings. Her informant is another god, Zeus' adversary Prometheus, who answers her questions, at times grudgingly (778), and in ways that are not immediately clear to her (775).[1]

Of the three dramatists, it is Euripides who makes his audience most keenly aware of the gods' interest in human affairs. Nine of his nineteen surviving plays conclude with scenes where gods speak from the stage machine;[2] in four plays gods speak the prologue;[3] Iris and Lyssa appear, dramatically – and with terrifying effectiveness – in the middle of the *Heracles*. Only six plays have no gods as characters, though in four of these the audience hears about or sees a miraculous event that could only have been brought about by a god: Medea appears with the bodies of her children in the chariot of Helios; in the *Heraclidae* we learn how in the midst of the battle against Eurystheus (Heracles' persecutor) Heracles and his bride Hebe, the goddess of youthful vigour, appear as a pair of stars near the chariot of old Iolaus, Heracles' nephew, and make him young again, just for the day of the battle (851–8); as Agamemnon prepares to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, the goddess Artemis makes the girl disappear and puts a deer in her place (*IA* 1580–95). In the *Hecuba* the murderer of Hecuba's son Polymestor is told by Dionysus that Hecuba, who has blinded him and murdered his children, will be turned into a dog whose tomb will be a landmark for sailors (1265–74). Only in two plays, the satyr play *Cyclops* and the *Phoenissae*, does no miracle occur.

Yet despite the frequency with which Euripides portrays in his dramas the gods and their actions, he is thought of as the poet who more than any other asks his audiences,

[1] Gods also appeared in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Lyomenos* (p. 306 Radt), *Psychostasia* (p. 375), *Oreithyia* (fr. 281), *Xantriai* (or *Semele*?, fr. 168). Athena speaks angrily in Soph.'s *Aias Lokros* (fr. 10c) and Apollo points out victims to Artemis in *Niobe* (fr. 441a); Demeter speaks in the *Triptolemus* (fr. 598) and Thetis in the *Syndeipnoi* (fr. 562). W. Schmidt, *Der Deus ex Machina bei Euripides* (diss. Tübingen, 1963), pp. 69–78 lists examples of epiphanies in myth and cult.

[2] Gods *ex machina* in *Hipp.*, *Suppl.*, *El.*, *Ion*, *IT*, *Hel.*, *Or.*, *Ba.*, *Rhes.*, cf. *Antiope*; cf. W. S. Barrett, *Euripides, Hippolytus* (Oxford, 1964), p. 395; O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 444–5. Possibly also *Phaethon*, *Rhadamanthys* (*PSI* 1286 = Hypothesis 14 Austin), *Erechtheus*, *Phrixus*, *Archelaus* (cf. test. 7, A. Harder, *Euripides Kresphontes and Archelaos* [Leiden, 1985], p. 174).

[3] Gods speak in the prologues of *Alc.*, *Hipp.*, *Tro.* *Ba.*

ancient and modern, to question the nature of the gods and even their existence.[4] The notion that the poet himself had doubts about traditional religion, even to the point of being atheistic, derives from his own dramas, or rather from Aristophanes' and other comic poets' versions of them.[5] In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, a woman claims that Euripides has spoiled her livelihood (selling wreaths for statues of the gods) because 'by working in tragedies he has persuaded men that the gods do not exist' (*οὐκ εἶναι θεούς*, 450–1). The comic Euripides in the *Frogs* prays to 'other, private gods': 'Ether, my food; Pivot of my tongue, Comprehension, and Nostrils keen to scent' (888–93). In the *Thesmophoriazusae* he tells a story of creation in which Ether, rather than Earth, is the mother of all living things (14–15). In the *Frogs*, according to his adversary Aeschylus, he is 'an enemy of the gods' (836).

In antiquity, being atheistic or impious (the terms are not synonymous)[6] signified an inability to distinguish right from wrong. Consequently, Aristophanes' Euripides is a notably 'deft' (*δεξιός*, *Ran.* 71, *Thesm.* 9) and wordy poet, capable of verbal play that his interlocutors cannot follow (e.g. *Thesm.* 5–11). In the *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides' aged in-law (275–6), and in the *Frogs* Dionysus (102, 1471), in order to get out of commitments that they have made to him, use his own famous line from the *Hippolytus*: 'my tongue swore it, but my mind foreswore the oath' (612). Aeschylus accuses him of writing about incest (850), putting whores like Phaedra and Stheneboea on the stage (1043), and not setting an appropriate moral standard, which is 'to hide what is shameful, not to bring it on the stage or to write about it. Little boys have a teacher to tell them [what is right]; grown men have poets' (1053–5). Euripides, claims Aristophanes' Aeschylus, has caused a general moral decline in Athens, not only by portraying immorality on the stage, but by his rhetoric:

> For what evils is he *not* responsible? Hasn't he exhibited procuresses, and women who bear children in temples, and have intercourse with their brothers, and state that life is not life? (1078–82)

This atheistic and immoral Euripides bears a close resemblance to the Socrates in the *Clouds*,[7] who is carried about in his basket in the air, praying to new gods that have no established cult, Air, Ether, and Clouds (264–5), and who can produce a Worse Argument that 'can plead an unjust cause and overturn the better argument'

[4] E.g., most recently, C. P. Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 335–6, 'the monumentalizing effect of these lines [*Ba.* 1325–6] again puts the truth about divinity in the form of an absence'; cf. H. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca, 1985), p. 258, 'Euripides can find no order outside ritual and myth and rational speech, yet in the end the order provided by art, ritual, and speech remains in an uncertain relation to the reality of the contemporary world'; cf. S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 234; A. Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (Madison, 1987), pp. 315–20. On the development (from Romanticism) of this modern attitude, see esp. R. Schlesier, 'Goetterdaemmerung bei Euripides?', in *Der Untergang von Religionen*, ed. H. Zinser (Berlin, 1986), pp. 35–50; H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*[2] (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 151–5; Michelini, p. 108.

[5] For details, see my 'Was Euripides an Atheist?', *SIFC* [Ser. III] 5 (1987), 149–66.

[6] Cf. M. Winiarczyk, 'Wer galt im Altertum als Atheist?', *Philol.* 128 (1984) 157–83, at 182–3.

[7] Aristophanes, in the first version of his *Clouds*, even has a character claim that Socrates composed 'those hyper-wordy plays for Euripides, the clever ones' (*sophas*, fr. 392 K–A). Other comic poets also alleged that Socrates collaborated with Euripides; Aristophanes' contemporary, Teleclides, wrote of 'Euripideses nailed together by Socrates' (I 219 K, cf. also Callias, fr. 15 K–A) and of Euripides' father-in-law Mnesilochus (possibly the poet's old in-law in the *Thesm.*) 'cooking up a new play for Euripides, and Socrates supplying him with firewood' (39, 40 K, cf. D.L. 2.18, and Lefkowitz (n. 5), 152.

(884–5, cf. Pl. *Apol.* 19b). As the writer of the Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease* observes, because magicians and wonder-workers try to usurp the gods' function by bringing down the moon, eclipsing the sun, and changing the weather, 'I think that they are impious (δυσσεβεῖν) and that they do not believe that the gods exist (οὐ νομίζειν θεοὺς εἶναι),[8] nor that the gods have any powers, nor that the gods would refrain from any of the most extreme actions' (*Morb. Sac.* ch. iv). As Plato has Socrates say in the *Apology*, people assume that philosophers 'search for what is in the air and beneath the earth' (*Apol.* 23d) and 'do not believe in the gods' (θεοὺς μὴ νομίζειν) and 'make the worse appear the better cause' (cf. 18c).

But although Euripides' 'philosophizing' made him seem impious, at least to the comic poets and the biographers who used their works as 'evidence', I believe that it can be shown that any character in Euripides who expresses 'philosophical' notions about the gods does so out of desperation, and that ultimately, the gods in that play will prove – not always to the characters' satisfaction – that the gods still retain their traditional powers. Perhaps understandably, modern scholars often seem uncomfortable with such an austere notion of divinity. But let us review the passages where characters in plays criticize the gods or question their motives or even their existence,[9] considering the nature of the gods' behaviour in the dramas where characters complain of them, and comparing (wherever possible) Euripides' portrayal of the gods with those of Homer and the other dramatists.

Hecuba, in a famous passage, speaks lines that, according to at least one ancient commentator, 'derive from the sayings of Anaxagoras' (ὁρμῶνται δὲ ἐκ τῶν Ἀναξαγορείων λόγων, Σ *Tro.* 884):[10]

> ὦ γῆς ὄχημα κἀπὶ γῆς ἔχων ἕδραν,
> ὅστις ποτ' εἶ σύ, δυστόπαστος εἰδέναι,
> Ζεύς, εἴτ' ἀνάγκη φύσεος εἴτε νοῦς βροτῶν,
> προσευξάμην σε · πάντα γὰρ δι' ἀψόφου
> βαίνων κελεύθου κατὰ δίκην τὰ θνήτ' ἄγεις.

Conveyance of the earth and you who have a base on earth, whoever you are, most difficult to know, Zeus, whether necessity of nature or the mind of men, I address you in prayer. For as you go along your silent path, you direct all mortal affairs according to justice. (884–9)

To ask a god by what name he or she prefers to be addressed is an act of piety, whose purpose is to make the prayer effective by getting power over or at least pleasing the god.[11] Like the chorus in Aesch., *Ag.* 160–6, who say 'Zeus, whoever he may be', Hecuba does not doubt that Zeus exists, but rather indicates that she is not sure exactly who he is, since he is 'most difficult to know'.[12] Although it seems to have

[8] This phrase is synonymous with οὐ θεοὺς νομίζειν, cf. W. Fahr, *Theous nomizein: zum Problem der Anfaenge des Atheismus bei den Griechen* (Spudasmata 26: Hildesheim, 1969), pp. 164–7.

[9] Not including the notorious fragment of the *Sisyphus* (Critias, fr. 1 N) sometimes attributed to Eur., cf. M. Winiarczyk, 'Nochmals das Satyrspiel "Sisyphos"', *WS* 100 (1987), 35–45.

[10] Cf. Lefkowitz (n. 5), 154, 163–4.

[11] Cf. E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus, Agamemnon* (Oxford, 1962), ii.100; R. Kannicht, *Euripides, Helena* (Heidelberg, 1969), ii.296; E. R. Dodds, *Euripides, Bacchae*[2] (Oxford, 1960) on 893–4. 893–4.

[12] But cf. how in Euripides even so traditional a question as 'Zeus, or if you prefer to be called Hades' (fr. 912 N), was judged to be 'philosophical' by a commentator on his work, who claims that 'He has caught Anaxagoras' world-view concisely and accurately in three words' and states that 'elsewhere he is uncertain about the established order in heavenly affairs' (Satyrus 37 iii).

been in no way impious to speak of Zeus as the controlling force in the universe,[13] because Euripides has Menelaus observe that she seems to have 'invented new prayers to the gods' (εὐχὰς ὡς ἐκαίνισας θεῶν), scholars have assumed that she might be thought of as unconventional, or even impious, like Socrates, who was accused by Meletus of believing in 'other new forms of divinity' (ἕτερα δαιμόνια καινά, *Apol.* 24b). Her suggestion that Zeus might be 'the mind of man', encouraged the ancient commentators to propose that Euripides was thinking specifically of Anaxagoras' theory that Mind controls everything in the universe (59B12 D–K). But the allusion, if it is one, is not precise. Similar notions were expressed by other philosophers at the time. For example, the eclectic Diogenes of Apollonia,[14] a contemporary of Anaxagoras, speaks of the air that is 'life and intelligence' (ψυχὴ καὶ νόησις) to men and beasts (64B4 D–K): 'what men call air is what has intelligence (νόησις) and all of them are governed by it and it controls everything' (69B5 D–K).[15] In any case, in her vague allusions to the language of the philosophers, Hecuba does not completely abandon conventional anthropomorphic terminology:[16] Zeus who is the conveyance of the earth also has 'a seat upon the earth',[17] and 'he goes along a silent path and guides human affairs with justice'. In calling Zeus' movements 'silent', Euripides might have in mind the music of the spheres, which is inaudible to man (Philolaus 58B35 D–K), but the idea that men are unaware of, and thus surprised by, Zeus' enactment of his justice also goes back to Solon, who compares the justice of Zeus to a sudden spring storm (fr. 13.17–25).[18]

Although ancient commentators did not hesitate to ascribe to Euripides himself the notions expressed by characters in his plays, we must keep in mind that in this passage from the *Trojan Women* it is, of course, Hecuba and not Euripides who is speaking. Troy has fallen, and she and the other women have been assigned as slaves to Greek masters. Hecuba has just seen her grandson Astyanax led away to be hurled to his death from the walls of Troy – an act that even moves the Greek herald Talthybius to pity (787). Now Menelaus has come to get Helen; the Greeks have given him permission to kill her, but he wants to wait till he returns to Greece. It is at this point that Hecuba utters her prayer. She and the women of Troy (857–81, 1071–6) doubt here and throughout the play that the gods care about the fate of Troy (cf. also 469–71, 1240–5, 1280–1). But the audience knows that the gods have not

[13] Cf. esp. Aesch. fr. 70 Radt; Derveni Papyrus apud M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 26–9.

[14] Cf. K. H. Lee, *Euripides, Troades* (London, 1976), p. 224; on Diogenes, cf. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*[2] (Cambridge, 1983), p. 444; J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*[2] (London, 1982), pp. 580, 646 n. 10.

[15] Cf. also 'in each of us our mind is god', a line attributed both to Euripides (fr. 1018 N) and Menander (Monostich. 588 Jaekel), cited by schol. *Tr.* 884. K. Matthiessen, 'Zur Theonoeszene in der euripideischen "Helena"', *Hermes* 96 (1968), 685–704, at 699–700 (followed by S. Barlow, *Euripides, Trojan Women* (London, 1986), p. 209, identifies Zeus here with αἰθήρ as in frr. 877, 941, cf. 330 N (parodied in Ar. *Ran.* 100, 311; *Thesm.* 272). But Eur. combines 'Anaxagorean' ideas with traditional terminology in Eur.'s *Chrysippus*, fr. 839 N = 59A112 D–K, about 'great Earth and Zeus' αἰθήρ who is the begetter of men and of gods' (cf. frr. 944, 1023, 1004 N); Zeus inhabits the air in fr. 487 N, cf. Empedocles 31B142 D–K.

[16] Cf. R. Scodel, *The Trojan Trilogy of Euripides* (Hypomnemata 60: Goettingen, 1980), pp. 93–5.

[17] Cf. Scodel (n. 16), p. 94 n. 33 who compares the divine (Poseidon, Zeus, Artemis) epithet γαιήοχος.

[18] Lee (n. 14) compares Solon's description of Dike who silently (σιγῶσα) takes in all that happens and eventually takes her revenge (4.15–16 W); cf. also Solon fr. 17 W where the mind of the immortals is always invisible (ἀφανής) to men.

forgotten about Troy. They realize, as the Trojan women cannot, since the scene took place in the prologue, before Hecuba and the other women of Troy came on stage, that Zeus and his daughter Athena, with the help of Zeus' brother Poseidon, have already set in motion the forces that will bring about the revenge against the Greeks that Hecuba desires. Thus if Euripides has put Anaxagorean notions into Hecuba's mouth, it is only to show that even though she suspects that the gods have abandoned her and the cause of justice, Zeus remains in control of the cosmos, not only in the form of the 'mind of man', but (though also imperceptibly to mortals) through the powerful agency of his immortal daughter and brother.

Ancient biographers believed that Euripides was a pupil of his younger contemporary the sophist Prodicus, who like Anaxagoras and Protagoras was said to have been tried in Athens for impiety; according to the Suda, like Socrates Prodicus 'died in Athens by drinking hemlock on the grounds that he corrupted the youth' (*Π* 2365: I iv 201 Adler). In the commentaries that have come down to us, no particular passages are identified as 'Prodicean', but modern scholars have thought that the lines in the *Bacchae* where Tiresias describes the gods Demeter and Dionysus show the influence of Prodicus' ideas.[19] In the drama, Tiresias tries to persuade the hostile Pentheus not to reject the cult of Dionysus and to acknowledge both the existence and the power of the god:

> For there are two things that are of the greatest importance for men: the goddess Demeter – she is the earth, by whatever name you wish to call her; she nourishes mortals with dry food; and after her comes the son of Semele, who discovered the wet drink of the vine and brought it to mortals... (275–80)

Prodicus seems to have argued that the gods had once been human beings who brought great benefactions to men and were then deified; in particular he mentioned the names of Demeter and Dionysus.[20] Tiresias, on the other hand, does not go so far as to say that Demeter and Dionysus were once *mortals* who were worshipped for their benefactions; he only claims that they are important gods because they have given men such useful gifts.

We ought also to ask how much conviction Tiresias' 'modernistic' arguments carry in the context of the drama. Tiresias tells Pentheus that it is not necessary literally to believe that Dionysus as a baby was sewn into the thigh of his father Zeus, but explains that the story was concocted out of a confusion in words (286–9). Cadmus likes Tiresias' rationalistic arguments (330), and urges his grandson Pentheus to say that Dionysus is a god, even if, as Pentheus alleges (332–3), he is not. But, apparently, it is not enough for Cadmus to don the god's apparel, or to say that he should be made much of because he is the son of his daughter Semele, or even to have made Semele's grave into a sacred area, since at the end of the play Cadmus will be exiled from the city he has founded and be turned into a snake.

Tiresias' (or Prodicus') arguments thus prove worthless. What the god wants is not gratitude for his services to men, but public recognition that he was born the son of Zeus (47), which involves accepting the bizarre story of his birth. In fact, whenever the god manifests himself during the action of the play, he has nothing to do with his practical gift to men of wine. Rather, the women who have come with his cult from Asia sing twice of the miraculous way in which he was taken as an embryo from his

[19] Cf. Dodds (n. 11), pp. 104–5; Lefkowitz (n. 5), 158, 164. On other 'allusions', see esp. M. J. O'Brien, 'Tantalus in Euripides' Orestes', *RhM* 131 (1988), 30–45, 31 n. 4.

[20] Cf. A. Henrichs, 'The Atheism of Prodicus', *Cronache Ercolanesi* 6 (1976), 15–21, esp. 18–21; 'Democritus and Prodicus on Religion', *HSCP* 79 (1975), 93–123, esp. 110 n. 64; cf. *HSCP* 88 (1984), 145 n. 24. Testimonia in Winiarczyk (n. 6), 177.

mother's corpse and enclosed in Zeus' thigh with golden pins (88–100, 521–9). As we have seen, the god is not satisfied with mere conformity or lip service, nor is the notion of private, personal belief in any way involved; what the god wants is honour. As he tells Cadmus when he appears *ex machina* at the end of the play to prophesy what will happen to him and his family:

> I Dionysus am telling you this, because I was not born from a mortal father but from Zeus. If you had understood how to be sensible, when you didn't want to, you would be happy to have the son of Zeus as an ally. (1340–4)

'Being sensible' (*σωφρονεῖν*) about Dionysus means not going along with sophistic arguments, as the chorus says: 'being wise is not wisdom (*τὸ σοφὸν δ' οὐ σοφία*) nor is [wisdom] thinking more than mortal thoughts' (395–6).

Can Euripides in the *Bacchae* be recommending the pious acceptance of irrationalism? Walter Burkert has characterized these lines as an expression of the paradox that the state that produced Socrates condemned him and other rationalists to death: 'Pentheus, the sensible defender of rational order, is drawn to a wretched end; irrationalism rises against enlightenment.'[21] But to speak of Pentheus as a 'sensible defender of rational order' does not correspond with the facts of the play, where Pentheus' conduct is neither sensible nor rational; as the messenger states from his more objective standpoint: 'I fear your quick judgments, master, your sharp temper and your too imperious bearing' (670–1). The issue, as Euripides describes it, is not irrationalism vs. enlightenment, but whether or not it is desirable to have the cult of the god Dionysus in Thebes. From the beginning Euripides makes it clear that the dances and rituals of the god will bring at best a mixed blessing to the city. Participants in his rites are required to act contrary to the conventional rules of behaviour: they must wear a strange get-up that strikes Pentheus as absurd and foolish (250–2), and the rites of Dionysus are celebrated mainly at night, a time that Pentheus, like most Greek men, considers 'treacherous and corrupt for women' (487). Nonetheless, the consequences of rejecting the cult are even worse: the god drives the women mad, so that they abandon their homes and live in the mountains and behave like wild beasts. To portray such undesirable alternatives does not amount to condemnation of the gods; as Achilles says in the grim context of the last book of the *Iliad*, from his two jars of good and evil Zeus offers man a mixture, or all evil (524–33).[22] As a dramatist, Euripides' purpose is to describe ancient myth in realistic and vivid terms; and his lesson, if anything, as in other Greek religious ritual, is to do honour to the gods and, in the process, to remind men of their mortal limitations.[23]

It is important to remember that to Euripides' contemporaries, honouring the gods did not mean liking them, or applauding their actions; on the contrary, the Athenian dramatists seem concerned to portray them in all the emotions that the gods manifest towards mortals: cruelty, neglect, anger, loyalty, and occasionally, even affection, especially for one of their own children. It is characteristic of mortals to complain that the gods do not play by human rules, and to state openly that humans are notably kinder and more forgiving. When Hippolytus refuses to honour Aphrodite, his slave prays to her statue: 'Queen Cypris, you must forgive him; if a man talks foolishly with intense passion because of his youth, pretend not to hear it. For gods ought to be wiser (*σοφωτέρους*) than mortals' (*Hipp.* 117–20). But, as Euripides will say again

[21] W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tr. J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA, 1985), p. 317.
[22] Cf. Eur. fr. 661 N from the beginning of the *Stheneboea*.
[23] Cf. Dodds (n. 11), pp. xlv–vi.

in the *Bacchae*, human wisdom is not wisdom, so far as the gods are concerned. Aphrodite has told us in the prologue that:

> I give preference to men who honour my power, and I destroy those who adopt a proud attitude towards me. For the gods as well [as men] have this trait: they take pleasure in being honoured by men. (5–8)

Aphrodite would not resent the fact that Hippolytus honours Artemis, if he gave due honour also to her, but instead 'he says I am the worst of divinities; he refuses to have intercourse and does not touch marriage' (13–14). And so she will exact her vengeance on him, without expending much effort, in one day. Note again that his 'wronging her' (ἃ δ' εἰς ἐμ' ἡμάρτηκε, 21) does not consist simply in his not having paid due respect, by placing a wreath on her statue, as he did for his patron Artemis; he must also acknowledge her power by submitting to the demands of sexuality.

Why didn't his patron Artemis try to defend him? Speaking *ex machina* at the end of the play, she explains that she could not save him because there is a law among the gods, set down by Zeus, that none will oppose the set purpose of another; otherwise she would not have let the mortal dearest to her die: 'The gods get no pleasure from the death of pious men – it is the evil we destroy, children and house and all' (1340–1). She promises Hippolytus that she will avenge him by killing with her own arrows whoever happens to be dearest to Aphrodite, and by giving him 'very great honours in the city of Troezen': girls before their marriage will dedicate a lock of their hair to him, and will sing of him and of Phaedra's passion for him.[24]

In a religion where there is no possibility of an afterlife, heroic honour and lasting fame are the highest compensation one can expect, especially if they can be combined with the possibility of revenge, in a moral system that enjoins one to help one's friends and harm one's enemies. No one asks Artemis, as the Corinthian women ask Medea, whether her intended victim – whoever he is – deserves to die, so that she can harm Aphrodite; how else could one harm a being who is immortal and ageless except by destroying some perishable being whom she loves? In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the goddess prevents the crops from growing, and allows humans, even at the site of her cult, Eleusis, to perish of starvation, so that the gods will get no sacrifices, because only in that way can she get Zeus to restore her daughter to her.

The contrast between divine and mortal existence is brought out most poignantly in Hippolytus' final speech to Artemis. The goddess says she must leave because she cannot look upon the dead or pollute her sight with dying gasps (1427–9), just as Apollo says he must leave Admetus' house because Alcestis is about to die (22). So Hippolytus bids her farewell: 'easily you leave this long relationship' (1441). As Homer has Achilles say to Priam when he comes to get his son Hector's body, 'this is what the gods have allotted to miserable mortals, to live in sorrow, while they themselves are without cares' (*Il.* 24.525–6). Artemis, like the gods in the last book

[24] On Artemis' 'indirect' revenge, cf. J. de Romilly, *L'évolution du pathétique d'Eschyle à Euripide* (Paris, 1961), pp. 32ff. Since preserving one's name, like song itself (cf. Eur. *Tro.* 1242–5), bestows a kind of immortality even on dead men and women, gods at the end of plays, either in person or through prophecy, frequently grant eponymous honours, either in the form of rituals or of place names; J. R. Wilson, 'The Etymology in Euripides' *Troiades*', *AJP* 89 (1968), 66–71, 70 n. 8 lists *El.* 1273, *Or.* 1646, *Hel.* 1670, *HF* 1328, *IT* 1453, *Hec.* 1275, *Antiope* fr. 48.80–5 ed. J. Kambitsis, *L'Antiope d'Euripide* (Athens, 1972); to which might be added the first *Hipp.* (fr. 446 N = fr. U, pp. 44–5 Barrett [n. 2], with n. on 1423–30), Alope's fountain (p. 390 N), and Andromeda's galaxy (p. 392 N).

of the *Iliad*, feels pity for mortals, and makes them feel pity for each other; but the same gods 'will human suffering and never share it'.[25]

If in Euripides' dramas the gods do not behave very differently from the way they behave in heroic epic, why is it that the human characters in the dramas, and consequently Euripides' audiences, express proportionately more doubts and resentment of them? I will suggest that they do so not because the nature of divinity has altered, or because the poet is trying to get his audiences to question the gods' traditional nature, but because increased fears and resentments expressed by the characters are an aspect of Euripides' celebrated realism. None of Euripides' characters, not even the children of gods, like Achilles or Helen, are so noble as their counterparts in Homer, or as capable of seeing the suffering they have brought to their enemies, or so knowledgeable about the future.

In Euripides' *Heracles* Amphitryon is an old man, physically very weak and afraid of death; it is hard to remember that he was once a famous hero, whose form was assumed by Zeus himself in order to deceive Amphitryon's faithful wife Alcmena, Heracles' mother. It is this attenuated Amphitryon, whose only weapon is words, who blames Zeus for his neglect of his human family:

> Zeus, in vain I had you as a comrade in marriage; in vain we have made famous our partnership in our son. You are less of a friend than you seemed to be. Even though I am a mortal I surpass you in virtue, even though you are a great god. For I have not betrayed the children of Heracles. You knew how to come to bed as a secret lover, seizing another man's bed when no one offered it to you, but you do not know how to save your friends. You are a stupid kind of god (ἀμαθής τις εἶ θεός), or by nature you are unjust. (339–47)

Other characters doubt the existence of the gods, when they have suffered a complete reverse of fortune: Hecuba, as we have seen, in the ruins of Troy, is uncertain who controls the universe; in the *Ion* Creusa claims that Apollo is unjust, and does not rescue the mother of his son, or answer her questions through his oracle (384–7). But as Ion (who will prove to be her son, although she does not yet know it) has said, the gods are under no obligation to answer mortals' questions if they do not choose to do so, however many sacrifices they might be offered. 'If we pursue the gods by force when they are unwilling, we have obtained unavailing benefits; but if the gods bestow gifts willingly, we are helped' (374–80).

Sometimes the god does what the mortal asks. In Euripides' *Antiope* Amphion claims that

> If Zeus was our father, he will rescue us and with us punish our enemy... I say this to you who dwell in the bright plain of heaven, do not marry for your pleasure and then prove useless to the children you have begotten; it is not fair (καλόν) to act like that, but you should be an ally to your friends. (*GLP* 10 Page = fr. 48.2–3, 10–14 Kambitsis)

In an exciting reversal of fortune (fr. 48.67–116 Kambitsis), Zeus sends his orders through Hermes and saves the day. In the *Heracles* for a short while Zeus seems to have responded to Amphitryon's rebuke. Heracles comes, rescues his family, and kills their persecutor. But then his divine enemy Hera intervenes, and has her minion Iris come with Lyssa ('Madness') to drive Heracles insane so that he murders his wife and children. Lyssa herself protests that she takes no pleasure in attacking men she likes, and reminds Iris that Heracles has restored the shrines of the gods that had been

[25] C. W. Macleod, *Iliad Book XXIV* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 132. Cf. also W. Desch, 'Der "Herakles" des Euripides und die Goetter', *Philologus* 130 (1986), 8–23, at 22; D. Kovacs, *The Heroic Muse* (*AJP* Monograph 3; Baltimore, 1987), pp. 69–71; P. T. Stevens, *Euripides, Andromache* (Oxford, 1971), p. 242; J. D. Denniston, *Euripides, Electra* (Oxford, 1939), p. 210. Cf. fr. 177 N: 'Dionysus, because he is a god, is never a support to mortals.'

attacked by impious men. But the rule of non-interference that Artemis described to Hippolytus remains in force, and Lyssa, though still reluctant, has no choice.

At that point the chorus, who have just exclaimed that 'the gods know about unjust men and listen to the pious' (772–4) must hear how Heracles has slaughtered the family he has just saved; and how he would have murdered his father had not Athena thrown a stone at him. Heracles, after he sees what he has done, says to Amphitryon: 'Zeus, whoever Zeus is, begot me and Hera hated me (don't be angry at me, old man; I think of you as my father rather than Zeus)' (1264–5).[26] Gods beget sons, but they do not look after them as a human parent would; the contrast demonstrates once again that the gods live without care and do not share in our sorrows. To the gods' attitude toward mortal suffering, we need only compare the conduct of Heracles' nephew Iolaus in his old age towards Heracles' second set of children:

> I have joined his children in exile as an exile; I am reluctant to betray them, lest some mortal say, 'look at this! When the children's father is dead, Iolaus, who is their relative, doesn't protect them!'. (*Heracl.* 26–30)

Perhaps the greatest privilege of being human is the ability humans have to care for one another, and to forgive; in this respect alone men are superior to gods.

The notion that human beings, despite their ignorance and weakness, are at least more compassionate than gods is not exclusive to Euripides.[27] In *Iliad* 24, the god Hermes, pretending to be a Greek soldier, assures Priam that he will not harm him, but rather protect him, since he reminds him of his own father (370–1). He tells Priam in his appeal to remind Achilles of his own family (466–7). But it is Achilles, the slayer of so many of Priam's sons, not Hermes, who shows that he understands what Priam has suffered, because his own father Peleus has only one son, who like Priam's sons, will not live to keep his father company in his old age (540).[28] It is the necessity of eventual loss that makes human beings aware of the value of affection: as he is about to die, Sophocles' Oedipus says to his daughters Antigone and Ismene: 'You could not have had more love than you have had from me, and now you must live the rest of your lives without me' (*OC* 1617–19).

But it is Sophocles, not Euripides, who emphasises the isolation of human beings from the gods, if in no other way than by *not* using the device of the *deus ex machina*. As Oedipus lingers embracing his daughters and weeping, the god's terrifying voice is heard shouting to him over and over again: 'You there, Oedipus, why are we waiting to go; long since your affairs have been delayed' (1627–8). In Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, absence of compassion makes the dying Heracles, despite his suffering, begin to resemble a god. His son Hyllus, who will not be transformed into an immortal, is left with the duty of carrying out Heracles' orders, to burn his father alive, and to marry Iole, the woman who has caused the death of both his father and

[26] The formula 'whoever Zeus is' as used here (and *Or.* 418) struck Dodds (n. 11), on *Ba.* 893–4 as 'sceptical and bitter', perhaps because it is not accompanied by a prayer, as in *Tr.* 884; cf. C. W. Willink, *Euripides, Orestes* (Oxford, 1986), p. 155, 'consistent with piety', and M. L. West, *Euripides, Orestes* (London, 1987), p. 212, 'a Euripidean cliché'. Cf. also *Hel.* 1137, with Kannicht (n. 11), ii.296. But the beginning of *Melanippe the Wise* was taken by ancient commentators as evidence of supposed impiety: 'Zeus, whoever Zeus may be, I don't know except from stories' (fr. 480) was said to have caused a commotion in the audience, so that Euripides changed it to 'Zeus begot Hellen, as the story goes' (fr. 481, but cf. fr. 591.4 N).

[27] Cf. M. Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London, 1987), p. 51; Matthiessen (n. 15), 703–4.

[28] On the motif, see Macleod (n. 25), pp. 118, 124. Cf. 504, where Priam says that he is more pitiable than Peleus, because he has no sons left.

mother. Hyllus, in his speech at the end of the play, asks his slaves to carry Heracles out:[29]

> Grant me much forgiveness (*συγγνωμοσύνην*) for this, and recognise the gods' great lack of compassion (*ἀγνωμοσύνην*) for what is being done; these gods who beget us and are called fathers gaze on such suffering. No one sees what is to come, but what is now happening brings sorrow to us and disgrace to the gods, the cruellest suffering experienced by man to [Heracles] who must suffer this disaster. (1264–74)

The audience knows, as Hyllus does not, that Heracles, once his mortality is burned away, will be turned into a god, but the poet ends the play without reminding us of the one positive result of all this suffering. Instead, the last words of the play (whether spoken by Hyllus or by the chorus),[30] emphasise that so far as the human participants in the drama are concerned Zeus is the cause of all the troubles they have witnessed: 'Many sorrows, and strange; of these there is none that is not Zeus' (1277–8). How different the effect might have been if, as in Euripides' *Antiope*, Hermes had appeared *ex machina* and explained to Hyllus and the others what would happen in the future!

Since no one in antiquity assumed that because he described the gods as uncaring Sophocles was being impious, why should we continue to ask whether Euripides was being either impious or ironical in his portrayal of the gods? Is it because, as Bernard Knox has suggested, his gods resemble mortals so much that they are unworthy of belief?[31] But, as I have tried to show, Euripides' gods resemble mortals only in certain ways: they love their friends and hate their enemies; they like honour and recognition. In other respects they are very much unlike mortals: they do not feel pity; they do not act out of compassion for mortals, as a mortal would for his fellow man, but in order to see that justice is done, in their terms, which sometimes includes a human notion of justice, but at other times involves ensuring working out a family curse, or taking revenge for some wrong against them, like deprivation of their proper honours.

Why worship gods like these? The question is not easy to answer, because, except for Aristophanes, we do not know what Euripides' contemporaries thought about the portrayal of the gods in his plays. We cannot attribute to the poet himself what a character says (however eloquently) in a particular situation. It is Heracles, not Euripides, who complains of Hera's malice: 'Who could pray to such a goddess? Because she hated (*φθονοῦσα*) Zeus on account of a liaison with a woman she destroyed the benefactors of Greece, who are in no way responsible' (*HF* 1307–10). It is the nature of Zeus' justice that the innocent must suffer (cf. Solon 13.31–2); as the elders of Thebes say to Antigone, 'You are paying for one of your father's sufferings' (Soph. *Ant.* 856). But in the end, Heracles will in fact fare better than Antigone, because he will be made a god, but even Antigone will not die 'desolate and unlamented', as she imagines (879–82).[32] It is not the voice of the poet speaking through his chorus, but the women of Troy who complain of the gods in the *Trojan Women*. In a choral song they speak of the past, when Zeus fell in love with Ganymede, and compare it to the present, when Eros the god of passion brought not honour but ruin, through Helen, to Troy, and death to their own husbands and children: 'Gone is the affection of the gods for Troy' (821–59).[33] That they are not

[29] Cf. P. E. Easterling, *Sophocles, Trachiniae* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 230–1.

[30] Cf. Easterling (n. 29), pp. 231–2.

[31] B. M. W. Knox, 'Euripides', in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* i (Cambridge, 1985), p. 317.

[32] Cf. Desch (n. 25), 16–17.

[33] Cf. fr. 1028 N about Zeus bringing sorrow to both Trojans and Greeks, though without context.

aware of the gods' plans to punish the Greeks does not mean that the crimes the Greeks committed during the sack of Troy will not be avenged; as Poseidon says in the prologue:

> Any mortal is a fool if he sacks cities, temples, and tombs, the shrines of the dead; once he renders them desolate, he himself will perish afterwards. (95–7)

In the *Iliad*, where the gods are openly involved in the world of men, it is somewhat easier for mortals to see that the gods are concerned about them. When Zeus sends Hermes to tell Priam that his son's body will be returned to him, undamaged, 'because the blessed gods care for your son even though he is dead, because he was dear to them', Priam is able to reply: 'It is good to give appropriate gifts to the gods, since my son, if he ever was, never forgot to give [gifts] in the halls of the gods who hold Olympus' (24.422–7).[34] In the *Trojan Women*, if Euripides had allowed the chorus to learn that the gods were about to destroy the Greek fleet, or even if they had been able to believe Cassandra's prediction that Agamemnon would be murdered on his return, they might, like Priam, have been able to conclude, even in the midst of their loss and suffering, that the gods were at least in some measure just. But in Euripides it is primarily mortals with divine relatives who receive such privileged information, like Peleus from his wife Thetis, Orestes from his uncle Castor, Cadmus from his grandson Dionysus, and Ion from Athena, who is sent by his father Apollo.[35]

The *Trojan Women* ends with a sad reflection by the chorus on the consequences for them of the action of the play: 'Alas my city; nonetheless, turn and walk towards the Greek ships' (1331–2). But other plays end with general reflections on human life that might be thought to be addressed directly to the audience, in order to allow them to reflect on the meaning for themselves of the drama that they have just seen enacted.[36] Of these, five plays have an abstract, interchangeable exodus that comments on the nature of the gods, and it is here, perhaps, that we may look for some indication of what Euripides meant his audiences to think about the gods in his plays:

> πολλαὶ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων
> πολλὰ δ' ἀέλπτως κραίνουσι θεοί·
> καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ' οὐκ ἐτελέσθη,
> τῶν δ' ἀδοκήτων πόρον εὗρε θεός.
> τοιόνδ' ἀπέβη τόδε πρᾶγμα.

> Many are the forms of divinity; the gods bring many things to pass unexpectedly. And what we thought would happen did not come to pass, but the god found a means to bring about what we did not imagine. That is how this action went.

The description of the gods must have the most general possible application in these lines, since they were appended to plays with both sad and happy endings: to the grim tragedies *Medea*, *Bacchae* and, in two manuscripts, *Hippolytus*; to two plays in which catastrophe is survived, *Andromache* and *Helen*, and also to the *Alcestis*, which replaced the satyr play in its trilogy.

Though in most cases there is no external reason to doubt the authenticity of these lines, scholars have suggested that these and other moralizing 'tail-pieces' were added

[34] Cf. Macleod (n. 25), p. 121.

[35] Cf. Barrett (n. 2), p. 395, who observes that 'the physical position of the deus ex machina may reinforce remoteness', and Harder (n. 2), p. 230, who notes that no deus ex machina, even Artemis in the *Hipp.*, ever addresses a person on the stage with a familiar phrase like ὦ παῖ.

[36] Cf. D. Roberts, 'Parting Words: Final Lines in Sophocles and Euripides', *CQ* 37 (1987), 51–64, at 59–60; R. Schlesier, 'Daimon und Daimones bei Euripides', *Saeculum* 34 (1983), 267–79.

by actors.[37] For example, Barrett in his commentary on the *Hippolytus* calls the repeated lines about the forms of divinity 'an extraordinarily undistinguished platitude', appropriate only for the *Alcestis*, only 'tolerable' for the *Andromache*, *Helen*, and *Bacchae*, and 'grossly out-of-place' in the *Medea*, even with its different first line.[38] But if the lines can be seen to suit the *Bacchae*, why not the *Medea*? In both dramas a mother kills her son, and in both the outcome of the action is not exactly what the actors in the play (let alone the audience) expected in the beginning. In the *Bacchae*, Pentheus cannot stop the worship or the followers of the god he thought so powerless; the same god compels him to dress in the costume of the female worshippers which he finds so abhorrent and leads him to his death. In the *Medea* the Nurse is afraid that Medea will harm someone (93), and hopes that it will be her enemies rather than her friends; at the end of the play she has killed both friends and enemies. Although powerless and alone at first, she escapes with the help of her divine grandfather, the Sun: 'But the god found a means to bring about what we did not imagine.'

If modern critics have considered the interchangeable exodus lines unsuitable for the *Medea*, it is perhaps because they have not sufficiently acknowledged the power of divine agency in the *Medea*, which helps to bring about an ending that punishes not only Jason (1352), but Medea herself (1249), and bestows upon her children heroic honours (1382–3), such as Hippolytus receives from Artemis.[39] Dodds in his commentary on the *Bacchae* thought the lines 'appropriate to any play having a marked *peripeteia*';[40] as Kirk observes, 'the formal yet familiar quality [of the coda] stresses the ritualistic origins of the drama, the inevitability of the human predicament, and the inscrutable power of the gods'.[41]

Specifically, the aspect of the 'human predicament' that these lines describe is ignorance: men are taken unawares (ἀέλπτως) by the gods' actions, and cannot anticipate their outcome (δοκηθέντα ἀδοκήτων).[42] The gods, by contrast, have knowledge of both the past and the future, and also have the power to assume different shapes (πολλαὶ μορφαί), to bring about what they want, and to find a means to accomplish what men thought impossible (πόρον εὗρε θεός). There is perhaps no more concise statement of unpredictability of human life, and of the weakness of the human condition. If the gods appear in these lines to be more austere and capricious than they do in the *Iliad*, it is because the nature of drama does not provide the same opportunity for us to observe them on Mt. Olympus and hear their conversations and plans, and we are left to judge them exclusively by their effect, for better or worse, on the lives of the human characters of myth.

Occasionally a mortal in one of Euripides' plays will try to deny, in the face of the myth's gruesome 'facts', that the gods could behave so badly as people think. Heracles, who has made hasty judgments earlier in the drama (586), asserts that the 'poets' miserable stories' about the gods cannot be true. Like Xenophanes (21 B 11, A 32.23–5 D–K), he believes that a god would not commit adultery, bind his father, or want to have power over another god, 'because the god, if he is truly a god, needs

[37] See esp. Roberts (n. 36), 51–4.

[38] Barrett (n. 2), 417. See also A. M. Dale, *Euripides, Alcestis* (Oxford, 1954), p. 130, D. L. Page, *Euripides, Medea* (Oxford, 1938), p. 181, P. T. Stevens, *Euripides, Andromache* (Oxford, 1956), p. 246. But contrast Roberts (n. 36), 57–8.

[39] Cf. Lloyd-Jones (n. 4), p. 171.

[40] Cf. Dodds (n. 11) on 1388, p. 242.

[41] Cf. G. S. Kirk, *The Bacchae of Euripides* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 140.

[42] Cf. Dio Cassius 78 [79].4.1–10.2, where the lines are seen in retrospect to have predicted the assassination of Caracalla.

nothing' (*HF* 1340–6).[43] Hecuba insists that Hera and Athena could not have been so foolish as to ask a barbarian's opinion, or have any need of a beauty contest (*Tro.* 969–77). But in each play the audience has already seen the gods *ex machina* in the act of 'needing' something, in both cases revenge for personal wrongs done them. Whatever these or other well-meaning mortals would like them to be, 'the powers which govern the world and man's destiny are unpredictable, implacable (though we must try to placate them), more often hostile than favourable, extremely rough in their justice, and [in the *Heracles*] downright malignant.'[44]

I do not see why the notion of divine behaviour expressed in the coda, even though it is stated so simply, should not be taken seriously. The lines suggest that the gods deserve respect and honour because of their supreme power, which is made manifest to men, especially in the ritual of drama, by what we would now call miracles: Dionysus is born from Zeus' thigh, he makes ivy grow around his mother's tomb, he causes the palace to fall down, and makes Pentheus do what would have been unthinkable for him at the beginning of the play, to dress like a woman, wear the fawnskin, and carry the thyrsus in the god's honour. Dionysus also undergoes a series of metamorphoses; first, he appears as a mortal (4–5), then he seems to Pentheus to be a bull (920–3); the women hear his voice as a god but do not see him; finally he appears *ex machina* as himself.[45]

Euripides was not the first (or last) Greek poet vividly to describe the miraculous, and (to men) capricious and cruel, behaviour of the gods.[46] In the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus* the god seems first to be a young boy; then vines and ivy grow on the ship, and wine flows; a lion appears, and a bear. The sailors jump into the sea and become dolphins, but the god takes pity on the helmsman, who had seen that he was a god and had tried without success to persuade his companions to release him (16–23). As in the *Bacchae*, the god in revealing his identity, emphasises the story of his birth: 'Courage, since you have been pleasing to me; I am Dionysus the thunderer whom Semele, daughter of Cadmus, bore after lying with Zeus' (55–7). Cadmus in the *Bacchae* is not so fortunate as the helmsman, but then why should the god do what he (or the audience) expects?

Wellesley College MARY R. LEFKOWITZ

[43] Cf. G. W. Bond, *Euripides, Heracles* (Oxford, 1981), p. 400; Desch (n. 25), 20; fr. 292.7 N 'if the gods do something shameful, they aren't gods'. Contrast R. Schlesier, 'Héraclés et la critique des dieux chez Euripide', *Ann. Scuol. Normale di Pisa* (Cl. litt./filos.) 15 (1985), 7–40, esp. 25–6 and 'Goetterdaemmerung' (n. 4), p. 41, who, by emphasizing the positive elements of the drama, seeks to make Eur. espouse a new and more beneficent theodicy. The old notion (see bibliog. in Schlesier, 'Héraclès', p. 12) constitutes a serious critique of the gods and their traditional roles in myth is restated by M. Halleran, 'Rhetoric, Irony, and the Ending of Euripides' *Heracles*', *CA* 5 (1986), 171–81, at 179–80.

[44] Cf. T. C. W. Stinton, 'Si Credere Dignum Est', *PCPS* 202 (1976), 60–89, at 83–4; Kovacs (n. 25), pp. 110–11. Cf. also how Iphigenia tries to attribute to men's 'notions' the human sacrifices Artemis desires (*IT* 380–91) not only in the context of the play but in other myths. The chorus of the *Electra* would prefer not to believe that the gods would have reversed the course of the sun because of a human crime (737–44), but the action of the play shows that the gods will go to extraordinary lengths to enforce their justice. Cf. esp. A. Spira, *Untersuchungen zum Deus ex Machina bei Sophokles und Euripides* (diss. Frankfurt; Kallmuenz 1960) *passim*: but contrast Schmidt (n. 1), who regards the *deus ex machina* as a purely technical device.

[45] Cf. also how Hera assumes the form of a priestess in Aesch. *Xantriai* (fr. 168, cf. n. 1); Athena imitates Aphrodite's voice in *Rhes.* 637–9. Changes of shape are frequent in myth but for practical reasons rare in dramatic performance; Io can wear a mask with cow's horns in *PV* 588 (see M. Griffith, *Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound* [Cambridge, 1983], pp. 198–9), but the audience learns about Iolaus' rejuvenation from a messenger (*Heracl.* 857–8).

[46] Cf. Schlesier, 'Goetterdaemmerung' (n. 4), 45.